THE UNIFICATION MISSION

THE GREAT LEAP BACKWARD 2

KELLY CURTIS

ABBREVIATIONS AND NEW WORDS

- Artificial Intelligence: AI
- Dapa: The slave class of the Unification, typically identified by their green clothing
- The Ethereal: A "protected" area of Earth where people use no technology at all, and these humans are not citizens of the JC or are counted as part of The Twelve.
- Galaxy: *Galaxy* is published about every six Earth years by the Galactic Universal. Its purpose is to keep members informed on what goes on in the Milky Way; very little is known about other galaxies. Each civilization submits a few pages about themselves, but the bulk of it is written by the GU, which is known to be biased.
- Guild: People are divided into guilds on Earth based on their occupations. They live and work within their local guilds. Children are apprenticed into these guilds at ten years old. It is common that children join the same guilds as their parents.
- GU: The Galactic Universal, an organizational body with some judicial powers composed of various civilizations throughout the galaxy. The JC is an

insignificant member and has no representation in GU decisions.

- GO: Titan Station, also called "The Gateway Out," the last post of the JC territory and the most cosmopolitan JC station frequented by JC citizens, off-worlders, and pirates.
- The Great Leap Backward: 2135, humanity sanctioned most technology on Earth
- GC: Guild Credits used to buy things in the JC, earned through employment
- IC: Instant Communicator
- ICe: Instant Communicator messages
- To ICe them: To message someone
- Imperial Exchange: In the Unification, when a new emperor takes over during an imperial rotation every 100 years. The role is only partially inherited.
- Increment: Unification citizens count the time of day in 100x19 minutes they call 'increments.'
- JC: The Joint Confederacy, humanity's main governing body.
- MAC: Main Administration Camp in the JC
- MT: Military Tributary, transmissions that are broadcast throughout the empire, carried by gravitational waves, to promote the magnificence and the glory of the Unification throughout the galaxy
- Rae: The capital city on Sa in the Unification
- RaeRae: Shortened to 'RR,' the gossip publication of the Unification
- Red: The closest alien neighbors and largest trading partner to the JC
- Sa: The capital planet of the Unification
- Shimbahn: The ruling class of the Unification, identified by their long hair and black clothing

- Shimbahn Unification of 5: The official name of the Unification, also referred to as the empire
- SC: Social Credits used for payment in the JC
- The Standard: A landline communal telephone shared between houses in the JC
- Terra Nova: An underground movement within the JC government focused on revitalizing the use and creation of human technology in daily life
- The Terra Nova Republic: the official name of Terra Nova as a governing body. TNR.
- Tri: The merchant class of the Unification
- The Twelve: The sanctioned population of the JC. The population is kept at roughly around 12 billion.
- Traditionalists: Humans within the JC who still practice religion and marriage. They are a minority and are considered to be heavily linked to Terra Nova.
- Trappists: Alien trading partners to the JC
- UC: Universal Credits, a form of payment used throughout the galaxy
- VM: Video message
- RVM: Video message in real time

The Unification Mission © 2022 by Kelly Curtis. All Rights Reserved.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author. The only exception is by a reviewer, who may quote short excerpts in a review.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: September 2022

INTRODUCTION

Enter a world without mobile phones, social media, mass media, cars, airplanes... a world where most people live and work with as little technology as possible.

How the future became humanity's past is called the *Great Leap Backward*.

After all the trouble social technology caused in the 21st century, humans finally decided to give it up, and by the 22nd century, only ten percent of technology was still in use on Earth. Humans got back to living as they were meant to live, in close-knit communities, communicating authentically without technology and celebrating the wonder of human life, which they deemed more special than any other alien civilization in the galaxy.

This book is written in that world.

The year is 2635, and although this tech-free utopia is still standing, humanity is struggling to find its place in the galaxy...

PROLOGUE

July 19, 2635, Choir Guild Hall, London, Europe

"HEAR ME," the Choir Guild Crier said loudly. "I have news. Captain Alma Hattie Johnson of the Starship *Indy* has been exonerated for the Mars One Massacre, but not without punishment. For her atonement, she will be reduced in social standing four levels and be made to lead a public mourning, which will be broadcast and recorded for JC records tomorrow."

