

# UNITY ALPHA

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*For Becky, who made this book—and everything  
else in my life—so much better.*



## **PROLOGUE : JULY 18, 2117 A.D.**

“**C**ITIZENS OF THE WORLD,” began the President of the United States. “We are gathered here today to witness the launch of one of the greatest feats of engineering and innovation in the history of this planet.”

The President was the first of several leaders of nations who would be addressing the worldwide audience today. The others stood patiently behind him, waiting their turns. Though they were ostensibly united in what brought them together, each saw this as an opportunity to further his or her political career. The speeches they gave today would be remembered for years to come, both on Earth, and on the planets that were to be colonized.

“The construction of these awe-inspiring ships has taken many years and countless sacrifices by those who have worked on it,” continued the President. “No other undertaking in recorded history has been this enormous. Nor has one brought together so many nations of the world.

“As we say goodbye to the first group of pioneers, who will venture forth out into the universe to settle on a new planet, we should remember what brought this upon us. Our stewardship of our home planet has not been exemplary. We have ravaged the Earth, taking its natural resources without regard to the damage we were inflicting. We have poisoned the atmosphere and sent the global climate into chaos. Even as we work to repair what harm we are able to, we realize that for the human race to survive, we must

spread out to other worlds.”

The President paused to take a sip of water. “For those of you who will be among those settlers, remember this: Treat your new home with the respect it deserves. If there is other intelligent life out there somewhere, we do not want them to see us as a race that moves from world to world, using them up and then moving on. Let them see that though we made mistakes, we have learned our lesson, and are now more mature, ready to work with our environment, rather than against it.”

After the President finished his remarks, each of the other leaders took their turn. Most of them echoed the sentiments of the President, but each one gave his or her own spin to the message.

After the speeches concluded, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, a native of India named Dakshayani Mukopadhyay, stepped up to the podium. It fell to her to give the final speech and to push the button—a ceremonial touch only; the real launch would happen at the captain’s discretion—that got the first colony ship underway.

Mukopadhyay began: “I wish to first thank my distinguished colleagues for their inspirational words today. This truly is a monumental occasion in the history of this planet. My organization, the United Nations, has existed since 1945—going on 200 years, now—but until recently, its members were united in name only. The great task of building ships to colonize other planets has finally brought us together as world citizens, not just a group of countries sharing a planet.

“Let us pray that this first, great example of true cooperation among all the people of Earth will not be the last. If we are to survive as a race, we must continue to work as one. We must cease our petty squabbles and conflicts and come together under the banner of a united Earth.

She paused a moment, to let her words sink in. “And now, I would like everyone to join me in a moment of silence before the official launch.” She bowed her head; the other leaders followed suit. After a properly respectful time, she raised her head and continued.

“By the authority of the United Nations, and in the name of the

people of Earth, I now declare this mission underway.” She pressed an oversized button that was mounted on a stand to one side of the podium. “*Unity*: Good luck, and may the gods see you safely to your destination!”



## CHAPTER ONE: IAN

IAN'S PHONE CHIMED AT HIM. It was Marcus, his boss.

"Marcus, what's up?"

"I need you to get down to sector 4-G. The power's out in some buildings there."

"That's the fourth outage we've had in the last month. What's going on?"

"I don't know; try to find out while you're there, but don't take too long. Get the power restored as soon as you can."

"Got it."

He closed up the access panel he'd been working on and set off toward the affected area on his skimmer.

The *ECS Unity* was the first of the three planned generation ships launched from Earth in the early twenty-second century. It was designed to carry over 20,000 people to a habitable planet twenty light years away. Two hundred years into its voyage, most of the problems that had plagued the early years had gone away, but there were always new ones to be dealt with.

As Ian rode along, he watched the inhabitants going about their daily business. *Unity* had a diverse population, both in ethnicity and profession. Once they reached their destination, everyone would be needed to get a civilization up and running. Farmers, engineers, teachers, politicians—all were represented here. All of the large nations of Earth had come together to help build the ship, knowing that this was their best hope to continue the human race now that so much environmental damage had been done to Earth.

The ship was built from a hollowed-out asteroid; the thick, stone walls of the outer shell absorbed much of the radiation that would normally make interstellar travel deadly to humans. The asteroid had been spun up to give the illusion of gravity within the ship. A light tube ran down the axis, and was cycled on and off to provide periods of night and day; it also provided a sunlight analogue that allowed crops to be grown. The living space was landscaped to resemble Earth, and included space for fields and even a few small lakes. Within the main city were parks and other green spaces. Anything the designers could feasibly do to make the ship seem like home had been done.

