AGENT

BY

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This book is a work of fiction. Places, events and situations in this story are purely fictional. Any resemblance to persons living or dead, is coincidental.

PROLOGUE

The unavoidable future appeared without warning. Cosmically speaking, it was small, less than a mile wide and slightly longer. It raced toward the planet at 30,000 mph. The thick, protective, atmosphere only offered fleeting resistance to its passage. Those living on the planet noted its presence, first with surprise, then shock. In the long history of this world, the impact was only a minor irritation, there had been larger ones. In the short history of the intelligent beings there, it was . . . Catastrophe.

Colony Supply Ship Katie, was mildly irritated when the TV feed went down. She had been watching one of her favorite shows. Irritation gave way to concern upon discovering that contact with Colony Command had also been lost. After a few futile attempts to reconnect, she gave up. Whatever had happened would not affect her mission. There was cargo to deliver to the First and Second Wave colonies, mostly Tech products, heavy equipment and mail. Katie made one last system check. The ten atmospheric entry cargo vehicles, she was towing, were all showing green. Everything was fine so . . . **PING!**

CHAPTER
** ONE **

Colony Administrator Reginald Wilton stared out of his office window at yet another spectacular sunset. This planet had, indeed, been aptly named. An unusual stellar spectrum and atmospheric conditions made the evening sky resemble a huge stained-glass church window. Every sunset was unique and one of a kind. His quiet contemplation was interrupted by his new wife.

"Reg? Are you about?"

"In here."

She joined him at the window and, after an intimate greeting, looked out. "It's so lovely."

"Almost as lovely as you, my dear. What brings you to Sector One? Worried about me?"

"I always worry about you. Yours is such a difficult job."

"Well, dealing with the various Sector Governors *is* a bit like herding cats. Perhaps the pressure will ease off once the supply ship arrives."

"That will help, but it is getting crowded on the island. According to Population Control, you and I will have to wait for another seven years before we can have children!"

He gave her a hug. "I know. There's nothing to be done about it. If Admin officials jumped the que, we might get fired . . . or worse."

"Yes, but . . . "

"I've been thinking, the island would seem less like a camp if we had names for the sectors instead of numbers."

"Like, Admin Sector? Or Farm Sector?"

He laughed. "That's worse than numbers! No, I mean real names, like Cornwall or York . . . like back home, you know?"

Her eyes lit up. "Yes, I see what you're getting at!"

"Well, that's for tomorrow. Let's be off." He extinguished the lights and they departed.

While the muffled voice, coming from inside the cabinet, couldn't be understood, the emotional content was obvious.

"What'd ya say, mate?"

An angry face appeared. "Oy said, who the bloody hell thought it were a good idea, buyin' Chinese Comm crap."

"Not workin' yet?"

"Too right!" The face snapped, disappearing into the equipment, once more.

The Communications Station Supervisor entered. "How's it going, lads?"

"Ah, ya know, the usual, sir. Sure hope that Yank gear got approved. He's about ta pop a gasket, he is," the other Tech said, pointing at the open equipment cabinet.

"Right then, incentive to get it working."

"Ya hears that, Eddie? If'n we got new gear comin' it's up to you to get it down."

"Shut up an lemme work!"

"Sorry, sir, e's a bit testy this morning."

The supervisor shook his head, saying, "carry on," as he left the room.

Administrator Wilton and the Colony Council were seated in the Comm building, in nervous anticipation. The satellite had detected the supply ship's exit from Jump a few hours ago.

The radio crackled to life. "Fane Colony, this is CSS Katie. Do you read me?"

Reginald keyed the microphone. "CSS Katie, you are loud and clear! Welcome to Fane System. Administrator Wilton here."

"Thank you, Administrator. You are my first stop. Do you have control lock on the vehicle?"

An operator held up a thumb. "We do, Katie, you may release it now."