Outrage filled the room.

"She is a murderer! Shaming her in a broadcast won't bring the dead back."

"She is a Terra Nova terrorist!"

"Three hundred of the Twelve die, and she walks free?"

"How is this justice?"

"There's no real proof she even saved Earth!"

CHAPTER 1

November 3, 2635, The Joint Confederacy Headquarters, Atlanta, North America

ALMA HAD MADE MISTAKES. She was human. But she was a determined woman and faithful to her government, even if her government was not always faithful to her. This morning, Alma's determination echoed on the old tiles as she walked through the hallways of HQ. Then she stopped momentarily in front of the large oak double doors, closed her eyes, ran her hands over her chin-length brown hair, and pushed the doors wide. All the loud voices inside the assembly room suddenly went silent.

All eyes were on Alma. The finance minister stopped talking, and after some strained seconds, the president was forced to acknowledge the young woman's tardiness. "Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to join us, Captain Johnson."

Alma found her assigned seat marked by a little plaque that read *Cpt. A.H. Johnson* in white chalk. Before sitting down, she made a cursory glance around the room to ensure no one unexpected was in attendance. But it was the usual crowd of the JC's top officials, a rough-and-tumble group of doers, dreamers, and especially where the

military was concerned, high-risk-takers. Alma met all of their eyes evenly. She knew them all, and they knew her. Some met her gaze with scorn, others with apathy, and a few with admiration. One sentiment all the eyes shared was the expectation that Alma was going across the galaxy on a mission and most likely would never return. After tomorrow, if she were unsuccessful, she would never be their enemy, colleague, or hero again.

Alma did not bother sitting down but addressed her colleagues. "Yes, Mr. President, as we are scheduled to leave tomorrow morning, I had last-minute preparations to be completed before I could come here to listen to you all talk about what has already been decided. I do apologize."

The president, Roscoe Bloom, merely nodded, dismissing her rudeness, and then pointed informally to the finance minister to continue with what he was saying.

Alma took her seat and only half-listened.

The finance minister gave Alma a dissatisfied smirk. "As I was saying, if this mission to the Unification isn't successful, we will need to consider reintroducing technology production here. We're paying too many UCs for ships and parts to transport goods that we don't see a reasonable return on. We can't keep this up for much longer, and I don't see our current trading partners paying more for our goods. We must consider alternatives...."

The president interrupted him. "We must consider what? Terra Nova. No. I'll not entertain the idea. We often say that 'our best future is behind us,' and I still believe that's true. What kind of civilization were we when we produced our own tech?" the president asked rhetorically, looking around the room until his eyes finally rested on Alma. "We were our worst selves; that's what we were. Our worst enemies. Greedy, warmongering, and miserable. Humanity accomplished nothing with technology but filled ourselves with anger and violence. I'll not open us up to that again. This trade mission," he knocked on the table loudly where some papers about the Unification lay, "is our best option, and let me

remind you folks, right now, it's our only option for a long and peaceful future."

Alma held the president's gaze even after he stopped talking.

"I understand," said the finance minister, drawing the president's eyes from Alma. "But even still, we must consider the possibility of Captain Johnson failing this mission. And we must talk about compromises if we want to continue to honor our commitment to the Great Leap Backward."

"I will not fail," said Alma, boldly interrupting the president and finance minister.

The minister only replied to her comment with a disgusted look.

"Captain Johnson has worked hard with our cultural minister to bring this all together, and not just on the military side, either. She personally spoke with every artist traveling with her. I've no doubt she is prepared and will succeed. So, you see, Finance Minister, there's no need to worry about what may never come to pass." The president spoke in such a way that everyone knew this conversation was over for now. "Now, to address another concern, cultural contamination from the Unification. As you all know, these aliens in the Unification dedicate almost every minute of their lives to their strict religion. I personally cannot see there being any allure for our citizens, but still, I want to put your minds at ease. Cultural Minister, do you mind explaining?"