Like everyone currently living on *Unity*, Ian Leatherby had been born on board the ship. Because no way to travel faster than light had been discovered yet, the only way to get to another star was to take it slow—in this case, over 500 years of travel time. And the only way to get anyone there alive was to replenish the population along the way. As each new generation was born—hence the designation “generation ship”—they became more removed from the traditions of Earth. Although many countries and races were represented, living together in relatively close quarters had eliminated many of the old barriers.

The city Ian lived in was called Harmony, in keeping with the theme of “unity” that had provided the name of the ship. Most of the ship’s population lived here, although there were small pockets of people scattered throughout the rest of the habitable area. Farmers, of course, lived on their farms, though many of the people they employed commuted from the city. And most of the military command personnel lived in quarters up at the ship’s bow, so they could be closer to the bridge and other control and command centers. But even those crewmembers rotated down to live in Harmony City periodically, so they could spend some time in the higher gravity provided by the ship’s rotation.

Ian was now passing through a commercial district, lined with shops where various items not provided as basic necessities could be purchased. There were clothing stores, featuring both upscale and casual clothing, as well as uniforms worn by many workers. A hobby

store catered to some of the varied pastimes people indulged in, such as model making, woodworking and sewing. There was even an old-fashioned ice cream parlor, with several couples relaxing at the outdoor patio tables, enjoying a mid-day treat. The designers of the ship had tried to provide living conditions as close to Earth's as possible, to ensure good morale among the population.

Sector 4-G was an industrial area, where a number of small-scale factories and processing plants were located. A power outage here could disrupt the day for many people. Fortunately, as Ian approached, it looked like it was contained to a pair of businesses—a food packager and a machine shop. He parked his skimmer in the alley between the two buildings and carried his toolbox over to the power junction.

Ian inspected the junction box, but didn't see anything obviously wrong with it. He pulled a diagnostic tool from his kit and began testing the various parts. Everything checked out. *This is really odd*, he thought. It'd been almost exactly like this in the other recent outages he'd been assigned to. Nothing apparently wrong, just no power.

He went into each of the powerless buildings and warned them that he would be turning the power back on, so they should take any precautions needed to ensure their equipment was not damaged. He returned to the power junction, inserted his special access key, and initiated the restart sequence. This always made him a bit tense, especially after an unexplained outage. He half-way expected a shower of sparks or an explosion. After a few seconds, accompanied by hums and clicks from the power junction, all the status lights turned green, and power came back on. He heard the sound of heavy machinery restarting in the food packaging building. He pulled out his phone and called Marcus.

“Marcus, this is Ian. I got power back on in sector 4-G. Everything checked out okay, and I still can't see any reason for it to have gone out in the first place.”

Marcus Chase had been Ian's supervisor for the past four years, ever since Ian had been promoted to Senior Power Engineer at Unity Power Control, the utility responsible for keeping the

electricity flowing throughout *Unity*. He was a good boss, normally pretty easy-going, as long as the work got done. He allowed his direct reports plenty of latitude to choose their assignments and determine the best way to complete them.

“Good work, Ian. I’ve run what diagnostics I can from my end, and I can’t see any problems either. This is really starting to annoy me.” Marcus hated unexplained problems. He treated the ship’s power grid as his own personal baby, and took offense to anything going wrong with it. Up until recently, his record had been outstanding, with only one extended power outage in the last ten years. This last month had been especially trying for him. “Did either of the building managers give you anything to go on?”

“No, but I didn’t spend much time talking; I wanted to get their power back on, and they were pretty anxious to get their staff back to work. You want me to try to find out more of what happened?”

“Yes, please. We really need to get to the bottom of these outages. I’m getting pressure from Command to get this under control.” *Unity* Command was even stricter than Marcus about keeping the power flowing at all times.

“Okay. I’ll talk to them and get back to you if I learn anything. See you later.” He sighed after breaking the connection. Talking to other people was one of Ian’s least favorite activities. It was one of the reasons he enjoyed his job. For the most part, it was just he and whatever piece of equipment he was fixing at the time. He understood electricity and circuits; people, he didn’t always get.

He stowed his equipment back on his skimmer and then stared at the two buildings for a moment, deciding which one to start with. After stalling as long as he could, he chose the food packager.

