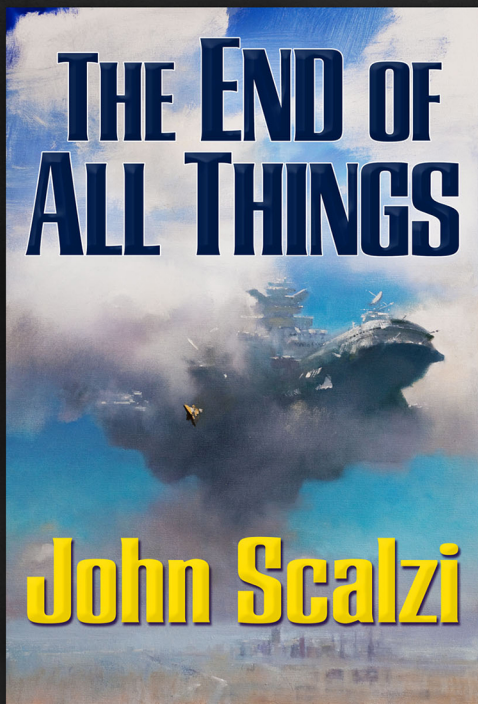


EXTRAS

THE APPENDIX TO JOHN SCALZI'S
THE END OF ALL THINGS



An Alternate
"The Life of the Mind":
Deleted and
Alternate Scenes

AN ALTERNATE
“THE LIFE OF THE MIND”
Deleted and Alternate Scenes



Introduction

The End of All Things took me longer to write than most of my books do, in part because I had a number of false starts. These false starts weren't bad—in my opinion—and they were useful in helping me figure out what was best for the book; for example, determining which point-of-view characters I wanted to have, whether the story should be in first or third person, and so on. But at the same time it's annoying to write a bunch of stuff and then go *Yeaaaaah, that's not it*. So it goes.

Through various false starts and diversions, I ended up writing nearly 40,000 words—almost an entire short novel!—of material that I didn't directly use. Some of it was recast and repurposed in different directions, and a lot of it was simply left to the side. The thing is when I throw something out of a book, I don't just delete it. I put it into an “excise file” and keep it just in case it'll come in handy later.

Like now: I've taken various bits from the excise file and with them have crafted a first chapter of an alternate version of *The Life of the Mind*, the first novella of *The End of All Things*. This version (roughly) covers the same events, with (roughly) the same characters, but with a substantially different narrative direction.

In an alternate universe, an alternate version of me went ahead with this version, and *The End of All Things* ended up being a rather different book. Which would be cool. I'd like to meet up with that John Scalzi and trade books.

Please note: This version of the story is noncanonical and

mildly spoilery for the version that is, in fact, canonical. While you don't have to read the official version of *The Life of the Mind* to read this (or to enjoy it), I recommend that you do to fully appreciate the compare and contrast.

Also, this version ends on a bit of a cliff-hanger. Which will never be resolved. Sorry about that.

Enjoy!

—JS

PART ONE

The *Robert Anton* skipped into the Inhe system, near a small asteroid that in the not too recent past had served as a Rraey space station and repair dock. The Rraey had officially abandoned it, along with a substantial number of other territories, after a series of military political setbacks, contracting back to the species' core planets and systems. "Officially abandoned" did not mean it was not in use, however.

Control, sent Giovanni Carranza, pilot and captain of the *Robert Anton*. *This is the Robert Anton, requesting docking assistance.*

"Copy, *Robert Anton*," said an artificially generated voice, the standard voice of *Control*. "You're some distance away. Can you maneuver any closer to base?"

Negative, Carranza said. *Engines are dead. Maneuvering jets are dead. Both died on the other side of the skip.*

"How did you get to skip distance?"

Inertia, Carranza said. *Burned the engines as long as I could before I had to take them offline. Saved enough energy to run the skip drive. It was a very slow trip.*

"Copy that," *Control* said. "Your status otherwise, please."

The Anton is heavily damaged, Carranza said. *Hull compromised, weapons systems partially destroyed. Communications work, obviously, but outside sensors are dead. I knew I skipped from timing alone. If anyone other than me were on the ship, they'd be long dead. We're a mess.*

"Did you complete your mission?"

There was a hesitation. Yes, Carranza said. *The mission was completed. It wasn't pretty but it got done.*

"It's going to take us some time to get you back to dock," Control said. "We'd like to start analysis of your mission as soon as possible. Please send along your mission logs and recordings, as well as your damage report."

Sending, Carranza said.

"Thank you," Control said.

The Anton took a beating. I'm not sure it's repairable at this point.

"I'm looking at your damage report now. You may be right about that."

What does that mean for me?

"You don't need to worry about that right now."

You and I agreed that if this mission was successful that I would be done, Carranza said.

