

XENOGENEIC FIRST CONTACT

LANCE ERLICK

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ONE

Dr. Elena Sweetwater Pyetrov studied the launch area below her in stunned silence as uniformed officers burst onto the scene, followed by dozens of men and women in camouflage gear carrying assault rifles. It looked like a stunt for a Hollywood movie about space invaders.

Members of her ground team scrambled in response to the unannounced intrusion. It brought back memories of anti-space opposition two decades earlier to her father's mission to Jupiter. That ended with his disappearance and a presumed crash into the Jovian planet.

Beyond the bulletproof glass of the observation deck, a Navy Seal chopper buzzed the launch pad. The Moon shuttle was being prepared for tomorrow's take-off to reunite Elena with her crew on the Moon base. In the distance, the Atlantic was calm and skies were clear for her launch.

Elena picked up her cell phone to call her benefactor, Mason Crenshaw Devereaux, the billionaire owner of MCD Enterprises that was financing her expedition. Static filled the line. *Damn.*

She used binoculars to watch her ground crew as two uniformed officers approached them. One of her assistants shifted anxiously with an armful of last-minute test equipment for the mission. A second checked an electronic pad and shook her head. Two members of her ground crew made it to the safety of a hangar with camouflage soldiers in pursuit.

This can't be happening, Elena thought, not when I'm this close.

Government delays had already put her behind schedule. She had a narrow window to initiate her six-month journey aboard a brand new, privately funded MCD spacecraft already stationed on the Moon base. After years of preparation, she was finally heading to the Jovian moon Europa, part of her dream to continue her father's work.

Someone pounded on the control tower's door. A commanding female voice called out, "Doctor Pyetrov?"

Elena opened the door to a slender Federal agent who forced a smile as she stepped into the control room, followed by two beefy marines who collided on their way in.

"What's the meaning of this?" Elena asked. "We've been cleared—"

"There's been a development," the agent said, straightening up. She compared an image of Elena on her cell phone to the person before her and nodded. "You're wanted in Washington."

"I was told—"

"My orders are to bring you, in cuffs if necessary."

Elena looked at the two beefy men. Backing up, she saw all of her ground crew down below, surrounded by camouflaged soldiers.

"The sooner you come with us, the sooner this can be cleared up," the agent said. "Let's go."

"Can I at least speak with my team?" Elena held up her cell phone, which showed no signal.

"That won't be necessary," the agent said. "They've already been told. You're wasting time."

Not seeing any alternative, Elena chose the non-handcuffed approach. Again, she tried to phone her benefactor. When that provided nothing more than electronic static, she grabbed her briefcase, followed the agent and her marines to the roof of the observation deck, and climbed

into a sleek, new helicopter.

“Are you jamming my signal?” she asked.

“I wouldn’t know,” the agent said. “Buckle up.”

Without waiting for Elena to do so, the agent lifted the chopper and sped north, throwing Elena back in her seat at what she figured to be 3g, zero-to-sixty in one second.

She fastened her belt. “Now that I’m cooperating, can you tell me where we’re going and what this is all about?”

“My orders were to deliver you to a congressional committee,” the agent said. “That’s all I know.”

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They landed on the new helipad above the senate offices. The agent and marines led Elena into a congressional meeting room and to a seat at the focal point of a semicircular table. It wasn’t her first time in this chamber. The last visit hadn’t gone well. On that occasion, Devereaux had intervened. This time she couldn’t reach him.

Elena scanned the annoyed faces of the six women and five men on the Special Committee Responsible for Alien Programs. She’d encountered them all before. Evidently, they’d cut short their summer break to haul her in, either to stall or cancel her privately funded mission. She needed the government shuttle to reach her ship at the government-run lunar base.

She sat, clutching a thin briefcase in her lap. When her eyes met the glance of Chairwoman Senator Christabelle Jorgensen, chills ran up and down her spine. The senator despised anything having to do with space. She’d made that clear during her campaign and during their prior encounter.

Jorgensen raised her hand, and the room fell silent. “After long deliberations, we cannot allow your mission to launch.” She sounded annoyed.

All eyes focused on Elena. She felt the heat of their attention, as well as the intense lights aimed her way. “Distinguished senators and representatives...” she began.

“Cut the formalities,” Senator Jorgensen cut in. “We’ve been sending missions and messages into space for decades. None of it has improved the lives of desperate people here on Earth.” One of Jorgensen’s acts upon entering the Senate was shutting down the SETI project and its search for intelligent signals from space.