Inside, it was barely-controlled chaos. One of the machines had come back on out of sequence, and the maintenance workers were scrambling to get the other machines paused long enough to sort things out before they had unpackaged food all over the place. Ian walked around the perimeter of the production line and finally found the supervisor, who was on the phone with someone.

“Listen, Victor, we have things under control. You don’t need to come down ... I know what the board says, but I’m handling it. It’s

just a minor synchronization problem. I'll get it fixed ... Yes. Yes. I've got it covered ... Okay, good-bye." He turned to Ian. "Can I help you? Oh, it's you. Thanks for getting the power back on. Was there something else you needed?"

"Sorry to bother you, but can I ask you a couple of questions about what was happening right before you lost power?"

"Only if you can do it while we walk. I've got a million things to take care of." He started walking away without waiting to see if Ian would follow. Ian stared after him for a second and then hurried to catch up.

"Do you remember anything unusual happening right before the power went out? Any noises or flickering lights?"

"No, nothing like that," the supervisor said. "Everything was running smoothly and then all of a sudden, it completely shut down." He stopped to grab a worker's shoulder. "Felicia, go in back and bring out more of the number two cartons; they're almost out. And while you're back there, tell Samantha to check on the shrink-wrap order. It should've been here by now."

"What about smells? Was there any unusual smell, like something burning, or anything?" Ian asked.

"Look around you, man." He gestured at the food on the conveyor belts. "Even if there was, nobody would be able to pick it out from all the food smells. Are we done yet? I really do need to get back to work."

"Yeah, sure. Thanks for your help," Ian started to say, but the supervisor was already hurrying off to deal with something else.

Ian went to the machine shop next door, and had better luck. The shop supervisor, Geoff, met him at the door as he came in. The shop had gone quiet, as the workers had shut down all the machines prior to the power coming back on, to avoid damaging them. They were still in the process of inspecting the machines before bringing them back on line. That was the kind of professionalism Ian liked to see, unlike the workers in the factory next door, who had not followed proper procedures.

The shop was equipped with the latest and best computer-controlled milling and fabrication machines. Though they should

have fail-safes built in that would activate in the event of a power failure, Ian imagined that several of the in-progress pieces had been ruined and would need to be started again from scratch. This could prove to be a costly outage for the shop.

“Hey, thanks for getting the power back on so quickly. What was the problem?” Geoff asked.

“To be honest, I'm not really sure. I couldn't find anything wrong; nothing was damaged or out of place. I was actually hoping you could shed some light on this. Did you notice anything odd—sounds, smells, anything—right before the power went out?”

“As a matter of fact, we did. I heard a noise back in the storage room, where we keep some of the finished products before we deliver them to the customers. I hadn't had a chance to check it out until the power came back on, but I just got back from there. I think you should come take a look.”

Ian followed Geoff back to the storage room. The walls were lined with steel shelves, all of which contained various machined parts—gears, camshafts, flywheels—all types of metal parts used in making heavy machinery.

“Look over here.” Geoff pointed to a spot on the floor next to one of the shelf towers. “What do you make of that?”

Ian knelt down on the concrete floor and examined the spot Geoff had indicated.

“It looks like something cut a groove into the floor,” he said. “Like a big circular saw blade or something. Are you saying this just barely happened?”

“Yeah. I was in here this morning, putting something away, and that groove was definitely not there. Then when I came back just now to check on things, I saw it. But it wasn't caused by any saw blade. I know my tools, and that was caused by something else. It's too smooth to be made by any normal metal blade.”

Ian stared at the groove a bit longer. “I don't know what to tell you. I'll take a couple of pictures of it and show it around at work, though. Maybe someone there will have some idea of what might have done this.”

“Thanks, man. I appreciate it. Anything else?”

“No, thanks, you’ve been very helpful. This is the first lead I’ve had on one of these recent outages.”

Ian took some pictures of the groove with his phone and then left the building, got on his skimmer and drove off to his next scheduled task.

## CHAPTER TWO: MIYUKI

“EXCUSE ME, OFFICER, CAN YOU HELP me with this?” asked the elderly man as he struggled to load his packages onto his skimmer.

“Of course, sir; I’d be happy to.” Detective Miyuki Takata took the packages from the man and fastened them to the rack mounted on the rear of the skimmer. The skimmer was a model commonly used by the elderly or infirm. The man thanked her for her help and rode off toward his home.