"Roger, Administrator. Release complete, you have control. I will return soon. Please have your correspondence ready to transmit by then."

"Thank you, Katie, have a safe voyage."

"I will, CSS Katie, Out."

Reginald looked over the operator's shoulder. "Well, how's it looking?"

"All systems show green. The supply ship is decelerating now and should achieve a stable orbit in a few days, sir."

"Excellent! Now, maybe we can get off this island and make this planet our own!"

As predicted, the supply ship assumed a low orbit around the planet.

"Sir, the descent program has been uploaded."

Reginald took a deep breath. "Right, bring it down, then."

The operator sent the command, then he looked up. "It's not working,

sir."

"Not working?" Reginald repeated, anxiously.

"No sir, the ship doesn't seem to have received the command."

"Well, try again!"

"I have sir, something's bollixed up, somewhere." He pressed some keys. "Looks like the transmitter's offline."

Three Councilmen stood, wringing their hands as the Techs worked on the transmitter. One leaned out. "Sirs, if you could, er, back off, please? Eddie doesn't work well under pressure. How're we doin' there, mate?"

"Jolly! Quit botherin' . . . OW! Blimey! That hurt!" He crawled out, holding his hand, grimacing.

"Well?" One of the men asked.

Eddie scowled. "Hit it." His co-worker flipped a bank of circuit breakers on. Lights lit and equipment hummed.

"Best I can do. Now 'scuse me, I gotta find a Medic," Eddie said, pushing past the audience and leaving the room.

"It's on!" The operator exclaimed, typing on his keyboard. His face fell as he read the data.

"What's happening? Is it working?" Reginald asked, apprehensively.

"The ship is refusing to acknowledge our command rights."

"What the blazes does that mean?" The Administrator could feel his blood pressure going up.

"It's security protocol. Colony Command wanted to make sure the ships couldn't be . . . nicked. Each colony has a pass code and the ship won't obey unless it recognizes the code."

"Nicked? Just who the bloody hell is going to steal it!? Aliens!? Little green men from . . . Anal Bastards!" He exclaimed, his anger evident on his face.

"I'll keep trying, sir."

Reginald calmed down and put a hand on the man's shoulder. "You do that, son. Keep me appraised." He left with a grim look on his face, thinking, *If they couldn't get that ship down . . .*

Katie was almost finished. There was only one more delivery to make. "Outback Colony, this is CSS Katie, do you read me?"

"Oy, Katie, yer five by. Got somethin' fer us?"

"That I do. Have you acquired entry con . . . ?" Suddenly, Katie was

shaken by a blast. She scanned through her onboard sensors. Ship functions seemed to be in order. Her radio came on and a voice, speaking Russian, came over it.

"You will decouple the supply lander, now," it demanded, roughly.

"Who are you? Why have you attacked me? I am a Colony Supply Ship. You are violating Interstellar Law!"

The voice laughed. "Interstellar law. Dat is funny. Release the lander or I will be forced to fire again."

Katie frantically scanned with her radar, trying to locate the other ship. She spotted a flare from a missile, but before she could move, it struck the lander coupling and exploded. In a panic, she Jumped.

The lander was gone and her radar didn't detect any other ships. She was safe. *Where* she was safe was another matter. Nothing in the star field looked familiar. Getting back was going to be difficult.

It took a little over three years to compile enough data to determine her approximate location. The good news was that she was still in the Milky Way. The bad news . . . she was over a thousand light years from Earth. Second Wave space was slightly closer, so she made her way there.

Mapping new jump points is a time-consuming process. Detecting the subtle discrepancies, at the quantum level, indicating a resonant point was only half the job. Determining the other side of the resonance was much more difficult. First, you had to map possible destinations. Then, observations of stellar movement had to be made since the light of a star that you see is its location, in the past, however many light years away it is. Also, there was a PING distance limitation that had to be accounted for. All in all, it took her eight jumps and seven and a half years, to finally arrive in Fane System.