Folding her hands on the table, Elena raised her voice a notch. “Just because we don’t know what we’ll find doesn’t mean we shouldn’t explore. Columbus sought a trade route to India and opened up the Americas. Nicholas Navarov found water and key elements on the Moon that will allow self-sustaining colonies to ease overcrowding on Earth.”

Jorgensen smiled for the hidden cameras. “Really? Your plan is to move billions of people to the inhospitable environment of the Moon?”

“We could colonize Mars.”

The senator slammed a gavel on her table. “People want to live better here on Earth. We will no longer waste valuable resources on space exploration.”

Elena took a deep breath. “Dr. Alexander Pyetrov—”

“The Committee knows your father’s failures, Ms. Pyetrov. If he hadn’t pursued his folly to Jupiter, you wouldn’t have stood over his empty casket.”

“He gave his life to further knowledge.” On this matter, Elena had mixed feelings. When her father missed her sixteenth birthday for his mission, she’d cursed him to a fate worse than death. With his many absences, it had been one disappointment too many. Even so, at his funeral, she’d vowed to fulfill his vision.

She studied the six attractive young women dressed in identical gray nanofab jackets, sky-

blue blouses, and navy skirts. They'd swept into office in the last election, championing the plight of women and children saddled with global crop failures. While Elena empathized, she didn't believe short-term needs should cancel long-term research.

Senator Jorgensen's cat-like eyes sliced into Elena. "We would be better served if you continued your efforts with the Women and Children's Taskforce."

Elena glanced at four men seated to her left, members of the Evangelical Ministry on Alien Mythologies. They leaned back in their seats, arms crossed, with scowls on their faces, content to let Jorgensen take the lead. A wrinkled clerk at the far right made sure recordings picked up everything Elena said—no doubt to use against her later. She sighed. "While that work is vital, I believe this mission can improve humanity's future."

"Isn't it true you expect to find alien life on your mission?"

Elena's throat tightened. She did hope to discover new species in space. Perhaps they'd be as bizarre as worms near submerged thermal vents on Earth, although so far, robotic space probes had been disappointing. "Learning about new resources will benefit everyone, and all of the financial risk is borne by—"

"I've read your report," Jorgensen said. "And not all the risk is private. Your sponsor requires use of our lunar base and our shuttle."

"For which he paid."

"Nevertheless. Sometimes science wanders into places that do more harm than good, like the atomic bomb. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Fire can keep us warm or burn down homes."

"Why pursue microbes while billions of people on Earth are starving?" Jorgensen asked.

With the exception of New Mexico Senator Emanuel Montrose to her right, everyone at the table deferred to Jorgensen. In private, Montrose had been sympathetic. Now he shrank into his seat as if Jorgensen had power over him.

"Exploration has made important contributions to understanding our solar system," Elena said. "Who knows? We might find microbes to help balance our food needs."

"People don't want to eat germs."

"If we don't explore," Elena said, trying a different tack, "whatever is out there could catch us unaware. Before Columbus, the Chinese discovered the Americas. Then their emperor died and his successor turned inward, which allowed the Europeans to dominate."

"I'm astonished that you champion Columbus, given what Europeans did to your Navajo ancestors."

That stung. Elena wished she knew more about that part of her heritage. "I'm aware of the exploitation of Native-Americans, but if Columbus hadn't explored, I wouldn't be here."

Several members of the panel broke out laughing. When Jorgensen remained somber, the room fell silent.

"Our primary concern is how alien mythologies contaminate young minds," Jorgensen said. "Isn't it true that while promoting this mission, you encouraged speculation about alien life?"

Elena measured her words. "My focus was on funding and approval."

Jorgensen paused to look at her notes. "Do you believe aliens brought life to Earth?"

"I believe in God," Elena said, *just not a god who denies the existence of alien life.*

"You didn't answer the question."

"I don't know. Do you?" Elena felt like a prop to political campaigning. "With all due respect, Senator, our future depends on exploration."

Jorgensen waved her hand in dismissal. "Leave us."

Holding her head high, Elena grabbed her thin briefcase, marched out of the stuffy chamber,

and headed straight for the restroom.

In the mirror, she stared into a weary face with dark eyes. Lines creased her bronzed forehead. She spotted another gray nestled among her obsidian-black hair. Each visit to Washington seemed to add more. Although men said she was attractive, she looked older than her thirty-four years, thanks to the frustrations of butting heads with bureaucrats.