"Thank you, Mr. President. The citizens of the Shimbahn Unification of 5 are very religious people. The likes of which I don't think we have ever seen on Earth. They believe their entire lives are predestined before birth. As a result, their social structure is as inflexible as stone. There are three classes of people, the Shimbahn, the Tri, and the Dapa. The first and the highest class is the Shimbahn. They are the imperials, the military, the thinkers, the city planners, the lawmakers, and the healers. To mark their class, they always dress in black and wear their black hair very long. The second class is the tradesman's class, Tri, which deals with the economy and all UCs. Apparently, they can dress however they want to wheel and

deal around the galaxy. Finally, the third class comprises slaves called the Dapa; they are the household workers and general laborers, although, they have other occupations as well, but those are a mystery becuase they don't translate to any of our languages. The Dapa always dress in green and keep their hair shoulder-length to show their status.

And to further my point about non-contamination, the Unification's society is so tightly sealed, that they've never even considered offering some of their closest and oldest trading partners Unification citizenship. Needless to say, a human would have no place in their society, so I don't imagine that anyone from the JC would look at the Unification with anything but curiosity.

Their appearances are another matter altogether. It is very unsettling to see off-worlders so like us but not human, grey-skinned, with black hair and either green or grey eyes. And besides a slightly lower core body temperature and rumored eidetic memories, they are, surprisingly, genetically human. But culturally speaking, our civilizations could not have gone down more different paths, and make no mistake; they take great pride in pointing out all the ways they think they are superior to humans."

"Superior, bah. They've chosen technology and war over any beauty or reflection in life..." commented the president. "There's nothing in the Unification to seduce humans to their style of living."

"Exactly," said the cultural minister. "They've been focused on building military might for so many centuries, they forgot to produce what makes life worth living for, which is convenient for us. They want to trade technology and weapons for art, music, and cuisine, which we have in abundance. Volunteers from some of our best artistic and culinary guilds will travel with Captain Johnson to introduce human art to the Unification.

Because the Shimbahn are the ruling class, we have worked out the logistical aspects of exhibitions with them regarding cultural appropriateness. However, all the payment not associated with military trade will be negotiated through the Tri, who in turn have told us

that everything will be finally presented to the Dapa class for ultimate approval."

"Who will you arrange the military trade agreements with?" the finance minister asked.

"Well, as I'm trying to explain, we have to deal with all three classes for trade, not one specific government body. Although it seems at first as if the Tri deal with all the economics, apparently, the Shimbahn must check and approve the trades first for suitability. And not only that, but somehow the Dapa also have a say, which leads me to believe that our translation of the Unification word 'slave' is inaccurate, but we must not have another human word for what that class is called. We have been informed that we should present our work to the Shimbahn, and then they will decide if it should be presented to the Tri. If the Tri agree on the economic exchange, the Dapa must agree by a religious ceremony. Then the Shimbahn will decide again and give us their answer for all of the Unification. There are even more intricacies, but there's no point in going into them now. Our ambassador has been briefed and will no doubt easily pick up the gist of it when he's in the empire." This is how humans worked in the galaxy.

Duke Douglas, the newly appointed ambassador to the Unification, and Patricia Evans, the JC's cultural attaché, stood up at the cultural minister's beckoning. Then the cultural minister caught Alma's eye.

Alma thought, *Now?* She had been looking forward to a little more time of half-daydreaming through this redundant meeting. She was exhausted because she had not slept more than a couple of hours in the last several days. But, reluctantly, Alma stood up.

Ambassador Douglas began, "Thank you," and everyone smiled. Duke was a wealthy young man in his prime. It was rumored that his family's fortune came from the highly disputed Floating World, a mysterious boutique galactic brothel in the Atlantic Ocean that offered absolute discretion at one of the highest prices in the galaxy. The Floating World paid more in bribes to the JC government than it

did in taxes. However, it still had been a shock when Duke, at the tender age of ten, had joined the government guild. But now, it did not take a genius to see it was coincidentally convenient that he was available to serve as the JC ambassador to the Unification, no doubt to expand the Floating World's clientele. "My first goal will be to acquire jump drives so that we can go back and forth between the Shimbahn Unification of 5 and Earth with a travel time of a little over a week rather than the three years it will currently take us with hypersleep. Alma has assured me that the jump technology will be compatible with the three JC ships we are initially taking over."