Miyuki watched him go with a sad smile on her face. He reminded her a little of her grandfather before he died. Grandpa Takata had held onto his independence right up to the end, refusing to retire to any “old codgers’ home” as he put it. “I worked hard every day of my life, and I’m not going to stop until they shoot my ashes into space,” he would often say. Miyuki had been sad when he passed away, but had also been so proud of how he’d lived his life to the fullest and not faded away like so many of his contemporaries had.

Shaking herself out of her reverie, she continued on her afternoon rounds. Normally, she would be doing detective work, but several patrol officers had called in sick, so she was picking up the slack. It was important that Harmony Security Department keep their visibility up. There wasn’t much crime on *Unity* and the goal of H.S.D. was to keep it that way.

Miyuki had joined Harmony Security as soon as she was old enough and was able to take the entrance exam to the academy.

She'd known this was what she wanted to do with her life since she was a young girl. Something about the job just called to her. It had not made her family happy—they'd wanted her to be a teacher—but they had grudgingly accepted her decision once they'd realized they weren't going to change her mind.

She'd worked her way quickly up through the ranks, doing her time as a desk-jockey and then getting out on patrol for a couple of years. Three years ago, she passed her detective exam, and was promoted to her current position. Miyuki was very ambitious, and was aiming for the top spot—Chief Security Officer for all of *Unity*. She'd mapped out exactly what she needed to do to make this a reality, and so far, she was right on target.

Walking into a nearby coffee shop, she greeted the owner, who was working behind the counter today.

"Hey, Sylvia, how's business?"

"Not bad," Sylvia replied. "The new pastries we started selling last week have been doing great, and the morning traffic is really up. Oh, I got in a sample of some new coffee beans they've been working on out in the plantations. You want to try a cup? It's really good."

"Sure, set me up. Give me a medium, two creams, no sugar." Miyuki had a weakness for good coffee, and was sure to stop in Sylvia's shop whenever she was in this area. Back when she still did daily patrols, it had been a frequent stop. Since she'd made detective, it was a less frequent indulgence—but that just made it even more of a treat.

"Had any more trouble with those kids that were scaring off your regulars?"

Sylvia glanced over her shoulder as she took care of Miyuki's order. "No, not for a few months now. Thanks again for talking to them; I really appreciate it."

"Just part of the job," Miyuki said as Sylvia passed the cup of coffee to her. "How much do I owe you?"

"It's on me today. I don't feel right charging you for being my guinea pig on the new beans." Sylvia had connections at the plantation and often got samples of their latest creations before any other coffee shops. It made her store one of the most popular ones

in the city.

“Thanks, Sylvia, that’s really sweet of you.” She took a sip and savored the complex blend of flavors. “Mmmm, this is good stuff.”

“That’s a real compliment coming from a coffee connoisseur such as you. If they can get this into full production, I think they may have a hit on their hands.”

“Definitely. Well, I should get back on patrol. Have to go out there and be seen some more. Talk to you later, and thanks again for the coffee.”

“Bye, Miyuki.”

Miyuki resumed her walk down the street, sipping her coffee as she walked. Some days she actually did miss being out here patrolling. It was a pleasant change of pace from her routine of solving crimes and tracking down the few people who just had to push the boundaries of civilized society. Meeting ordinary people who weren’t involved in any crimes was also nice; it reminded her of why she was needed in her normal job.

The only thing she didn’t miss about her days as a beat cop was the uniform. Normally, she could wear whatever clothes she wanted to, as long as she looked professional. Today, however, she was back in the standard uniform of a Harmony Security Department officer: dark blue slacks, a light blue blouse with dark blue epaulets, and a silver badge over her left breast. She’d never thought the outfit was particularly flattering, especially on her slight build. At least it was only temporary now.

Turning onto a side street, Miyuki heard shouting up ahead. She drank the last of her coffee and threw the cup in a nearby recycle bin. She hurried over to find two young men in a heated argument, standing nose to nose. The cause of the dispute became clear almost immediately.

“I’m telling you, she doesn’t want anything to do with you!” shouted one of the men, a tall, thin, blond man, wearing a set of white painter coveralls. “Just leave her alone, she’s with me!”

“That’s not what she said when I talked to her last night. She said the two of you were through,” said the other, a shorter, stockier man with long brown hair. He was dressed all in green, the standard

uniform of the recycling crew.

“You’re lying!” said the blond man. He then grabbed the other man by the shirt and pulled back his other arm, preparing to strike his opponent.