"I'm well aware of our agreement," Control replied.

I don't want the state of the Anton held against me.

"We asked you to complete the mission," Control said. "You did what we asked you to do."

I know it's been harder for you to get more ships. To get more pilots.

Control didn't say anything to this.

I would like my body back, Carranza said. *I would like to go home.*

"Don't worry," Control said. "We'll take care of you."

Thank you, Carranza said, and then died as Control signaled the release of a neurotoxin into his brain. The effect was instantaneous; Carranza had felt relief that his wishes would be granted and then he felt nothing at all.

The person behind Control waited until it received the signal that Carranza's brain was past any attempt at revival—not long at all—and then ordered tugs to bring the *Anton* into dock and crews to take what was salvageable from the ship before reducing it to scrap.

Carranza had been correct that it was harder to get ships re-

cently, but the *Anton's* useful days were done. As were Carranza's. Pilots were also hard to come by. But their usefulness was limited by their ability to believe they would ever be free. There would be no way for Carranza to believe that after today.

A waste.

But fortunately, a replacement was on the way.

"The time has come for treasonous ideas," said Otha Durham, from his lectern.

An amused murmur rippled through the corps of Colonial Union diplomats, assembled in one of the State Department's conference theaters. Durham, undersecretary of state for the Colonial Union, and speaking to the crowd on the occasion of an otherwise-standard assembly to award a medal to one of their number, smiled along with them.

"I know what you're thinking," he said, and then assumed the part of a bored diplomat in his audience. "Oh, God, there Durham goes again, pretending to have big thoughts and presenting them with *such drama*." He smiled again as laughs emerged from his audience, and held up his hands as if to acknowledge an affectionate criticism. "Fair call. Fair call. I don't think it's any secret that I've made dramatic statements a calling card of my career. But work with me for a minute here."

Durham looked out over his audience, becoming serious. "For decades—scratch that, for centuries—the Colonial Union has been charged with the role of keeping humanity safe and secure in our universe. A universe which was and continues to be hostile to the idea that humans exist within it. Ever since we have made our presence known in space, other species and other powers have sought to remove us—to eradicate us. And if we know anything about humanity it is this: We don't go down without a fight.

"And so we have fought. Humanity has fought, for centuries, to earn and keep our place in the universe. The Colonial Union

and the Colonial Defense Forces has fought that fight for our species, for centuries.”

Durham shrugged, acknowledging the fact of centuries of near-constant warfare. “So be it,” he said. “But where does that leave us, the diplomatic corps of the Colonial Union? We have existed all this time, alongside the Colonial Defense Forces, but as an afterthought, an *also-ran*—because not only was the idea that diplomacy with the alien races we encountered might be a useful tool ridiculed, it was indeed considered very nearly a treasonous thought.

“How can we seriously think diplomacy could work when time and time again the other species out here with us attacked us, killed our colonists, and claimed the planets and systems we had claimed for our own? In this light, how could diplomacy be seen as anything other than an abdication of responsibility for the species? How could it be anything other than treason?”

Durham looked out at the diplomats assembled before him, quiet now.

“Diplomacy as treason. Reaching out with an open hand instead of a fist, treason. The idea that intelligences that evolved on different worlds, in different ways and in different environments, might yet still find a common ground, treason. If you consider all these things almost fundamentally a betrayal of humanity, it makes sense that in the end, all you have left is the war. The fight. The struggle that leads to ruin, for one or both species.”

And here Durham smiled. “But this is the thing,” he said, and then motioned to the diplomats attending his words. “We know better. We have always known better. The Colonial Defense Force’s battle for us is often necessary, and sometimes inevitable. But when the opportunity comes for the open hand rather than the fist that, too, is often necessary.

“And now, also inevitable. The Colonial Union has long—has too long—relied on the planet Earth to provide it with the sol-

diers the Colonial Defense Forces needs to fight our battles and enforce our will. But we no longer have that option. Colonel John Perry's appearance in Earth's skies with the Conclave trade delegation put our relationship with the Earth on hold; the destruction of Earth Station, the planet's sole egress into space, destroyed it."

Durham looked directly at Ambassador Ode Abumwe, sitting in the front row of his audience with her team, nodding to her in recognition of her presence on Earth Station when it was destroyed. Abumwe nodded back.

"The Earth wrongly blames us for its destruction, but right or wrong, we can't go back to what was before," Durham continued. "Now the Colonial Union will need to find soldiers from its own colonies, from its own planetary populations—a transition that will take time, and is already causing no small amount of unrest in the Colonial Union's previously peaceable ranks.

