



Issue #1

Malcolm Orion

a Unioverse™ Backstory

LOOKING OUT OF A SMALL WINDOW in the back of the military transport, Macolm Orion could just make out the flickering light of Earth, three months and 140 million miles behind him. On most of his missions, Malcolm chose to focus on what was out front, but this time, he couldn't help but look back.

He had grown accustomed to leaving Rayla and the kids when duty called, and there was always a chance that he wouldn't return. That's the life he had signed up for, first as a Navy SEAL and then as an astronaut with NASA. But the mission bringing him to Mars? Everyone involved, including Malcolm, knew it was probably a one-way trip.

Duni and Niran had taken their father's departure hard. They thought he was heading to Europa, an eight-year deployment, which had, until recently, been his assignment. But then, a geologic survey team found the alien spacecraft on Mars, and everything changed.

How do you explain to a 7 and 10-year-old that instead of flying to one of Jupiter's moons, you're going to step into a bubble of alien technology and see where it takes you? No one could know that, though, not even Rayla. But she had always been able to read his eyes and his heart; she knew that this trip was different, that this time she and the kids were going to have to learn to live in a world without him.

The pain of the final morning still lingered, but more powerful still was his wonder at the grace of his wife. He had been ready to walk away from the mission, duty be damned, but she would not let him, despite not knowing what awaited him on Mars.

She told the kids that daddy would hurry home as fast as he could, that they'd see him soon, lying so that their memories of him would be pure and pristine. One final gift from the woman who held his heart, born of love and grief and the pain of pending loss.

Malcolm stood there for a long time, looking back at Earth, where everything that mattered spun slowly in the void.



On the journey from Earth to Mars, Malcolm had reread all of the reports on Project Celeste. At this point, he knew the details by heart: five years ago, an international survey team discovered a massive alien ship almost completely buried in the ice and sand of the south polar cap. According to the potassium-argon analysis of the surrounding sand, the ship had crashed on Mars over 40,000 years ago, and everything inside, which included smaller spacecraft and the remains of numerous semi-organic androids, showed no signs of life.

After two years of excavation and three more of examination and analysis, though, that was about to change: a team of scientists had finally figured out how to supply power to one of the smaller craft and had activated something that could alter the trajectory of human history: an intergalactic transportation system. That's where Malcolm came in.

No one knew why the ship had come to our solar system or how it had crashed on Mars. The best scientists from two worlds couldn't even figure out what the ship was made of, only that it was equal parts unidentifiable alloy and biological material.

The answers to all of their questions, if they were ever going to find them, were located wherever this ship came from, and so they needed someone to test the system... and hope that they came back.

Malcolm's military transport touched down at a remote base on the polar ice cap, thousands of miles from the permanent colonies in the northern lowlands of Arcadia Planitia. There were over half a million civilians living on Mars now, but none of them knew about the alien ship. Even with humanity making its first steps towards the stars, the few global leaders who knew about Project Celeste had made the decision that the public wasn't ready to know that they weren't alone.

Malcolm was surprised to see a tall, intense man in full uniform waiting for him when he exited the transport. This was General Alvarez, head of Project Celeste, and the man who had hand-selected Malcolm for the mission.

"Welcome to Mars, Commander."

"Thank you, General."

"You need a few minutes? Or do you want to head right out to the whale?"

"Whale, sir?"

"The ship. You'll understand when we get out there. It's different in person."



The General was right. The ship was much different in person. It was more than 60 miles long and ten miles wide, making it twice the size of New York City. Seeing it up close, even so heavily damaged, was both awe-inspiring and deeply unsettling. The ship was a stark reminder of two indisputable truths: we are not alone, and whoever built this thing was inconceivably more advanced than us.

Malcolm understood the whale reference once they were inside the ship. The curves and undulations of the cavernous space, which did not appear to be designed for either crew or cargo, were undeniably organic; he felt like he was inside the belly of the beast. And the long, ribbed tubes that dominated the interior gave new meaning to the term mothership: smaller spacecraft, each over a mile in diameter, were frozen in place at various points along the tubes and appeared to be in different stages of gestation.

The General led Malcolm into a structure that had been built around one of these smaller ships; this one was a subject of intense study because it had fallen from the tubes in a state of partial completion.

Once inside, Alvarez and Malcolm entered a lab where teams of engineers, scientists, and techs slowly dissected several of the dead cybernetic sentinels Malcolm had read about.

The organic machines were perhaps ten feet tall, and the exposed wiring of the tendrils that emerged from a central body was impossibly complex. What surprised Malcolm the most, though, was how these ancient machines, tens of thousands of years old at the very least, looked like they could power up at any moment.

“At first, we thought these things were the ones that built all of this,” said the General. “But they share a lot of the same wiring as the ship, so now our scientists assume that all of this was constructed by some unknown race.”

Malcolm leaned in to get a better look at the mixture of metal and tissue on the table and shook his head.

Alvarez frowned. “One of the reasons I chose you for this mission is that you’re an engineer. I can see you don’t agree with my team’s conclusions. Tell me why,” insisted Alvarez.

