**THE QUEEN OF HEAVEN**

The recently arrived roboticist could not hide either his inexperience with weightlessness nor his fascination with the strange interior of High Earth Station 1. He gripped tightly one of the many handholds recessed into the corridor wall while his eyes wandered from one impossible scene to another. His guide, the chief of robotics, had seen it so many times before. He estimated that it would be rather longer than average before this new recruit became space oriented.

The young man ventured cautiously along the corridor, faltered and then caught himself again at the next handhold. He dared not let got, but the chief smiled patiently, knowing they had been designed to become more widely spaced toward the interior levels. The newcomer paused beside a large viewpoint opening onto an open storage bay.

The view's utter bottomlessness, opening out into infinite space, renewed the fight by the roboticist for the breakfast too hastily eat on Terra firma only hours before. He sought something solid and familiar upon which to fix his unsettled mind and refocused on the irregular ore mass and several smaller fragments nearby.

He focused his eyes on the group of objects and stopped trying to do so for the bottom that was not there. He discovered that it was more than a bit of space debris. It was a sculpture, the huge statue of a woman.

The Chief had been carefully and patiently watching this new man. He saw the expected puzzled expression come over his face and saw it morph into one of awe just as he had so many times before.

"No, comrade, you have not lost all your faculties. That is the patroness of HEOS-1, "The Queen of Heaven" by Marquette. She watches over not only this viewport but others in the French, German, Japanese and American sectors of the station as well.

"Isn't it ...?" the newcomer began but then catch himself before he put his question into words.

"Yes, it is and it isn't. Here in the Russian sector it is wiser to refer to her as 'Nadenka'. In the other sectors she is called more plainly 'Maria' and 'Regina'. They identify her as the woman clothed in the sun with the moon beneath her feet and with a crown of seven stars above her head, the one in the Christian's *Book of Revelation*.

The young engineer dared not admit his familiarity with the *Bible* to someone he just met. The fall of the Soviet Union was still within living memory of old-timers like the Chief. He could not deny that what he had first seen as just a rock was a woman just as he had described. Seven shining star-like objects and a larger crescent, moon-like object had been set at her head and feet, likely by invisible tethers. He wondered at the artistry and he wonder at the explanation he would be given next.

"The story of Nadenka begins many years ago at the interationalization of the moon. Tsuki Enterprises was having problems with the electronics at D'Alembert base. The Americans had their own problems with their tug crew and our own economy could not afford a larger investment in space. It looked as if the great promises of industralized space were about to falter.

While everyone else had relied on the continued availability of personnel and materials, Marquette and Company had gone in another direction.

Since beginning his spiel the Chief had not varied his tempo or inflection. He was repeating the series of words by rote that he had repeated so many time before that they held no meaning for him. The younger man only half listened, continuing to stare at the unearthly masterpiece before him.

Breaking into a re-enactment, the Chief said, "'We have to get that problem with the meshwork alignment solved within fifteen hours!', Marquette shouted angrily over his radio. 'Fix the sensors on that blasted machine or I will send you back to Earth without a shuttle!'

The project head 'Mark' Marquette stared out over the bay holding the now nearly completed prototype he had given ten years of his life for. He sorely wished that his dear Maria could have lived long enough to see it completed. He had to succeed -- for her sake, for everyone's.

Without the long aluminum strips properly aligned in its sails *Harbinger* would never be able to respond correctly to its guidance system. He would have to through his weight around and manage to supervise the mission on board rather than remotely. If the ship could just bring back the ore stored at Farside to the station, with D'Albert no longer communicating, the Cartel could be saved.

The accident with the mercury boiler which had taken his wife's life had not been the only one. The international tensions on and off Earth and the seemingly endless series of budget overruns joined with the highly publicized accidents had seemed to conspire against them. He could not let *Harbinger* fail now.

The magnetic catapult at D'Albert would not be working again for several days at least. There were no ships coming up from Earth and the station was becoming critically in need of the oxygen-bearing lunar material from Farside. Everything was set up for its extraction. The station was nearly ready to become self-sufficient, but right now there was only enough oxygen left after the spill for minimal life support. The *Harbinger* had to make it; no other ship could make it in time.

Ever though the Harbiger outdid all but Marquette's expectations, it was not good enough for him. By the time the ship had decellerated for rendezvous with the Farside collector, even the stoic astrogator, Nadenka Sokolovna, had been shaken.