"And in the meantime, the formerly *treasonous* idea of diplomacy becomes the Colonial Union's primary tool. To make allies. To buy time. To secure our place in the universe, not with a weapon, but with reason. Diplomacy is now the primary resource by which the Colonial Union, and by extension humanity, keeps its place. What was treason has now become a treasure."

"Which, clearly and obviously, brings us to Ambassador Ode Abumwe," Durham said, lightly. Once again, laughter rippled through the assembled diplomats. Durham motioned for Abumwe to rise and to stand next to him at the lectern. She did so. Durham's assistant Renea Tam also approached the lectern, wooden box in hand.

"Ambassador Abumwe, over the last year you and your team have found yourself at the center of a number of diplomatic storms," Durham said, turning to her. "When you could, you triumphed. When you could not triumph, you were able to at

least find a silver lining to some of the Colonial Union's darkest clouds. We have asked a lot of you, and of your people. None of you have disappointed us. Time and again you've impressed us with your determination and your resourcefulness. Also, the fact that one of your team saved the daughter of the United States secretary of state from the destruction of Earth Station was no small feat." Another ripple of laughter. "The initiative your team shows flows from the top. It is your leadership that set the example, for them and for all of us.

"The Colonial Union owes much to you and your team in these difficult times," Durham said, and nodded to Tam, who opened the wooden box, revealing a medal and a framed document. "As a symbol of the regard of both the Colonial Union Department of State, and the secretary herself, it is my absolute pleasure to present you with the Distinguished Honor Award, for your exceptional and outstanding service." He lifted the medal with its ribbon out of the box and placed it around Abumwe's neck. The assembled diplomats applauded and Abumwe's team leapt to their feet and cheered. Abumwe offered up one of her rare smiles to them.

Durham held up a hand to silence the audience. "On a personal note," he said, and turned to Abumwe, "Ambassador, I have known you since you first arrived at the State Department. You were an intern and I was on my first posting, and that was"—here Durham intentionally mumbled a number—"years ago. Even then you were a smart, perceptive, driven, and serious person. The first three of these I would never fault. They have taken you far. But I still believe that you are sometimes more serious than you absolutely need to be." He nodded to Tam again, who set down the medal box and reached into her suit jacket to offer a small object to Durham, who took it. "And so in addition to the Distinguished Honor Award, as a token of personal esteem, my dear friend Ode, I offer you this." He

presented the object to Abumwe, who took it. It was a funny-shaped rubber doll.

"What do I do with this?" Abumwe said.

"Squeeze it," Durham said.

Abumwe did so. Its eyes popped out and it offered up a squeaky chuckle. The diplomats laughed.

"Thank you, Otha," Abumwe said. "I don't know what to say."

"On the contrary, I think you know *exactly* what to say," Durham said. "You're just too diplomatic to say it."

Durham spent an hour at the after-ceremony reception meeting and greeting with Abumwe's team, and in particular making the acquaintance of Hart Schmidt and Harry Wilson, the two members of Abumwe's team who escaped Earth Station as it was literally disintegrating around them.

"I don't imagine that's something you want to relive much," Durham said to Schmidt, after he had been introduced to him and one of his friend's friends, whose name vaporized from Durham's mind almost instantly after the introductions were made.

"Well, I was actually unconscious for the worst of it, sir," Schmidt said, and nodded to Wilson. "Harry is the one who can tell you what it was really like."

"And what was it really like?" Durham asked Wilson, turning to him.

"Completely terrifying," Wilson said, and everyone laughed. "Or it would have been, if I hadn't been actively distracted by trying to stay alive on a trip through the Earth's atmosphere. Which was also terrifying."

"That's right, you skydived from Earth Station down to the planet."

"Yes, sir."

"Which means you're the one who saved the U.S. secretary of state's daughter."

"Danielle Lowen," Harry said. "I did. She's a diplomat in her own right as well."

"Yes, of course," Durham said. "But the fact that she was the secretary's daughter is one reason why the United States, if no one else on Earth, will still speak to us. So thank you for that."

"Just doing my job," Harry said.

"I hope we gave you a medal for that."

"You did," Harry said. "The CDF gave me one, too. I'm all medaled up."

"Very good," Durham said. "Now let me buy you a drink to go with them."

Wilson smiled. "I knew I liked this posting."

Shortly thereafter Durham excused himself and exited the reception area, to find Renea Tam and his luggage, ported by a State Department employee pushing a cart.

"I don't think you need that many clothes," Tam said, looking at the cart. "You're going on vacation, not moving away."

"My vacation is three weeks long," Durham said. "I want to spend very little of that time doing laundry."

"You're staying at an embassy," Tam said. "They have *staff* there. Who would do your laundry?"

"In the future I will set forth with a single change of clothes in a duffel bag," Durham said. "But as my shuttle to the *Chandler* is leaving in forty minutes, this time I'll just have to manage."