“I just can’t fathom a civilization sophisticated enough to build something like that. Can you?”

“I don’t know, Commander. But that’s not what keeps me up at night.”

“What does?”

“That something, or someone, made this ship crash and killed everything inside.”

It had taken ten minutes to walk to the heart of the ship. There, Malcolm stared at the illuminated oval on the floor, one of four in this central chamber.

“That’s the one?”

Alvarez nodded. “Get a little closer.”

With the General and a number of lab techs at computer terminals watching his every move, Malcolm took a step forward. Slowly, a substance that looked like a mixture of oozing oil and liquid light rose from the floor and started to form a glowing cocoon.

As if that wasn’t enough to put him on high alert, he could now feel that something – The pod in front of him? The ship? The beings that built all this? – was crawling around in his consciousness. Searching. Exploring. Connecting. It wasn’t painful, just... intrusive. He rubbed his temples.

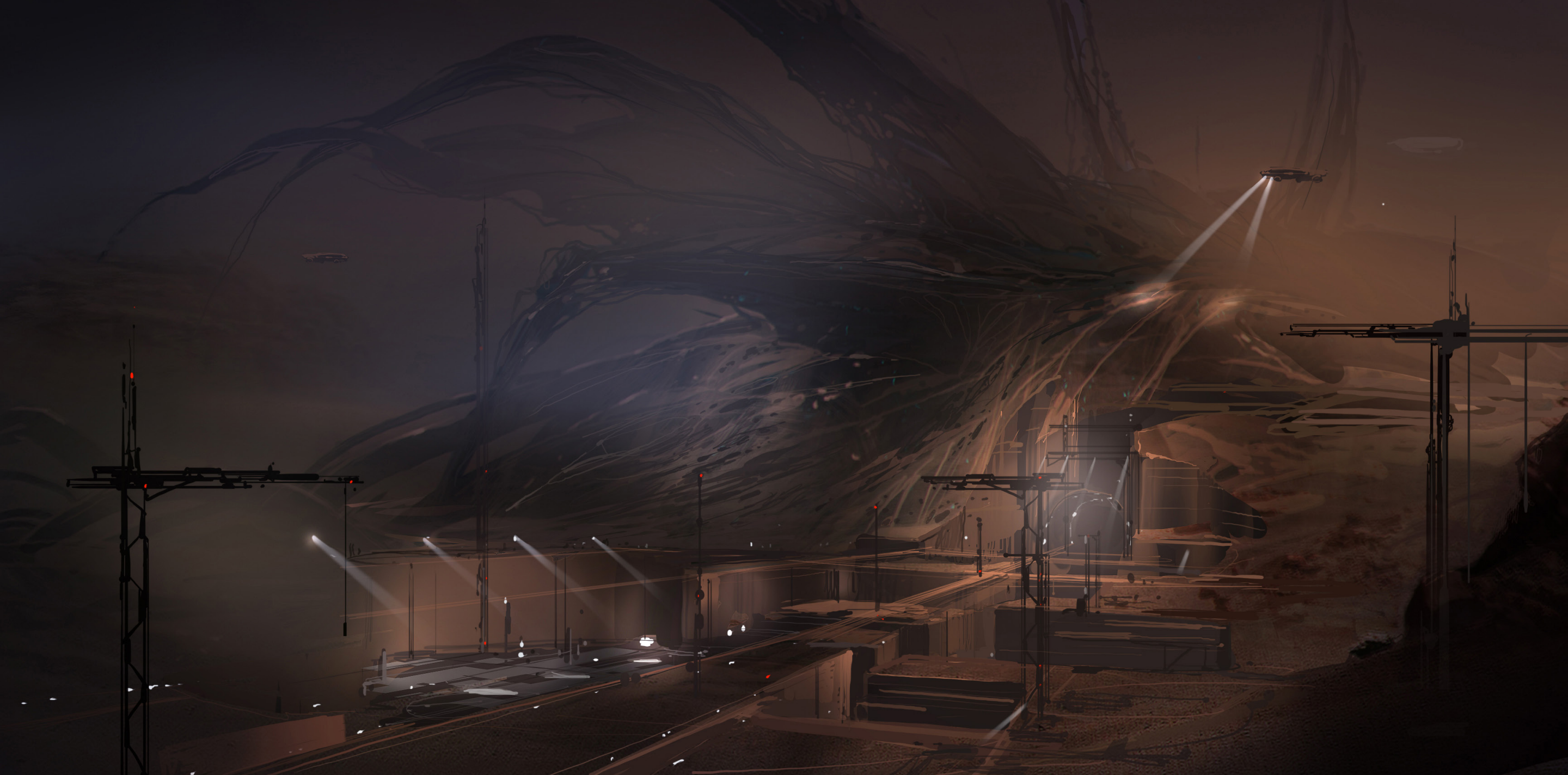
“What is it, Commander?”

“It’s in my head, General.”

For a moment, Alvarez stared at Malcolm in stunned silence. Finally, he found his voice.

“What does it want?”

“It’s inviting me to take a trip.”



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