Alma disliked that he used her first name; they were not friends.

Duke continued, "I'll trade spices, music, books, people...." He fake laughed at his last joke about 'people,' and then some people, as if on cue, nervously laughed. "Whatever the Unification wants I will trade. I understand that the Unification has been so determined to build their military empire that not one fictional book has been written in over a thousand years. If this is true, then humanity has a lot to offer. And don't be put off by what the cultural minister said — our cultures are different, but not so different that Unification people won't appreciate human art and cuisine. As I see it, their culture has been only stunted," he stopped short, and Alma thought he would add, '*as our technology has*,' but instead, he just looked over at her expectantly.

Alma didn't acknowledge him but waited to see what Patricia would say.

Patricia was a red-haired woman who would officially present all the human goods for trade. She would coordinate all the artists, chefs, musicians, and art once they reached the empire. Patricia, like most humans, had never left Earth before. "We are excited to be traveling to the Shimbahn Unification of 5's capital planet called Sa at the invitation of the emperor and empress to perform and exhibit our art, drama, and cuisine. It's understood that by the time we arrive, the Unification will have constructed a large theater based on our recommendations to seat over four thousand spectators. Two performances

each day for a probationary period over 25 Shim days will be shown. Attached to the theater will be an art exhibition center and a large bar and restaurant offering both food and drinks from Earth."

Everyone listened to Patricia with great regret as she listed what would be on offer at the restaurant. Earth was sending its most prized foods over to sway the Unification into trade agreements they desperately needed. As a result, they had depleted their reserves of most spices and prized ingredients from across the globe. Not to mention their best wines.

As a direct democracy, the JC had had a referendum about it, and people had agreed to send the best of what they had. Having the Unification as a potential trading partner was worth the temporary annoyance. It still did not take away the sting of regret when they had to listen to the menu that would probably be wasted on unappreciative off-worlders, that is, if Captain Johnson even made it across the galaxy. It had been centuries since JC ships had traveled so far.

Patricia continued, "The restaurant will be open from eight in the morning until two at night. As there are thirty-one hours in a day on Sa, the bar will be staffed by human and Unification workers. One hundred nineteen-minute increments mark time in the Unification in a day, and the denotation of decimals is used for the minutes within the increments. To avoid confusion, we've indicated both Earth and Unification times on all our schedules because it's difficult to know what time thirty-five increments is without doing the math. We don't want anyone to be late because of bad math." In the galaxy, humans had a reputation for being late, whether due to slow ships or that humans didn't take time as seriously as everyone else.

"Unification citizens are early risers and go to work before eating breakfast, then take significantly longer breaks to eat together during the workday. Just like us, they enjoy their evenings with friends, so the restaurant and bar will also be open late. We hope Unification citizens will embrace the culture and food we offer them and that the theater, restaurant, and bar will remain permanently open with performances and menus changing monthly. Not only is Sa the

capital planet and the gem of their vast empire, but it is galactically cosmopolitan, and popular with other off-worlders for commerce that humanity has yet to encounter and so there is a potential future for other trade partners there as well." Patricia finished and made eye contact with Alma.

Before Alma could began, the health minister cut in. "As many of you know, I've already raised these concerns, but do you really think Unification people will be capable of sitting through a three-hour opera or a two-hour play? I'm only a doctor, not an anthropologist, but given that our two species are almost genetically identical, wouldn't it make sense that they all suffer more or less from tech flu? And that would make it impossible for them to concentrate on anything, be it entertainment or conversations for long periods, and this is why their culture never developed as ours has. They are merely good at blowing things up and killing. Their attention span for entertainment became too short. In light of them all suffering from tech flu, wouldn't it be better just to send over paintings, sculptures, poetry, and songs?