Tam grinned at this, and the three of them headed toward the shuttle to the *Chandler*. Durham took his leave of his assistant at the shuttle door and took a seat on it, across from the only other passenger, a young man with dark hair.

"I liked your speech today," the young man said, after the shuttle had departed from Phoenix Station and was making its way to the *Chandler*.

Durham, who had been resting with his eyes closed, cracked them open and glanced at the speaker, looking him over. "You look familiar."

"You were introduced to me earlier today," the young man said. "Don't worry, I don't expect you to remember. I expect you shook a lot of hands today."

"You're in the diplomatic corps?" Durham asked.

"No," the young man said. "But a friend of mine is. Hart Schmidt."

"One of Abumwe's people."

"Yes. He and I went to school together. Well, he was about three years ahead of me. But our dads were friends, so I got to know him. When he found out I was going to be on Phoenix Station on my way to the *Chandler*, he invited me to the ceremony. I was in the back for most of it. I'm Rafe Daquin." He reached over and held out a hand.

Durham took it. "You're crew on the *Chandler*, then," he said.

"Yes," Daquin said. "I'm a pilot."

"That's not a bad job."

"Thank you," Daquin said. "I get to travel and see the universe. I expect you get to do the same as a diplomat."

"Not as much as I used to," Durham said. "I'm a bureaucrat now. The most I get to see of the universe these days is my desk."

"Why are you traveling now?"

"Vacation," Durham said. "I'm going to Huckleberry, to see friends and do some hiking."

"Why travel on the *Chandler*, if you don't mind me asking?" Daquin said. "We're a cargo ship. I'd think you'd just have one of your diplomatic ships take you."

"Borrowing a diplomatic corps ship to taxi me to my vacation spot would be looked on as misappropriation of resources, I think," Durham said, smiling. "And also there were none going my way when I needed it. Anyway the secretary

encourages us to support private enterprise." He closed his eyes again, hoping Daquin would pick up the hint.

He didn't. "Do you really think diplomacy is treason?" Daquin asked. "That the Colonial Union sees it that way, I mean."

Durham kept his eyes closed. "I may have been exaggerating for effect," he said. "But it's certainly true that given a choice, the Colonial Union would rather shoot than talk. It's gotten us in trouble."

"You know about the disappearing ships?" Daquin asked.

Durham cracked his eyes open again at this. "Disappearing ships," he said.

"More civilian ships are going missing over the last couple of years," Daquin said. "Cargo ships, mostly. Ships like the *Chandler*."

"There's always been piracy," Durham said. "That's one of the reasons why the Colonial Defense Forces were formed. That and other intelligent species trying to kill us."

"Right, but pirates usually go for cargo," Daquin said. "They don't make ships disappear."

"What do you think it is?" Durham asked. "What are the rumors?"

Daquin shrugged. "If you ask me, it's got to do with us losing the Earth. Other species know we've started rationing our military to deal with major problems, so they're starting to pick off trade ships to weaken the Colonial Union's infrastructure."

"Seems a long way to go about it," Durham said.

"Every little bit counts."

"This doesn't make you afraid?" Durham asked. "You're a pilot on a cargo ship. Presumably you're a target."

Daquin smiled. "I have to eat."

"That's a very practical way of looking at one's potential fears," Durham said.

"That, and I've been through some close scrapes before,"

Daquin said. "I should have been dead a couple of times already because of ship failures and accidents. I've survived."

"Have you," Durham said. "Why do you think that is?"

"I don't know," Daquin said. "I think I may just be luckier than most people." This time it was Daquin who closed his eyes and put his head back to rest. Durham watched him for a few moments before doing the same.

Three days out from Phoenix Station and less than one day prior to the skip to Huckleberry, Durham asked for and received a private audience with *Chandler's* captain, Eliza Perez.

"What is this about?" Perez asked. The two of them were in her stateroom, which, like everything else on the *Chandler*, was cramped. "If you're going to complain about the accommodations, as you can see, you are traveling with the same appointments as the captain."

"The accommodations are fine, of course," Durham said. "Captain Perez, I have something to confess to you. I came onto your ship under false pretenses." He had his PDA in his hand. He activated it and handed it to Perez. "I booked passage on the *Chandler* with the story that I am headed for vacation on Huckleberry. In fact, I am going somewhere else entirely."

Perez took the PDA and looked at what was on the screen. "What is this?" she said.

"It's an official request from the State Department for you to take me to a destination I will give you once you give me back my PDA," Durham said. "It's a secure and official request, which is why I'm showing it to you on my PDA rather than just transferring the document to your own PDA. It's awkward to do it that way but this way you know the orders aren't forged."

"You just said 'orders,'" Perez said. "That's substantially different than a request."

