

MARGARET COLICOS

Safe in orbit high above the gas giant, Margaret looked through the observation port at continent-sized hurricanes and clouds far below. She wondered how long it would take for the entire planet to catch fire, once the experiment began.

Oncier was a pastel globe of hydrogen and mixed gases five times the size of Jupiter. Moons surrounded the gas giant like a litter of pups jostling against their mother. The four of greatest interest were large bodies of ice and rock with capricious names: Jack, Ben, George, and Christopher, after the first four Great Kings of the Terran Hanseatic League. If today's test proved a success, those moons could be terraformed into Earthlike colonies.

If the Klikiss Torch failed, the respected career of Margaret Colicos would fizzle along with it. But she would survive. As xeno-archaeologists, she and her husband Louis were accustomed to working in blissful obscurity.

In preparation for the experiment, the technical observation platform bustled with scientists, engineers, and political observers. Though Margaret had nothing to do with the actual test, her presence was still required here. A celebrity. She had to make a good show of it. After all, she had discovered the alien device among the ruins.

Tucking gray-streaked brown hair behind her ear, she looked across the deck and saw Louis grinning like a boy. They had been married for decades and had never worked without each other. It had been years since she'd seen him in a dashing, formal suit. Margaret could tell how much he reveled in the excitement, and she smiled for his sake.

She preferred to watch people rather than interact with them. Louis once joked that his wife had become fascinated with archaeology on alien planets because there was no chance she might have to strike up a conversation with one of her subjects.

With plenty of dirt under their fingernails and ground-breaking discoveries on their resumes, Margaret and Louis Colicos had already sifted through numerous worlds abandoned by the insectlike Klikiss race, searching for clues to explain what had happened to the vanished civilization. The alien empire had left only ghost cities and occasional tall beetlelike robots that bore no helpful memories of their progenitors. In the eerie ruins on Corribus, the Colicos team had discovered and deciphered the remarkable planet-igniting technology they had called the "Klikiss Torch."

Now excitement thrummed in the filtered air of the observation platform. Invited functionaries crowded around the observation windows, talking with each other. Never before had humans attempted to create their own sun. The consequences and the commercial possibilities were far-reaching.

Chairman Basil Wenceslas noticed Margaret standing alone. When a small-statured server compy came by bearing a tray filled with expensive champagne, the powerful Chairman of the Terran Hanseatic League snagged two extruded-polymer glasses and walked over to her, proud and beaming. "Less than an hour to go."

She dutifully accepted the glass and indulged him by taking a drink. Since the reprocessed air of the observation platform affected the senses of smell and taste, a cheaper champagne would probably have tasted as good. "I'll be glad when it's over, Mr. Chairman. I prefer to spend my time on empty worlds, listening for the whispers of a long-dead civilization. Here, there are too many people for me."

Across the deck she saw a green priest sitting silent and alone. The emerald-skinned man was there to provide instantaneous telepathic communication in case of emergencies. Outside the observation platform hung a ceremonial fleet of alien warliners, seven spectacular ships from the Solar Navy of the Ildirans, the benevolent humanoid race that had helped mankind spread across the stars. The beautifully decorated Ildiran ships had taken up positions where they could observe the spectacular test.

"I understand perfectly," the Chairman said. "I try to stay out of the limelight myself." Wenceslas was a distinguished man, one of those people who grew more attractive and sophisticated with each passing year, as if he learned how to be suave rather than forgot how to be physically fit. He sipped his champagne but so slightly that it barely seemed to wet his lips. "Waiting is always so hard, isn't it? You are not accustomed to working with such a rigid time clock."

She answered him with a polite laugh. "Archaeology is not meant to be rushed -- unlike business." Margaret just wished she could get back to work.

The Chairman touched his champagne glass against Margaret's like a kiss of crystal. "You and your husband are an investment that has certainly paid off for the Hanseatic League." The xeno-archaeologists had long been sponsored by the Hansa, but the star-igniting technology she and Louis had discovered would be worth more than all the archaeology budgets combined.

Working in the cool emptiness of Corribus, sifting through the ideographs painted on the walls of Klikiss ruins, Margaret had been able to match up the precise coordinates of neutron stars and pulsars scattered around the Spiral Arm, comparing them with maps developed by the Hansa.

This single correlation caused an avalanche of subsequent breakthroughs: By comparing the coordinates of neutron stars from the Klikiss drawings with known stellar drift, she had been able to back-calculate how old the maps were. Thus, she determined that the Klikiss race had disappeared five thousand years

ago. Using the coordinates and diagrams as a key, as well as all the other information compiled on numerous digs, Louis and his engineering bent had deciphered Klikiss mathematical notations, thereby allowing him to figure out the basic functioning of the Torch.

The Chairman's gray eyes became harder, all business now. "I promise you this, Margaret: if the Klikiss Torch does function as expected, choose any site you wish, any planet you've wanted to explore, and I will personally see that you have all the funding you require."

Margaret clinked her glass against his in a return toast. "I'll take advantage of that offer, Mr. Chairman. In fact, Louis and I have a likely site already picked out."

The previously untouched ghost world of Rheindic Co, full of mysteries, pristine territory, uncatalogued ruins. . . But first they had to do their duty dance here and endure the public accolades after they ignited the gas world below.

Margaret went to stand beside Louis. She slipped her arm through his as he struck up a conversation with the patient green priest who waited beside his potted worldtree sapling. She could hardly wait for the experiment to be finished. To her, an empty ancient city was far more exciting than setting a whole planet ablaze.