Elena felt exhausted from her preparations and this latest distraction. This committee could have halted her mission at any point. *Why now?*

Gritting herself into control, she clutched an ornamental platinum comb her father gave her before his last mission, and pushed back her short-cropped hair.

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Elena paced outside the committee chambers, longing for time in space, away from vicious politics and other people's expectations. Even her on-and-off-again fiancé, Captain Marc Carlisle, a marine pilot, held expectations. He had repeatedly pressured her to include him on her mission. She only had room for her handpicked crew. Besides, Elena was convinced they wouldn't survive together in such tight quarters. Their strained goodbye the night before had left a sour taste in her mouth. She couldn't permit entanglements to hold her back.

Chamber doors swung open. Senator Jorgensen emerged, her face betraying no emotion. The senator offered her hand and squeezed Elena's in a firm grip.

Jorgensen's mouth drew into a tight line. "This mission is a waste of resources. You know that."

The senator's vacant eyes gave Elena chills. "With all due respect, our future lies out there."

"Are you prepared for whatever sacrifices this mission calls for?"

Elena's throat went dry. Suddenly, Jorgensen seemed willing to let the mission continue after all. The senator led Elena into a room across from the committee's chambers and closed the door. She left the lights off, no doubt to avoid cameras. The darkness made it harder to ignore the senator's pungent perfume.

Elena recalled a previous encounter with this scent. About a year ago, a colleague pressured her to join the secret professional group Sisterhood of the Nile. Membership bound her to their code. Only later did she realize what she'd agreed to: a commitment to the Women and Children's Taskforce that, while worthy, distracted from her mission.

Withdrawing into the darkness, Elena forced a deep breath and nearly choked. "What changed your mind?"

"Your single-minded determination." The senator took Elena's hand.

Confused, Elena pulled away and bumped into a table. She straightened up. "I'm committed."

"One condition. Your mission is limited in scope. You'll report all findings directly to me and no one else. Is that clear?"

Elena pressed against the table. "This is a scientific mission."

"And a commercial one."

"My sponsors won't—"

"Then consider yourself grounded."

"Senator, any commercially viable materials we find would benefit—"

Jorgensen grabbed Elena in the secret arm grip of the Sisterhood. *That explains the dark room.* The group's support might explain the senator's rapid rise in politics and the solidarity of the five women who rose with her and sat on the Committee.

Was this a charade intended to get Elena to agree to conditions? Well, sponsors were one thing. Elena had her own reasons for going into space.

She swallowed hard. The Sisterhood's code obligated Elena to a senior member like

Jorgensen. "I accept."

The senator moved away. "Go before we reconsider."

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A space cruiser glided high above the Earth, monitoring events unfolding in the American capital and at a Florida launch pad. Standing before the wide screen in the command center, General Nurock Gorg tightened her well-toned stomach muscles and stifled her disgust at the pale human form Supreme Commander Viv had taken.

The general looked away from the screen before her contempt for non-gray complexions and smooth foreheads twisted her forehead ridge-crest; to snub her supreme leader would be suicide and Gorg had a score to settle. The attempts to ground the human space mission had failed, opening up opportunities for her. She smiled, hoping that would soften her image for the supreme commander, and returned her attention to the screen.

"We cannot risk exposure," Viv said in human-accented Knoonk language over the secure com-link. She adjusted her camera, which then showed behind her the brightly colored office in Viv's Washington home. The vivid colors stabbed at Gorg's eyes, an unfortunate byproduct of inbreeding among a too-small surviving population. Overuse of color was a human obsession that the Supreme Commander had acquired as part of her genetic transformation to human form.

Gorg adjusted the command ship's controls so the craft would appear to float as satellite debris to the humans' feeble sensors. She glanced at her immediate superior, Commander Jinek Zurbiz, whose bloated figure filled the captain's chair. Zurbiz was the only person between her and the supreme commander, a position Gorg coveted.

Zurbiz's ineptitude had condemned General Gorg's sister to die on Earth during a routine recon mission. When Colonel Dwentok Gorg was wounded and couldn't reach the extraction point, Commander Zurbiz refused to risk a rescue mission that could have saved the colonel's essence. In fact, to avoid letting humans capture the fallen soldier, Zurbiz had ordered her body remotely incinerated. Now there could be no ritual resurrection, no chance for life to continue in a new body. In her mind, Gorg spat at the flabby target Zurbiz made. *You're a disgrace to our people.*

Seated next to Zurbiz was little Nalon, the faithful sycophant. *You picked the wrong master,* Gorg thought.