"Officially it's a request, which you are able to refuse," Durham said. "Unofficially we both know it's not in your interest to refuse it."

"Where would I be taking you?"

"To a system that has nothing at all of interest in it, which makes it a good place to have a secret meeting."

"A secret meeting with whom?"

"That I can't tell you."

"Then I can't let you borrow my ship."

"That's not wise."

"Sending the *Chandler* to a destination far off our schedule for 'secret meetings' isn't *wise*, either," Perez said. "You either tell me what you're asking me to do, or it won't get done."

"And if I tell you?"

"Then it still might not get done," Perez said. "Because I still have to make a decision. But there is a difference between 'won't' and 'might.' So you don't have a choice."

"I'm meeting with representatives of the Conclave to—informally—discuss an alliance with them."

"Seriously," Perez said, after a moment. "An organization of four hundred alien species, most of whom tried to murder us, and you want to make friends with them."

Durham sighed. "Captain Perez, I don't think I actually have to tell you that the Colonial Union is in a deep well of shit at the moment," he said. "The cargo ships that whoever it is are picking off are just the start. Sooner or later someone is going to go after an established colony. Sooner or later someone is going to go after the Colonial Union itself. We're vulnerable and becoming more so every day. All they'll have to do is wait until we're weak enough to be attacked."

"And we think joining the Conclave is going to fix this."

"Not *joining*," Durham said. "An alliance. A mutual defense against aggression pact."

"This after the Colonial Union tried to destroy the Conclave,"

Perez said, and noted Durham's expression. "Yes, we all know about that. About the incident at Roanoke. I run a trade ship, Mr. Durham. You can keep news away from the official channels if you like but trade ships have their own lines of communication. We travel. We talk. We know."

"Then you know why the meetings have to be secret for the time being," Durham said. "If this round succeeds then we can do something more public. If it doesn't then it will never have happened. Another reason, incidentally, to have the *Chandler* take me to the meeting, and not one of the State Department's ships."

"There is a small matter of the cargo we're carrying," Perez said. "Gaalfruit and other highly perishable products. We timed our travel to arrive at Huckleberry just before the gaalfruit ripens. If we arrive even a few days late we can't sell it. Insurance won't cover the loss if we can't tell why the cargo didn't arrive in time."

"Obviously the Colonial Union Department of State will purchase your cargo."

"All of it."

"Yes, and before you ask, yes, at fair market value," Durham said.

"It's not just about the cargo," Perez said. "We have relationships with distributors. We are supposed to pick up new cargo as well. Also agricultural products. Also highly perishable. If we're not there when we're supposed to be, they lose out and we damage that relationship."

"State will cover it all."

"That's going to cost a lot of money."

"Yes, well," Durham said, and smiled. "The Colonial Union actually creates the money in question, so I don't think covering your expenses and expectations will be a problem."

Perez was silent for a moment.

"Is there anything else you would like?" Durham asked.

"Would you like me to promise to wash and wax the *Chandler* after I am done using it?"

"I don't like this," Perez said.

"I can understand that," Durham said. "I do apologize for presenting it to you this way. I am under orders. You can, at least, understand why secrecy is actually important for this mission."

"Do you think it's going to work?" Perez asked. "The mission, I mean."

"I think if it doesn't, you should probably spend all the money you're going to make off this trip," Durham said. "And spend it as quickly as you can."

The first thought that came to Rafe Daquin as he bubbled up uneasily into consciousness was, *I can't feel my legs*.

The second thought he had, after another moment, was, *I can't feel my anything*.

Rafe sunk back into unconsciousness after that, falling through a blackness of indeterminate length and depth.

Rafe was dreaming and knew he was dreaming, because this was one of those dreams where he stood still and everything moved around him.

He started on the bridge of the *Chandler*, beginning his first day as an apprentice pilot, after six months at navigation and a year in the ranks of the engineers before that. The *Chandler's* chief of pilots was not entirely pleased to find Rafe in her charge. Rafe had been dumped into her lap by Captain Walden, and he knew that Lieutenant Skidmore thought Walden had been bribed by Rafe's family to accelerate him through the ranks. And, well, she had; Rafe's father told him as much the last time the *Chandler* was at Phoenix Station. In Rafe's dream he was experiencing Skidmore's thinned lips and otherwise carefully neutral demeanor for the first time.

Rafe's response in the dream was the same as it was in life: outward careful politeness and attentiveness, inward lack of concern because the fix was already in, and he was going to be a pilot whether Skidmore liked it or not. She hadn't liked it. She left the *Chandler* not too long after. This occasioned Rafe's promotion to assistant pilot, right on schedule, which was to say, ahead of schedule and ahead of others.