"Thank you, Doctor," the cultural minister said before Patricia could answer. "We've studied their culture in depth from sources they supplied and information we have from both the Red and the GU. Unification citizens manage to live with social technology in their daily lives without any sign of tech flu, and they've many nonfiction books, which they seem to enjoy reading in their free time. I don't believe they suffer from tech flu, and this isn't because they're immune to it; it's because, in their daily activities, they adhere to strict social regimes. And their strong religious beliefs keep them from becoming ill because their religion separates them from technology at constant intervals throughout the day, which I think is much more than just coincidental."

The health minister looked at her in disbelief. "Aren't you worried that all the traditionalists will jump on the bandwagon and say, 'Tech is okay as long as you have religion'? And what's our guarantee that the Unification won't withhold the tech from us unless we

convert to their religion? And if they did, are we prepared to take on that religion as part of the bargain as well? Are we that desperate? And who will make that call? Captain Alma Johnson with a first officer who believes in religion?"

"Calm down," the cultural minister instructed. "Let me remind you, I'm the anthropologist, and you're the doctor. And to put it simply, most people don't simply change their religion on a whim or suddenly adopt one. When humanity saw the first signs of tech flu in the early 21st century, most people were still somewhat religious, and religion did nothing to hinder the spread of tech flu. And our past religious devotion and few hours of absence from the technology, even among the most fervent believers at the time, the Amish, for example, did nothing to stop tech flu. And as far as people going from being atheist to religious overnight, it doesn't happen like that unless you already have underlying issues. As you know personally, Doctor, everyone going on the mission has been physically, mentally, and emotionally vetted. And there are differences between the Unification religion, religions of ancient Earth, and the way that traditionalists practice religion in our own society today. In the Unification, they don't believe in free will at all. I am not sure if you can, or any of us can understand what that really means, but from all my research, I cannot see any scenario where one of us would want to convert to their religion. Conversely, I cannot see any scenario where the Unification would try to force their religion onto humans; in fact, they have thousands of vassal planets, and not one of them is required to practice the Unification religion, so I highly doubt they'd require that from humanity either, especially since we will just be a very minor trading partner if they even agree to trade, which isn't even guaranteed."

"Are you worried I'll bring back some silly notion of religion with social tech, Health Minister?" Alma couldn't help but interject, amused.

"Is your first officer not a traditionalist, Captain?" he snapped back.

"He is. You know that. Everyone knows that."

"And wouldn't you say that in combination with your record that makes you and your first officer a liability under these circumstances?"

"Health Minister," Alma said evenly, "I've proven myself. I'm not a supporter of Terra Nova or a traditionalist. As for my first officer, he keeps his religious beliefs to himself as part of the Agreements."

"But what about Junior Doctor Julia James? It's rumored she was raised in the Ethereal and is a witch. Aren't you worried she will inspire others to adopt religion covertly? And possibly even be taken in by Unifcaiton religion?"

"Doctor James graduated from the Fleet Academy, and my chief medical officer, Doctor Galen Harvey, a very well-respected physician, doesn't find her lacking, so why should you? If she was a witch, then all the better because witches don't use technology, and the Ethereal cast off all technology, so I'm not sure where you were going with that line of thought? Perhaps only to make me and my crew look unsuitable for this mission. Which I can assure you we certainly are not."

"I'm only asking the question everyone is whispering around you, Captain. We deserve answers."

Alma gave him a small smile. "I'd advise you to stop listening to whispers, Doctor. They can be so easily misheard and untrue."

The cultural minister cut the health minister off before he could reply. "I want to assure everyone, again, that Captain Johnson's crew has been cleared for this mission. They've undergone psychological evaluations, been given cultural classes about the Unification, and are prepared for success. No one is susceptible to conversion from the Unification religion, not even Commander Christopher Bates, a known traditionalist. Now, are there any other questions about our proposed cultural program?"