"I share your disappointment," Supreme Commander Viv told Gorg. "I also grieve for your sister, a great Knoonk warrior." She paused, leaving only background hum for a moment of remembrance.

Then she turned her human face to Commander Zurbiz. "Where do we stand on finding the Royal Couple?"

Zurbiz bowed with her ridge-crest at attention across her forehead. "We have many leads to catch the traitors."

"You should have caught them by now," Viv said.

Gorg suppressed a grin. It was another failure by her incompetent boss and another step closer to Gorg replacing Zurbiz. If the commander hadn't been so timid ... well, Gorg would handle things differently.

In fact, General Gorg would have caught the Royal Couple twelve years ago, when the remnant of her Knoonk rebels overpowered the outposts in this solar system. Zurbiz's hesitation allowed the Royal Couple to complete their transformation to human form and escape to Earth to hide among the inferior species. Despite Zurbiz's bungling, Supreme Commander Viv chose her over Gorg to command the outpost.

"I suggest General Gorg take this assignment," Supreme Commander Viv said.

The general bowed. She relished the opportunity to exact revenge against humans for the permanent loss of her sister. As a bonus, she would get to upstage Zurbiz.

Commander Zurbiz changed the subject. “We are resurrecting our fallen comrades as quickly as we can.”

Yeah, Gorg thought, *the lucky ones killed in our failed rebellion*. The survivors preserved and transported their essences to this outpost at the edge of the galaxy. They were receiving the ritual resurrection denied to Gorg’s sister. Never again would she stand side by side with her kin as Knoonk warriors.

“Not fast enough,” Viv said. “Humans are sending another manned probe. Use it to our advantage.”

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TWO

“Beware what you ask for,” Elena’s father had once warned.

Those words rattled about her head while she squeezed out of the lunar shuttle’s sleep tube. As the drug-induced fog faded, she sat facing a narrow sky-blue corridor. The bizarre encounter with Jorgensen kept looping through her brain, making no sense.

Despite her pledge to the senator, Elena would soon be on the Moon base, away from all the politics. She hoped her lunar crew had checked out and provisioned Devereaux’s long-range spacecraft, though when she reached the Moon, she would perform her own checks. Then they would launch toward Jupiter. She smiled. *This is finally happening, Dad.*

Stretching, Elena closed her eyes, pictured her father before he vanished, and wished she could share this moment with him. She snapped on antiquated magnetic boots and struggled to put one foot in front of the other to reach the main cabin. Her seamless blue and red transport bodysuit was too tight, the stretchy material clinging.

Predictably, Marc Carlisle managed to finagle his way onto her lunar shuttle. At the last moment, he’d shown up with official documents showing that he was replacing one of the passengers transferring to the Moon base. That was when she’d decided on induced sleep for the two-day journey. *I’m not going to let him pester me into taking him to Europa.*

The ship lurched, tossing her against one wall and then the other. *Wretched clumsy boots.*

At least on the longer journey she’d have artificial gravity and other conveniences. She peeled one boot off the metallic floor, pushed it forward, and let it magnetically reconnect. Fighting the boots in zero gravity took all her concentration. That and the lingering haze of induced sleep delayed her recognizing the obvious. It was rare for a spacecraft to shift direction abruptly unless something hit it. The only things that came to mind were meteorites and space junk, neither of which would be good.

The boots resisted her attempts to move faster. By the time she reached the main compartment, the nineteen other blue-and-red-clothed passengers, many dazed from sleep, were already strapped in or struggling to reach assigned seats in one of five rows. These lunar miners, construction workers, a cook, and a few agrarians were all heading for the lunar base or a nearby settlement.

The view-screen before them showed a starry sky, mostly blackness. The pilot’s seat was empty and Captain Zak Pavlin was nowhere in sight. Elena thought there should have been a partition separating the crew from passengers, so the latter wouldn’t notice such details. To conserve weight and space, NASA had built the shuttles without dividers.

Nearby sat navigator Reese Paswitch. Her highlighted brown hair and eyeliner seemed overdone for a transit to the Moon; she was looking forward to a lunar wedding. Her fiancée sat in one of the passenger seats, gripping the armrests. Two crewmembers on either side of the controls, young recruits on a routine lunar transit, were both sweating. They looked as if they hadn’t slept in days.