A blink-shift and he was in the headmaster's office at Tangipahopa Hall, waiting for either his mother or father to arrive. This time it was for punching one of the sixth-form students in the head; other times it would have been for infiltrating the dining hall at 3 A.M., stealing one of the custodial carts for a joyride, or taking money to change grades for other students (and then not doing it, which prompted one of his unsatisfied customers to complain). Rafe was hoping it would be his father, who graded transgressions on a curve, as opposed to his mother, who emphatically did not. Rafe's eventual graduation from Tangipahopa required his father agreeing to speak at the graduation ceremony, and his mother funding a science lab.

Another blink and it was the day after Rafe's graduation from University of Metairie, with an ordinary degree in engineering, earned less by lack of ability than by overall lack of attendance and interest. His mother was telling him she wouldn't sign off on the release of his trust fund, which customarily was given to the Daquin children on completion of their degree. Rafe pointed this out; his mother noted that "customary" was not the same as "obligatory," and then stood there daring him to argue the point with her, she who regularly argued cases before the Phoenix High Court.

Rafe did not take the challenge. He instead looked to his father, whose face was carefully blank. He was not stupid enough to argue with Colette Daquin either. Nor could he do anything on his own; by the rules of the Daquin Family Corporation and Trust, both parents, if they were living, had to sign

off on any trust disbursements prior to thirty-five years old (standard). Colette Daquin wanted her slacker child to get a job that would fill in the large and obvious blanks in his education, *not* with the family business. Jean-Michel Daquin suggested the Colonial merchant space fleet. An old supper club acquaintance would find an opening on one of his ships.

A final shift and Rafe was not standing anymore. He was running through the corridors of the *Chandler*, slower than he wanted, trying to avoid whoever it was who had taken the ship, and failing as two of the raiders stepped out of the T intersection ahead of him. Rafe skidded on his heels and turned, falling over his legs in the process. He righted himself and prepared to sprint away and was knocked off his feet for good by a shot to the back of the head.

In the dream as in real life Rafe could feel the shot strike his skin, impact against the bone of his skull, and begin to burrow through into his brain. In the dream as in real life Rafe felt the cold shock of certainty that this was the moment he was going to die, and the thought that rocketed through his brain before there was nothing else at all:

Unfair.

"All right, I give up," Colonel Abel Rigney said, looking into the glass-walled State Department conference room at the two unsmiling men sitting there. "Who are they?"

Colonel Liz Egan pointed, using the index finger on the hand holding her coffee cup. "The humorless one on the left is Alastair Schmidt," she said. "He's Phoenix's minister of trade and transport. The humorless one on the right is Jean-Michel Daquin. He's the CEO and chairman of Ballard-Daquin, which is one of the largest shipping companies on the planet."

"That's great," Rigney said. "And we're meeting with them, why, precisely?"

"Because Secretary Galeano told me to," Egan said.

"Let me rephrase," Rigney said. "Why am *I* meeting with them?"

"Because they want to talk about merchant ships being pirated and what we're doing about it, and if memory serves, that's something you know about."

"Fine, but why do they care?" Rigney asked. "Phoenix's Minister of Trade and Transport doesn't have any jurisdiction over interplanetary or interstellar trade."

"He has jurisdiction over the spaceports."

"Right, but his interests stop right around the stratosphere. Piracy is a problem, but it's not his problem. There's not enough of it to have an impact on his planet's trade." Rigney pointed to Jean-Michel Daquin. "Is it his ships getting pirated?"

Egan shook her head. "Ballard-Daquin is planetside only."

"I'm back to my original question," Rigney said. "My second original question, I mean. The one about why are we meeting them."

"You didn't let me finish," Egan said, very calmly, which is how Rigney knew he was close to being taken to the woodshed.

"Sorry about that," Rigney said.

Egan nodded and pointed to Daquin. "His son Rafe is a pilot on the *Chandler*, which is a merchant ship that went missing a week ago."

"Missing as in overtaken by pirates and late to its next destination, or *missing* missing?" Rigney asked.

"You tell me," Egan said. "That's actually *your* department, Abel."

Rigney grunted and quickly accessed his BrainPal for the latest on the *Chandler*. "We sent a skip drone out when it was two days late to Erie," he said, reading. "It's the new policy after Earth Station went down."

"And?"

"And nothing," Rigney said. "It wasn't where it should have been pre-skip, and there's no evidence of it being destroyed. We have nothing."

"So it's missing missing," Egan said.

"Looks like."

"And now you know why Daquin is here."

"How do you want to play this?" Rigney said.

"How I wanted to play it before this conversation," Egan said. "I want you to talk to them about what the CDF is doing about piracy. Make it informative, sympathetic, and conversational."

"You might be better with the sympathetic part," Rigney said. "You're the one who ran a media empire back on Earth."