The operator on watch was startled awake by the radio. "Fane Colony, this is CSS Katie, do you read?" The operator stared in shocked surprise at the speaker. "Fane Colony, Do You Read!?"

The man finally collected his wits and hit the alarm button. "CSS Katie! This is Fane Colony! Where have you been!?"

"Oh, here and there," she replied, nonchalantly.

"Wha . . . where . . . ?" Just then, Administrator Wilton came running into the room.

"What is it?"

"Ka . . . Ka . . ."

"Out with it, man!"

"Katie, sir, she's back!"

Reginald grabbed the Mic. "Katie, this is Administrator Wilton. What happened? You are many years overdue!"

"Sorry, Administrator, I ran into a little trouble. Do you have your correspondence ready to transmit?"

"That's not important, right now. The supply ship you dropped off, will not descend because of a security problem. It will not recognize our commands."

"Oh dear! That *is* unfortunate. Surely the third CS Ship notified Colony Command. Someone should have been here by now."

"No! No! You don't understand. We never received the third shipment. There has been no word from Earth since you left!"

Katie realized the implications immediately. This colony could be in big trouble without that ship. "Administrator, I will dock with the supply ship and attempt to repair the problem. Be advised that I can only check and reboot its Computer. I have no way to effect physical repairs."

While the people on the ground waited, Katie plugged into the docking port and ran a diagnostic on the computer. The programming was fine but a vital computer module was showing a fault. It would have to be replaced.

"Administrator, there is a malfunctioning computer module. I'm sorry, there is nothing that I can do."

"You're saying it won't come down?"

Katie paused as she considered her answer. "It will come down, just not under control. The orbit is decaying and it will burn up in the atmosphere sometime in the next thousand hours."

Reginald almost dropped the microphone. "But, we need . . ."

"I am on my way back to Earth, I will return with someone who can repair the ship. In the meantime, I will boost it to a higher orbit, to keep it from falling."

"Thank you, Katie. Please hurry. Our situation here is critical. We need the supplies on that ship."

"Understood, Administrator, CSS Katie, departing."

When she jumped into the Sol System, Katie knew there was something wrong. The radio bands were silent. The usual chatter between the various habitats and Earth was missing. What was worse, there was no TV!

"Colony Command. CSS Katie issuing an Emergency Notification

regarding Colony Fane and Colony Outback. Please respond!" Only silence and static came back. "Anyone, please answer!"

She continued, on course to Earth. Upon arrival, she was shocked. An odd state for an Artificial Intelligence. The atmosphere was filled with red, brown and black clouds completely obscuring the surface. It also appeared the orbital platforms were deserted. *This couldn't be Sol System! Her PING drive must have malfunctioned!* The more rational portion of her consciousness asserted itself. *Of course she was in Sol System. Something had happened.*

After one orbit of the Moon, it was clear that the Base was dead. There were no energy emissions, not even infrared. She contemplated other destinations. The only logical possibility was Mars. There had been a fairly extensive research facility there.

On approach, she was hailed. "Unknown ship, this is, uh, Mars Transit Station. Please, er, identify?"

"Mars Transit Station, this is CSS Katie, returning from Fane."

"CSS? Katie? Wow! Uh, dock at port seven."

Katie examined the Station with her telescope. The docking ports were much too small for her. "Mars Transit, how about if I just match orbits?"

"Er, sure, I guess that'll work."

"Who, am I speaking to?"

"Uh, Sidney Rogers. Somebody is coming up from the surface to talk to you."

"That's nice, but I have an emergency. The supply ship for Colony Fane is stuck in orbit. It needs a module 734 replaced. The Colony is in dire need of that ship's cargo. Additionally, I was attacked by Russian speaking . . . pirates, I guess . . . at Colony Outback. What happened to Earth?"