In the co-pilot’s seat sat Marc Carlisle, looking as if he’d pulled all-nighters for a week. Elena sighed. She didn’t need their personal drama replayed in public. She hated shutting him down on

their last night together, but she was tired of his insistence that she let him accompany her to Europa. Now he'd moved a step closer.

After they reached the lunar base, she would let him stew while she prepared her team. Then she would bid him farewell—again. Maybe this time they could leave on better terms.

The transport jolted to the left, forcing Elena to steady herself against the cabin wall. Her attention fell on the forward view-screen, which no longer showed a starry sky.

“What the ... Jupiter?” She felt dazed, still recovering from the sleep drugs. *Am I dreaming?*

No, she was awake, all right. The magnetic boots were like having her feet encased in concrete. She grabbed hold of an empty seat and dragged her boots toward the pilot's chair. *Have I been asleep for six months?* She checked her wrist-com. Two days had elapsed and she was still on the shuttle. “Where's the Moon?” she asked Marc.

“Good, you're up.” He reached for her hand.

Elena pulled away. Weariness and frustration swept across Marc's face.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Somehow we diverted to Jupiter, months early.” Marc's attempt to act calm was betrayed by his face, wrinkled with unsettling terror.

“How is this possible?” Elena scanned the jumble of controls and lights for evidence of what went wrong. The whole setup looked like something from the Smithsonian. The shuttle was a generation out of date, since the government refused to invest in space exploration. NASA had assured her that the weathered craft was sturdy enough to get them to the Earth's moon. *Not to Jupiter.*

“We don't know.” Marc's face sagged. “Maybe you can help puzzle this out.” His pleading look reminded her of the night they'd parted.

Approaching Jupiter should have excited her, but Elena struggled to absorb what was happening. She was near her destination without her team, no gear, in a shuttle that couldn't survive out here. Preparation was everything. She shook her head. “The shuttle can't travel this fast.”

Marc returned his attention to the controls and pulled up status charts. “Agreed, but we've been approaching Jupiter for hours. I'm open to explanations.”

Elena didn't have any. She stared at the image of Jupiter, with the sinking feeling that she'd survived Jorgensen only to vanish in space like her father. Only one thing made sense, yet it didn't. “Were you that desperate to be on my mission that you veered off course?”

“Whoa.” Marc threw up his hands and let out a heavy sigh. “We didn't do this. The crew and I have been through forty-eight hours of hell. The controls don't work. The pilot and co-pilot are checking panels for malfunctions. Tara L'Enfant is helping them.”

Elena had bumped Tara, an electronics expert, off her mission in favor of someone she deemed a better fit. Tara had taken the consolation prize, one rotation of work on the lunar base and ended up on this shuttle.

“Why are you at the controls?” Elena asked in a harsh whisper.

“I have pilot training.”

“Not for a shuttle.” Elena took a deep breath. She didn't want another fight. “I want to speak to the pilot. Where is he?”

“He's working on our thruster electronics. You'll have to wait until he's done. In the meantime, why don't you sit?”

“Tell me what you know.” She stopped herself from adding *that shouldn't take long.*

“Not a single switch, circuit or gear problem.”

Reese Paswitch sat nearby; her bloodshot eyes and knotted brow betrayed shell shock. Even

her cheeks sagged, hardly the image she would want at her wedding. Passengers stared at the screen. Several got up and approached.

Elena tried to focus on the science, but her mind remained foggy. She couldn't account for traveling so far so fast. Although her sponsors had exhausted every resource to find the fastest way to the outer solar system, even their long-distance spaceship couldn't achieve these speeds.

"What do you make of this?" Elena asked, lowering her voice.

"We lost controls an hour into the flight," Marc whispered.

The bulky control panel had no flashing lights. No displays hinted at anything wrong except for that Jovian mass ahead of them. "Why didn't you wake me?" Elena asked.

"I tried," Marc said. "You must have taken extra sedatives."

To avoid you. A sharp pain stabbed behind her right eye. She dropped into the pilot's seat and immediately her eyes felt leaden, ready for sleep. She took a deep breath and clenched her fists. "Not much, though my head's ready to explode."

Marc handed her a mug of coffee. "This might help. It's a richer blend."

Clutching the mug, Elena sucked in lukewarm coffee through a tube and hoped it would do the trick.

A half-dozen puzzled and scared passengers closed in around Elena as they pushed for a closer look. Worry spreading across their faces. She stood to get air. These passengers hadn't signed on for the challenges and risks of flying to Jupiter. She didn't want to add to their terror.