The cultural minister looked around the room fiercely, clearly agitated. "No? Good. I needn't remind you; I've been at this for a long time. It's my area of expertise, sending suitable human art, music, and

cuisine out to other civilizations in the galaxy for UCs. It's not easy, but I've done it successfully for countless years, barely keeping our little government afloat, and now on the eve of our most important trade mission, you question me? Unbelievable." In their last meeting, the cultural minister was frustrated that many of the guild criers had purposely misunderstood her points about religion. But she hadn't realized that they'd twist it so that this would become an issue. To her, it was preposterous to imagine that humans would pick up religious beliefs again, especially an alien religion, no matter what they were offered as a side dish with it. "Alma, if you would please?"

Alma began without a preamble. "My ship, the *Indy,* and two large cargo ships, the JC *Casa* and the JC *Ford* are ready for departure. Tomorrow we will leave Earth's orbit and go into hypersleep for roughly three years once we clear our solar system. We're scheduled to wake up one week before our rendezvous with a small Shimbahn fleet that'll escort us to Sa and through Unification territory safely. My chief medical officer, first officer, communications officer, Ambassador Duke Douglas, and Director Patricia Evans have all been fitted with embedded universal translators to help with negotiations. However, as these translators are more than three hundred years old, they work only for the spoken word in the Unification. After jump drives, I hope that the ambassador will also be able to negotiate for new translators as it's very inconvenient not to be able to read." Alma looked over at Duke. "Preferably before we negotiate for jump drives." Then she looked out at her colleagues again. "We've been supplied with as many hand-held translators as we could get a hold of throughout the JC, although we haven't had the time to do thorough checks on how well they all work. Regardless, we will manage, as humans always do. We have our orders; we're prepared, and I assure you, this mission will be a success because I never fail."

"Captain Alma Hattie Johnson," the guild minister addressed her haughtily.

Alma knew the guild minister was using her full name to show her dislike as if she were on trial again.

"Thank you," she said to Alma when she stood back up. "I'd once again like to call into question Captain Johnson's suitability for this mission. In the past, she has been reckless and unable to follow direct orders from her superiors. It's not too late to replace her."

Alma almost laughed at the guild minister's suggestion. *Go on. No one else would even consider this mission*, she thought.

Chatter on both sides of this argument began to swirl throughout the room.

Alma was patiently waiting to see if she should defend herself or if someone else was going to speak against or for her.

The finance minister stood up. "I must second the guild minister's concerns. What happened on Mars One was a disgrace. Innocent people were needlessly killed, and Captain Johnson was responsible for all that reckless destruction and death."

The president pounded his fist against the wooden table, and it shook. "And Alma took full responsibility. She was investigated for her actions, put on trial, and was punished."

Admiral Jackson rose, her beautiful dark brown skin marred by a scar down one entire cheek. "Guild Minister, do you think Captain Johnson wanted to kill those people? Unfortunately, they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. It happens when you are trying to defend a civilization that has given up technology, including most weapons. But oh, that's right, you wouldn't know anything about that, would you? Let me tell you, as an expert in keeping humanity safe: what Alma did on Mars One was to protect our borders from Terra Nova, who was trying to bring in illegal weapons, and not just any weapons, if you recall — nuclear weapons, to Earth. Do you remember what those do? Do you like your job? Do you know how easy it would've been for Terra Nova to take over this government if Alma had let that Terra Nova ship leave Mars One Station? Or how many more of the Twelve might have died, including all of you sitting here had she not acted quickly and against orders?"

"The deaths of 305 of the Twelve is too many to justify her actions. It's true, we don't know what those people would have done

with those weapons, but I feel, as many others do, that Captain Johnson should be replaced on such an important mission as this one. I've been saying it from day one. She cannot be trusted. And it's not too late to send someone else."

"Guild Minister," Alma said, "I'm sorry that you only seem to take note of my actions when I break the rules to keep you all safe or make decisions that may make you feel uncomfortable, but I would strongly advise you, that if you enjoy sitting at your desk and passing judgment on what I do out in the galaxy, then let me go and do my job so that you can continue to do what makes you happy." Alma took a breath, then began again. "There's no doubt that I've made some mistakes. The Mars One incident was one of them; however, there's no question that had those nuclear weapons on the *Alba* reached Earth, more than 305 of the Twelve would be dead now, and none of us would be sitting here today wondering what we're going to trade with the Unification, of that I'm quite sure.