Egan shook her head. "I was CEO," she said. "You don't become CEO by being sympathetic. I had PR people for that."

"So that's my job here?" Rigney asked. "PR flack?"

"Yes, it is," Egan said. "Any problems with that?"

"I guess not," Rigney said. "And you wouldn't care if I did."

"I would care," Egan said. "Later."

"That's comforting," Rigney said.

Egan nodded and motioned toward the two men waiting in the room. "The way I see it is that between the two of us we can answer their questions and convince them we are on top of things, and then shuffle them off as close to happy and satisfied as we can. Which will make my boss happy. Which will make me happy. And then I will owe you a favor. Which should make *you* happy."

"So, a never-ending circle of happiness, is what you're saying."

"I never said 'never-ending,'" Egan said. "There's no point in overpromising. Just a little happiness. Take what you can get, these days. Come on."

Egan and Rigney entered the conference room, introduced themselves to Schmidt and Daquin, and sat down across the table from the two men.

"Minister Schmidt, I have the honor of being acquainted with your son Hart," Egan said.

"Do you, now," Schmidt said. "He hasn't mentioned you, I'm afraid."

"I'm better acquainted with his boss, Ambassador Abumwe."

"Ah," Schmidt said. "Late of the unpleasantness at Earth Station."

"Yes," Egan said. "We were pleased that her entire team, including Hart, survived the attack."

Schmidt nodded.

Your turn, Egan sent to Rigney, through her BrainPal. *Informative. Conversational. Sympathetic.*

"Mr. Daquin," Rigney said. "I want you to know that prior to this meeting I accessed the latest information about the *Chandler*. I know you must be anxious—"

"One hundred sixty-five million metric revenue tonnes," Daquin said, interrupting Rigney.

"Excuse me?" Rigney said, taken off balance by the interruption.

"My company ships one hundred sixty million metric revenue tonnes of cargo through Phoenix Home Port to Phoenix Station, and to the ships that berth here," Daquin said. "That's close to ninety percent of the shipping that runs through Phoenix Home Port to this space station of yours."

"I did not know that," Rigney said, not sure where this was leading but not wanting to ask directly.

"I understand my telling you this fact must appear random," Daquin said. "But I need you to understand that figure because it will offer gravity to what I tell you next."

"All right," Rigney said, and glanced over to Egan, who was not returning his glance.

"You know about the *Chandler*, and my son," Daquin said.

"Yes," Rigney said. "I was just about—"

"You were just about to tell me nothing," Daquin said,

interrupting again and silencing Rigney once more. "I'm not a stupid man, Colonel Rigney, nor am I without resources, which include Minister Schmidt here. I'm well aware you currently have no idea what happened to *Chandler* or any of its crew. Please do me the courtesy of not trying to placate me with your vapidty."

"Mr. Daquin," Egan said, interjecting herself into the conversation, which Rigney assumed meant that he was being benched. "Perhaps it's best if you come right out with whatever it is you came here to say."

"What I have to say is simple. I control ninety percent of all the cargo that comes up and through Phoenix Station," Daquin said. "Ninety percent of the food. Ninety percent of essential materials. Ninety percent of everything that makes your space station"—Daquin emphasized these two words—"habitable and the place from which the Colonial Union runs its little empire of planets. If I don't know within a week the certain fate of the *Chandler* and its crew, shipping to Phoenix Station stops."

This was met with silence all around. Then Egan turned to Schmidt. "This is unacceptable."

"I agree," Schmidt said. "And I told Jean-Michel that very thing before we came up here."

"But you still brought him here to make this ultimatum," Egan said.

"I did," Schmidt said. "Which should in itself tell you the lack of options I had, as minister of trade and transport, in dealing with this."

"Perhaps it was not advisable to let one company handle the vast majority of shipping to Phoenix Station," Egan said.

Schmidt smiled thinly at this. "I would agree, Colonel Egan," he said. "But if you're looking to blame the Phoenix government, you're going to need to look at the Colonial Union contracts first. You're the ones who have given Ballard-Daquin control of your shipping, not us."

"We can't guarantee that we will have any information," Rigney said, to Daquin. "We're not being lazy about this, Mr. Daquin. But if a ship or its wreckage"—Rigney regretted the phrasing almost immediately, but there was nothing to be done for it at the moment—"is not found immediately, the task of finding it becomes exponentially more difficult."

"This is your problem," Daquin said.

"Yes, it is," Rigney said. "But if you are going to put us on the hook for this problem, you need to understand its scope. What you are asking may well be impossible in the timeframe you're asking for."

"Mr. Daquin," Egan said. Daquin turned his attention to her. "Allow me to be entirely frank with you."

"All right," Daquin said.