She handed Marc the coffee, placed her hand on his shoulder to steady herself, and leaned in to whisper into his ear. "I want a complete assessment."

"Gladly," Marc said, "but you're not in charge until we land."

"Neither are you. You should have stayed home." Elena pulled away and stared at the growing image of the gas giant, Jupiter. *Four-hundred-fifty million miles in two days.* "Any chance that image and the instruments are wrong?" *After all, this is a relic.*

"The crew checked everything a dozen times. I'm sorry; I really did try to wake you."

Elena's knees trembled as she fought deceleration. "Any thoughts on how we got out here?" *Out here?*

Marc stood. He towered over her by five inches. "I've read theoretical treatises on space-time continuum and wormholes. I don't know. Something bypassed all of our controls and pulled us toward Jupiter."

"You're saying we have no control," said Wil Benning, the biggest of the passengers and a construction recruit hired for the lunar base. He pushed his way forward. "What the eff is going on?" He glared down at Elena.

"Are we crashing?" another man asked.

Passengers pushed closer, all shouting at once.

Marc faced the burly construction recruit. "Everyone take a deep breath. We're doing everything we can."

"Where's the pilot when we need him?" Wil Benning asked.

"He's checking the equipment. Unless one of you has electronics or aeronautics skills, sit down and let the crew do its job."

Elena couldn't make sense of their velocity: two percent the speed of light. When her sponsors had brainstormed faster means of space travel, they'd brought in a Stanford physicist who discussed the Alcubierre Drive, a specially designed engine that creates a field around a spacecraft using exotic matter and negative energy that might allow it to bend the space-time continuum and move as fast as the speed of light. It had too many technical problems and no evidence it would work, so her sponsors dropped that option. Nothing else explained this speed.

Most passengers returned to their seats, except Reese's fiancée who hovered over her. Elena sat in the pilot's seat. She scanned the usual status reports on a small screen in front of her and turned to Marc. "Get me access to the view-screen's history."

He clicked a file on the small console before her, and up came the video. "What are you thinking?"

She played the video from an hour after takeoff and sped it forward. The shuttle veered away from the Moon, which zipped by. Then it lifted above the plane of the planets. Not believing the trajectory, she slowed viewing to real time and was stunned by how quickly they passed Mars.

She checked her wrist-com. It registered a two-day lapse, yet at the shuttle's implied speed, the trip couldn't have taken more than a day. She wondered why Marc hadn't said anything. In fact, he'd mentioned two days.

To verify, she counted off a minute. The console's clock registered two. Even Einstein's relativity couldn't account for that. She counted again to be sure.

The craft lurched right.

As others fell against metallic walls, Elena grabbed her seat belt. "What was that?"

"We've been getting bursts of movement," Reese said, "as if someone else is navigating."

Elena tried to bridge the gap between Marc's feigned coolness, Reese's panic, and the possibility that someone was tampering with time and the shuttle's speed. The lights on the panel before her were either green or white. "How much fuel do we have?"

"That's just it," Marc said. "We aren't using much—only enough for electrical and life support."

"That's crazy." She decided not to share her suspicions until she knew more.

Reese tugged Elena's arm. "You guys need to see this."

Standing, Elena stared at an approaching moon, which looked pink, thanks to the screen's enhanced color contrasting. It took a moment to register that this was her Europa, the ocean moon, as she'd imagined it. Her jaw dropped. Of course, Europa was a moon of Jupiter.

Amazing.

The image quality was unlike anything she'd seen before—the lines and angles of angry ice pushed and shoved by Jupiter's tidal pressure. Clarity was so sharp she could imagine reaching out to touch it.

Marc tinkered with the controls. "Zak!" he yelled into the communicator. "What do you have? We're on a collision course." He turned off his mike and turned to the passengers.

"Everyone in their seats and buckle up," he yelled. "Prepare to crash."

"I'm on my way," Zak said.

"What's going on?" someone yelled.

"Sit and try to be quiet," Marc said. "Elena, that includes you."

Unable to take her eyes off the screen, she groped for the pilot's seat. The stark image of crisscrossed pink lines grew, demarking broken ice sheets, until the cracked and haunting image of Europa filled the view-screen. They plunged through the negligible atmosphere. Giant blocks of ice rushed toward them.

A chorus of confusion welled up behind her. Passengers screamed. A construction recruit fell against the forward screen with a crunch. Keeping her eyes fixed on an approaching brown ridge, Elena grabbed for the seatbelts. "Do you have thrusters?"