I may be young, the youngest one here, but besides Admiral Jackson, I have the most experience with off-worlders, starships, and artists than anyone else available, and there's no one better to lead this mission that is willing to go." Alma sighed, looking at their angry expressions. *They refuse to see how close we are to losing everything because we cannot protect ourselves in a galaxy full of predators. Our remote location has kept us safe for centuries, but it's no longer adequate camouflage. We must change, no matter how fearful we are to do it,* she thought *as the* room exploded with a tornado of arguments over Alma's use of the word 'incident' to describe the Mars One tragedy.

The president spoke loudly. "Order, I'll have order here. As I said, Captain Johnson is the best choice to lead the Unification mission. She has been chosen by a panel of government and military representatives. I know some of you have your reservations, but we must trust that both the admiral and the captain are doing the best they can with what they have to keep our government and territories safe. Yes, Terra Nova is still a threat to the JC. But if Captain Johnson

is successful, we will be able to squash the Terra Nova movement once and for all since most of their ardent supporters won't have ground to stand on saying the JC doesn't have a future without modern technology to trade our goods. This mission will solve both of our problems. Now, if there's nothing else to discuss, let's allow the captain to return to her preparations."

Admiral Jackson remained standing. "Mr. President, just one more thing, as long as everyone is criticizing the responsibilities of others rather than trusting them to do their jobs, I'd also like to weigh in. What about our relationship with the Red? Our biggest trading partner and the Unification's enemy. Does anyone else see a problem here? And since our Red ambassador is actually in attendance today, I want to hear the words straight from the horse's mouth. What do the Red say about this potential Unification trade agreement, and don't give me that nonsense my guild crier has already tried to convince me of."

The ambassador to the Red stood up and addressed her calmly, almost quietly. "Admiral, you know we've tried for years to trade for jump technology from the Red, but they refuse, abiding by their law only to pay humans in UCs. But the Red have assured me that they see no issue with the JC trading with the Unification as long as it's only for basic technology, which extends to jump drives. It's not ideal, but I don't think we need to fear the Red dropping us as a trading partner or breaking their peace treaty over this."

"And that doesn't seem off to you, Ambassador?"

"What would you suggest, Admiral?" asked the president, annoyed.

"Come on; you are smart people. We all know the Red to be a strange and jealous civilization. What in the history between Earth and the Red would make you think the Red would be okay with any of this? We are being played."

"Unfortunately, we don't have the luxury of asking the why or how of it, and even if we did, we wouldn't receive an honest answer. We aren't powerful enough to get the truth, nor stealth enough to

have spies steal it. We must simply take this opportunity, play the part the Red or the Unification want us to play and hope for the best," said the Red ambassador, and then under his breath, "and prepare for the worst when this fails."

"If no one else has anything to add, Captain Johnson, we wish you and your crew a smooth journey and a safe and successful return," said the president.

Everyone collected their papers and began making their way out of the room.

Admiral Jackson stopped Alma before she could leave. "These Shimbahn men aren't used to seeing women on starships. Whoever your contact is, he'll be surprised and curious about you. Use that momentary hesitation to your advantage. Don't waver in doing what you must to get us what we need. We only have fifty years at best before the JC collapses from within. Less if the Red tries to take us or Terra Nova continues to weaken us. Also, Alma, I know you're not fond of Duke, but you must help him secure the jump drives and weapons. I don't trust him."

"Yes, Admiral."

"And remember, this isn't a grand gesture of friendship by the Unification and them suddenly looking for culture. They want something from us, and my gut tells me it isn't what we're prepared to trade. Be vigilant. Do not agree to anything beyond our means or morals. Duke's looking out for the Floating World first and the JC second. Stars only know what he'd trade to get what he wants. Don't let him go too far. I trust you. Good luck."