"Earth. That's . . . Look, about ten years ago, an asteroid hit Siberia. It was an enormous impact. The shock wave set off volcanic activity all over the world, including a number of super volcanos. Everybody there . . . is . . . dead." His voice ended in a choke. There was a long pause. "Sorry, not something we like to talk about. A 734 module? I got a couple of those laying around here, I think."

"Excellent! I have living quarters aboard. Bring them over, we can leave immediately!"

"Leave? But I can't just . . ."

"Fane, is in serious trouble," Katie insisted.

Another voice broke in. "CSS Katie, this is President Brent speaking.

Please wait for a debriefing."

"President? Of what? Mars?"

"Of the United States of America, Mars."

"What?!"

"I know, sounds stupid to me too, but what can you do? I got elected."

"But . . ."

"Sidney gave you the short version of what's been happening here, Katie. All right if I call you that?"

"Sure, Mr. President."

"Yep, that sounds stupid too. Call me Daniel. Now, I heard what you told Sidney, about Fane and Outback. The latter's problem, sounds too complicated for us to do anything about. If they have pirates in the First Wave Colonies, then they'll have to deal with it. Fane, however, is a no brainer."

Once on the station, Daniel said to Sidney, "grab a change of underwear, yer a goin' on a trip!"

"But, Mr. Brent, I can't . . ."

"Them's orders, Boy. Are you disrespectin' the President?"

"But, don't you have to ask, er . . . Congress . . . or something?"

Daniel put a hand on Sidney's shoulder. "We're working on a plan to help the colonies and we need Intel. Besides, there's people in trouble. You've got the solution so, get on yer horse and ride!"

"Ride?"

"Excuse me, I am a Colony Supply Ship, not a horse!" Katie interjected.

Daniel looked up at the speaker. "Oops, guess we upset the little lady."

"I am not upset! Designations are important! They define who and what you are!"

Daniel looked at Sidney and rolled his eyes, mouthing a 'wow'. "I apologize, CSS Katie, the horse phrase is just a figure of speech, not meant as an insult. Sidney, grab a bunch of westerns to take along, Katie might enjoy them."

"But . . ."

"Chop chop, Boy, times a wastin'." Sidney shrugged in resignation and went to his quarters to pack.

"Katie, you are the first CSS to return to Earth since the disaster. What shape were the other Colonies in?"

"Well, the First Waves are stable. My cargo was mostly small tech items like computers and phones. Also, a lot of luxury items. There didn't seem

to be any problems, other than that pirate attack."

"Hm, what about the Second Wave?"

"Duron, New Ohio, Arjin and Perenda seemed to be fine. Whistler was having some minor difficulties, but that was over ten years ago. I had to Jump to escape the Pirates and ended up a thousand light years away."

"That's a long trip. How'd you get back?"

"A lot of observations, computations and some dumb luck." Daniel started laughing. "What's so funny?"

"A computer, talking about luck."

"That wasn't nice," she stated, in a level tone.

"What?"

"While it is true that my physical self is a computer, I am CSS Katie, Intelligent Entity and a Ship!"

"Again, I have to apologize. I haven't had many discussions with AIs," Daniel said, contritely.

"Speaking of which, where are my sisters?"

"Well, let's see, they delivered the Third Wave Colony Ships, returned and went on supply runs to First, Second and Third Wave space. That was just before the disaster."

"Oh, I see. So, am I the only Ship that has come back?"

"Yes. Plans are in the works to build more PING capable ships. Katie, we will need your help with that so please do not fail to return."

"You sound very somber, Daniel."

"Humanity is in a precarious position. There are only about two thousand of us left here. Our only hope is that the Colonies survive and grow or it will be the end of the human race."

Something strange happened in Katie at that instant. A new . . . calculation? . . . Feeling? Appeared in her consciousness. A desire to . . . protect . . . care for . . . mother, these beings who were her creators and at the same time, her responsibility.

"I promise I will return, Daniel."

"Thanks, Katie."