"Inoperable."

"Missiles?"

Marc glanced over. "It's a transport, not a fighter. Now get your seatbelt on and brace for impact."

Elena tugged at the seatbelt a moment too late. The shuttle slammed into the icy surface, throwing Elena into Marc's arms. Air squeezed out of her lungs. She couldn't move. Her insides heaved. She pressed her eyes shut and begged for relief. Marc held on too tight.

"Leeeeet goooo!" Elena's voice trailed distant and hollow in her ears. She struggled to break free. She smelled sweat; Marc was as petrified as she was.

Lights blinked out. Elena fell against the view-screen and winced from pain in her left shoulder. Odd screams scratched at her ears, punctuated by elongated blasts and the thunderous crackling of ice ... or the shuttle. Time slowed, though she knew that was an illusion.

Darkness engulfed them except for sparks from the control panel. The smell of toasted electronics filled her sinuses and left a metallic taste in her mouth. Despite the loss of power, the screen glowed reddish.

A cacophony of terror jumbled signals to her brain. Emergency lights flashed on. Red splattered. Blood choked her throat. She was pinned by deceleration as the shuttle slowly broke through the ice.

Distorted screams tore at her ears. The screen presented a yellowish glow that illuminated sheets of ice flowing past. If the impact hadn't destroyed the ship, ice pressure should have, yet they continued descending. Three bodies lay crumpled nearby. Elena couldn't see faces.

Another body slammed against the view-screen: Captain Zak Pavlin, the pilot. Unable to lift her body, Elena slid closer to check his pulse. Nothing. Other bodies hit the screen. Acrid odors of blood, vomit, and electronics attacked her sinuses. Elena was amazed that she was still conscious, still experiencing all this.

Onscreen, the wall of ice turned into a brackish-brown slurry: a liquid ocean, as predicted.

Astonished by her own calmness, Elena strained to see. If only they had lights to penetrate the murkiness. *I'm here, on Europa, Dad.*

She sensed the sides of the shuttle bulging inward.

The shuttle continued its descent. The cabin filled with smoky haze. Her eyes misted and burned. She no longer saw Marc or Reese in the flickering lights. She drew her knees to her chin. Guilt tightened her chest, the nightmare of finding her brother Leo hanging by a rope after their father vanished. She hadn't been there to protect him.

The ship stopped. Metal creaked. Everything fell forward. Voices echoed around her.

"Help!" someone yelled.

"No!"

Elena covered her ears and cried out. She couldn't hear her own voice. Icy water swept into the compartment. A thousand needles stabbed her flesh. She couldn't see through the fog. Her entire body was on fire with frigid stabs.

Lights went out. Sparks flickered from the controls. Then even they vanished.

Darkness enveloped them.

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LINKS to BUY XENOGENEIC: FIRST CONTACT

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B01N5Y82JY>

<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/xenogeneic-lance-erlick/1125726223?ean=2940154001462>

<https://www.kobo.com/us/en/ebook/xenogeneic-first-contact>

<https://itunes.apple.com/us/book/xenogeneic-first-contact/id1204050039?mt=11>

STORIES by Lance Erlick

XENOGENEIC: FIRST CONTACT

Aerospace engineer Elena Pyetrov lost her father in space 18 years ago. She finally gets her chance to continue his research and her ship crashes. Alien pilgrims lost their civil war and seek to colonize Earth. Within caves on alien world, the Knoonk execute their plan to genetically adapt to Earth and displace humans. Kidnapped to the closed cave system, Elena finds other humans subjected to Knoonk experiments. With time running out, she must dig deep to uncover the alien plan and stop them before humans face extinction.

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REGINA SHEN: RESILIENCE (Regina Shen book 1)

Outcast Regina Shen is forced by the World Federation to live on the seaward side of barrier walls built to hold back rising seas due to abrupt climate change. A hurricane threatens to destroy what's left of her world, tearing Regina from her family.

Global fertility has collapsed. Chief Inspector Joanne Demarco of the notorious Department of Antiquities believes Regina holds the key to avoid extinction. Regina fights to stay alive and avoid capture while hunting for her family. Does she have the resilience to survive?

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REGINA SHEN: VIGILANCE (Regina Shen book 2)

Regina Shen is pursued by the notorious Department of Antiquities for her unique DNA. She jumps the Barrier Wall into the Federation to find her kidnapped sister. Stuck on a heavily guarded closed university campus in the mountains, she must use her wits to escape and rescue her sister without letting either of two rival Antiquities inspectors capture her.