'Everyone into your suits. Now!' Mark shouted out as they approached. 'We will need every available hand to make up for the broken-down robot loader. Get going!'

The look of contempt that Sokolvna gave her commander was not missed by any of the rest of the international crew. She maneuvered past him giving the widest possible clearance. She looked him directly in the eyes and left now doubt that her feelings had nothing to do with their different genders or nationalities. She hated him personally.

Nadenka quickly locked on her helmet effectively cutting off anything else they might have had to say to each other. She pulled down her sunvisor so that she could hide the smile of superiority she wore. She purposefully did not turn her radio on.

Mark's only vent for soothing his wounded ego was the hapless German communications man, Hans Vogel. In the process however he began to realize just why Nadenka, who happened by chance to be the only woman on this maiden voyage, upset him so. He did not like the idea of a woman other than Maria sharing in this, whether it be a success or a failure. He stuffed that realization into the back of his mind and said nothing to Vogel. The mission was what was most important.

Leaving the German alone to co-ordinate his part of that mission, Captain Marquette donned a helmet himself and went out to load the nodules into the holding net. Outside the ship Mark was, despite his efforts to fight it, nearly overwhelmed by the collector. Hanging there in space, larger than the apparent diameter of the moon, it dwarfed not only the crew members, but the ship as well. The solar sails seemed very fragile next to its three-hundred-meter mouth.

Although only holding a half-month's output of the lunar mining operation, the conical structure held almost three thousand tonnes of ore in five-kilo packets. From the alumina and other oxides more than enough oxygen could be extracted to replenish HEO's reserves. He watched the four small figures moving across from the collector to the ship and back, guiding the shiny glassfiber containers.

He became more aware than he ever had before, busy with the mission, of the nearness of death in space. Only a millimeter of spacesuit held back the cold and blackness of space, a blackness so huge it made everything else seem nothingness. He wondered if man would ever be truly ready to live in space.

His philosophical musing suddenly became cut short as the broken robot loader made an unexpected jerk of its powerful arm catching Nadenka as she approached the holding net. He and the other crewmembers watched helplessly as she was flung far from the ship toward the sun. The nodules she had in tow scattered about her and traveled along with her limp body.

"Nadenka!" Mark called out, unaware that he had until then always called her by her surname.

He heard the others' calls to her and to him over the intercom, but there was no response from her. She seemed as lifeless as the rock that shared her momentum.

As she passed, her metallic suit suit and the nodules became lit not only by the direct sunlight but by the reflected light off of *Harbinger*'s sails. Then they passed into the shadow of the moon.

From Mark's point of view the scene was startling. He recognized the sign in the heavens. Silhouetted against the dark lunar disc with its thin crescent at her feet and the shiny nodules like stars where no stars could be, he felt that nothing was impossible. He knew that this time the darkness would not swallow up another life.

He fastened a tether and pushed off to intercept her and did not wonder if he was risking his own life in the attempt. He stared stared at the figure before him, trying to see the smallest sign of life.

'Pierre, I live.', he heard.

His heart fluttered, he later told reporters, as he heard the words; they gave him the encouragement and strength he needed. The force of Nadenka's pull on the tether nearly, but not quite, broke it. The nodules continued to eventually fall back to the moon from which they had come, creating little, new craters. Within minutes both Nadenka and Mark were again aboard the *Harbinger* and headed with its load for HEO.

'I must have been knocked unconscious by the blow by the robot arm,' Nadenka told the press. 'I remember nothing at all before waking back on the ship with my rescuer, Mark, beside me.'

The Chief had given Pavel the official version of the Sokolovna incident, the inspiration for the sculpture, made from some of that ore from the D'Alembert before planetoid mining became competitive. The younger man took one last look at the Woman and then thought. The Chief took his expression for space sickness and continued silently to Robotics.

Pavel asked himself if Nadenka only knew Mark by his nickname and not by his Baptismal name Pierre, if she had been unconscious the whole time, "Who was it that he heard say, 'Pierre, I live.'?"

Like so many before, even from the former Soviet Union, Pavel felt that he understood that he had been called out into space, that it was not full of darkness, but light. He knew that every moment of life in space is a miracle. His stomach however might need a bit more convincing.