Miyuki quickly stepped in, grabbed the blond man’s pulled-back arm, and twisted it behind his back, preventing him from moving. She pulled him a few steps away from the other man; she needed to diffuse the situation before it got any worse. The last thing she needed was a full-on street brawl on her watch.

“I think the two of you need to calm down,” she said. “Unless you want to spend some time together in a holding cell? You can work out all your problems behind bars.”

The shorter man held up his hands and backed up a bit, showing he meant no harm. The blond man started to struggle, but realized it was security officer who was restraining him. He relaxed and allowed Miyuki to lead him a few feet away from the other man.

“Now, what seems to be the problem here?” Miyuki asked.

Both men began talking at once, trying to get their side of the story in first.

“Stop!” Miyuki said. “One at a time. You in the green, you go first. Start with your name and then tell me what started this.”

“My name is Patrick Rourke,” the man said. “This started a few weeks ago, when I met this girl named Kathy at a club. We got talking, and hit it off. We had a couple of dates, and I thought things were going well. Then two days ago, this guy left me a threatening message at my apartment, telling me to back off and leave Kathy alone. I asked her about it, and she said not to worry, he was just an old boyfriend; they’d broken up some time ago. Then today, on my way home from work, he came up to me and started getting in my face and yelling at me. That’s when you showed up.”

“He’s lying!” the other man started to say. Miyuki held up her hand and motioned him to stop.

“You’ll get your turn,” she said. “Now, Patrick, is there anything else you want to tell me?”

“Only that I really like Kathy, and she likes me, and if she says she’s done with him, she means it.”

“Okay, thanks, Patrick. Don’t go anywhere. Now, you get your say,” she said, turning to the blond man. “Tell me your name and then your side of the story.”

“My name is Lance Schrom. I work for Harmony Maintenance, mostly painting stuff. The first part of his story is right; he met Kathy at a club. But she and I were still dating the whole time. She never broke up with me. He’s trying to steal my girl!” Lance started shouting again.

“Look, Lance, you need to calm down a bit or I will take you down to a holding cell and let you cool off for a while,” Miyuki said. “Is it true you left a message at Patrick’s place?”

“Yes, that’s true. But it wasn’t threatening. I just told him Kathy was still my girlfriend, and he needed to leave her alone. I wasn’t sure he’d gotten the message, so when I saw him out here today, I stopped to talk to him. Then *he* started yelling at *me*, so I was getting ready to defend myself. Then you showed up.”

“Officer, that’s not what happened. He started it,” Patrick said.

“Look, I don’t care who started it. We can’t have this kind of thing going on. I don’t want to put you both in lock-up, so what can we do to work this out?” Miyuki asked.

The two men stared at each other for a few moments, looking uncomfortable. Lance sighed and said, “Look, man, I just got upset because I realized I’m finally losing Kathy. I knew things weren’t real good between us for a while, but I didn’t want to admit it. If you two can be happy together, I guess I can back off and leave you alone.”

“Hey, I’m sorry if I seemed to be getting in the middle of you two,” said Patrick. “Kathy really did tell me it was over with you guys. If I’d believed for a moment that you were still together, I would never have kept seeing her.”

“All right, can you two shake hands and go your separate ways?” Miyuki asked. “I think I can forget all about this little incident if you can.”

The two men shook hands and went their separate ways. Miyuki watched them go, thinking how glad she was that she didn’t have to arrest one or both of them. She hated taking people in, especially

over something like this. She returned to the main street and continued on her patrol route.

As she reached another cluster of shops, she was startled by a strange noise, much like the whoosh of opening a large, vacuum-sealed bag. Almost simultaneously, the power went out in several buildings along the street. *Great*, she thought, *just what I needed*. She pulled out her phone and called in the outage. Dispatch said they would get someone from Unity Power Control out there to fix it as soon as they could. She decided to check on the stores to make sure nothing was wrong and nobody was hurt.

After making her way through each store and ensuring nobody was in any danger, she came back outside to wait for the power engineer. As she exited the last store, she saw a skimmer approaching with the U.P.C. logo on the side; this must be the power engineer. He was a few centimeters short of two meters tall, with medium-length auburn hair and startling blue eyes. He was dressed in faded blue jeans and a wrinkled white button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows; the color of the shirt struck her as an odd choice for someone who would likely be digging around in power conduits all day. She walked over to him as he was getting off his skimmer.