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REGINA SHEN: DEFIANCE (Regina Shen book 3)

Outcast Regina Shen has DNA the Federation believes can reverse a global fertility collapse. Rival Federation agents fight over capturing Regina to gain power amidst turmoil over who will become the new World Premier. Regina has to flee from Virginia through desert and wilderness to Alaska to hunt a treasure big enough to barter for her freedom and that of her sister.

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THE REBEL WITHIN (Rebel Series book 1)

Annabelle Scott lives under the iron rule of a female-dominated régime that forces males to fight to the death to train the military elite. When pressed into service as a mechanized warrior to capture escaped boys, Annabelle stays true to herself by helping some escape. Her defiance endangers everyone she loves and thrusts her to a place of impossible life and death decisions.

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THE REBEL TRAP (Rebel Series book 2)

Despite being a military recruit, Annabelle Scott rebels against her female-dominated régime by refusing to kill a handsome boy she fancies and helping him escape. Auditory implants and cameras allow her commander to watch her 24-7. Can she help the boy free his brother from a heavily guarded geek institute without destroying her family or getting killed?

Written as a standalone story, *The Rebel Trap* follows Annabelle's adventures from *The Rebel Within*.

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REBELS DIVIDED (Rebel Series book 3)

The first time Geo sees Annabelle, they meet as enemies and she doesn't kill him, which mystifies them both. It's after the 2nd Civil War with the nation divided into an all-female Federal Union and a warlord controlled Outland. The Outland warlord kidnaps Annabelle's sister and kills Geo's pa. Can Annabelle and Geo overcome mutual distrust and work together to rescue her sister and gain justice for his pa's murder? Will their feelings for each other derail or further their goals?

Written as a standalone story, *Rebels Divided* is also part of the Rebel series, three years later.

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ULTIMATE HACK (novelette)

Hercules considered himself an ordinary anonymous geek with a special reason to remain in his mom's basement. Ignoring warnings from his best friend and his girlfriend, he pursues the hack of a lifetime into a top secret security system. What could possibly go wrong when he meets his match?

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SHE-DEVIL ROCKS (novelette)

Inspired by *Lord of the Flies*.

Bullied as the smallest of thirteen boys in his class, Bradley is on a plane that crashes on a remote island with a bully who is out of control. Bradley meets a mysterious tomboy who shouldn't be there. He has to learn to survive on the hostile island, deal with the tomboy, and come to terms with the bully.

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REGINA SHEN: SALVAGE (novelette)

Living on the seaward side of barrier walls built to protect against rising seas, the only means of survival for Regina Shen is underwater salvage, which is banned by the World Federation. After a storm takes a friend's family and home, Regina is determined to help by defying the Federation

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MAIDEN VOYAGE (short story)

Security Chief Nina Rekovic keeps the peace on the all-female Maiden's Ark that left Earth five years before. Distress signals say Earth is lost, stranding lunar colonists. While balancing Returners she sympathizes with, a dictatorial captain, and an estranged lover who betrays her, can Rekovic solve the conspiracy before she's imprisoned or killed?

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WATCHING YOU (short story)

At the intersection of pervasive networks and the Patriot Act, we have the ability and some say the obligation to know everything about everyone. Can privacy survive? Can the individual endure?

Harold is a second-class citizen and a low-level worker in a government surveillance system charged with reviewing "criminal activity." He has private thoughts about a woman he's forbidden from approaching. He will not be deterred.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lance Erlick writes science fiction thrillers for young adult and adult readers. He is the author of *The Rebel Within*, *The Rebel Trap*, and *Rebels Divided*, three books in the Rebel series. In those stories, he explores the consequences of Annabelle Scott following her conscience. He authored the Regina Shen series—*Regina Shen: Resilience*, *Regina Shen: Vigilance*, *Regina Shen: Defiance*, and *Regina Shen: Endurance*. This series takes place after abrupt climate change leads to the Great Collapse and a new society under the World Federation. A related short story is *Regina Shen: Salvage*. His latest novel is *Xenogeneic: First Contact* about encounters with an alien race aiming to take over Earth. Lance is also the author of unrelated short stories.

Find out more about the author and his work at LanceErlick.com. Go to the website or sign up [here](#) to receive occasional email newsletters with links to free short stories, and updates on new releases and other writing developments.