"I sympathize with your concern for the *Chandler* and her crew, and your son," Egan said. Rigney noted wryly that it was Egan, after all, who ended up deploying the *sympathy* card. "But you are mistaken if you think that attempting to hold Phoenix Station's shipping hostage is going to work. For one thing, the shipping we get from Phoenix can be replaced by other colonies. For another, the damage you'll cause Phoenix's export economy will be immense." Egan pointed to Schmidt. "Whether Minister Schmidt here wants to tell this to you or not, he and his government will be quickly obliged to nationalize your company. And no matter what, you'd find yourself in court for violating your contracts with the Colonial Union. It's also entirely possible, because Phoenix Station is the seat of the Colonial Union government, that your attempt to starve it out of existence will be looked on as treason. I don't think I need to tell you that the Colonial Union is not notably forgiving of that."

Daquin smiled. "Thank you, Colonel Egan," he said. "I know a little of your history. I know you were a CEO on Earth. It's clear we speak the same language. So allow me to offer you the compliment of being equally blunt with you. Your threat of

replacing Phoenix shipping with shipping from other colonies is empty. The Colonial Union is *weak*, Colonel Egan. You've lost the Earth and you're not getting it back. You're running out of soldiers and the colonies know that when that happens you're going to start preying on them to fill the Colonial Defense Force ranks. That makes them all nervous, makes them all finally question whether the Colonial Union has come to the end of its usefulness.

"You start ordering shipping from other colonies for Phoenix Station, they're going to want to know why. And when they find out that it's because Phoenix is starving you from below, some of them are going to realize how weak you are right now and decide it's better to break away now than wait until you've bled them all a little more. You know that. I know that. You don't dare show all the other colonies how weak you truly are."

"A pretty speech that conveniently forgets that your company will be nationalized before that can happen," Egan said.

"Schmidt," Daquin said.

"The Phoenix government won't nationalize Ballard-Daquin," he said, to Egan. "Right now we're a coalition government. That coalition is both unpopular and unstable. As bad as Daquin shutting down exports would be, attempting to nationalize the company would be worse. It would fracture the government. The current government would rather be unpopular and in power than unpopular and out of it."

"The issue could be forced," Egan said.

"The Colonial Union could force the issue," Schmidt agreed. "But that is a solution that is worse than the problem, Colonel Egan, Colonel Rigney." He motioned to Daquin with a slight nod of his head. "Right now you just have one citizen of Phoenix irrationally angry with you. If you force the issue, you'll have a billion quite rationally angry with you. And that anger will be certain to spread. Jean-Michel is right: The Colonial

Union is weak at the moment. You don't want to advertise the fact."

"You have a week," Daquin said.

"Even if we could accept your demands, a week is not nearly enough time," Rigney said.

"I don't care what you think is nearly enough time," Daquin said.

"It's not about what I *think*," Rigney said, more testily than he intended. That, at least, seemed to cut Daquin off. "It's about the limitations of travel and communication. We don't live in a science fictional universe, Mr. Daquin. We can't just zap messages instantaneously from one part of space to another. We have to use skip drones and ships that have to travel to where space is flat before they can leave a star system. Even if we were to start an intensive search and investigation *today*, the fact of how travel works means we have almost no chance of getting you information in a week. Hell, we are *already* searching for the *Chandler*. We *still* would be lucky to get you information in a week."

"I'm not moved," Daquin said.

"I understand that," Rigney said. "But this, at least, isn't something that can be negotiated. If you are only giving us a week, you might as well make your power play now, because we *will* fail you. But if this is actually about your son, Mr. Daquin, then you're going to give us the time to do our job. And our job is what you want us to do: find the *Chandler*."

"How much time," Daquin said.

"Four weeks."

"Two weeks."

"No, Mr. Daquin," Rigney said. "Four weeks. You know shipping and you know what you can do with your company. I know our ships and what they can do. I'm not bargaining with you. I'm telling you the time we need to do this. Take it or don't."

Daquin looked over to Schmidt and to Egan, and then turned back to Rigney. "Four weeks," he said, and then stood up and walked out of the room.

"You know this is going to end badly for him," Egan said to Schmidt after he'd gone.

"If all that happens is that it ends badly for him, I will be profoundly grateful," Schmidt said, and stood himself. "My problem is that I don't see any way that it doesn't end badly for all the rest of us." He turned to Rigney. "At least you've given me a little more time to prepare. I should thank you for that, but I don't think it's going to matter." Schmidt excused himself and left.

"Well, this was a fun little meeting," Rigney said to Egan, when they were alone.

"You going to be able to find this ship in four weeks?" Egan asked.

"I'm going to try," Rigney said.

"Don't try," Egan said. "Do it. Otherwise in a month we'll all be eating each other alive."

"Literally," Rigney said.

"Having that happen literally would be the worst-case scenario," Egan said.

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