

# PROLOGUE

“HOUSTON, THIS IS Acting Commander Catherine Wells of *Sagittarius*. Do you read?” Catherine leaned over the comm panel, watching the swirling colors of nothingness outside the ship.

“Mom, they can’t hear you.” Aimee sat on the edge of the console, twisting the end of her long braid around her index finger. She was wearing the PROPERTY OF NASA shirt David had bought Catherine the Christmas before she left.

She was right, of course. But any moment now, the blurry colors of the wormhole outside her window should resolve into normal space, meaning that she’d arrived back in her own solar system. Back within radio contact. Finally.

The ship’s chronometer told her she had been traveling at least six years now. It felt much longer. She wasn’t sure she trusted the reading, but at this point, her mind was even more untrustworthy than the chronometer.

When she looked at Aimee again, her daughter had gone from being an eight-year-old in an oversize shirt to a five-year-old holding a stuffed stegosaurus. She fidgeted in her chair. “I’m tired of waiting. Are you going to be home soon, Mommy?”

“I hope so, baby girl. I hope so.” She reached out to push a lock of Aimee’s dark hair behind her ear. Her hand went straight through her daughter, bumping against the heavy glass window separating her from the dark vortex of space outside.

Catherine knew, of course, that the Aimee in front of her was the result of too much time alone—more alone than any human had ever been.

She'd had a crew once. The other five individual quarters on the ship were empty now, but each bore marks and remnants of their former occupants: a data disk labeled in Claire's neat handwriting, Richie's battered Mets hat, photos of Ava's children on a shelf, Izzy's copy of *Catch-22*, Tom's antique compass. If she closed her eyes, it almost felt like they were right there, just as Aimee was, present but beyond reach. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen them. Or why they weren't with her now.

All she knew was that she had to get home. To Aimee. To David. To Earth.

The ship gave a small lurch beneath her and for the first time in years, she saw stars again, the blackness of space stretching out before her, drawing her toward home. Her breath caught.

"Try the radio again, Mommy!" Aimee said, bouncing in her seat.

Catherine smiled at the vision of her daughter. She was still too far away for communication, but she had to try. For Aimee. She leaned over the comm panel again.

"Houston, this is Acting Commander Catherine Wells of *Sagittarius*. Do you read?"

All that met her was silence.



Tucked away in a corner of a basement of a satellite NASA office in Houston, largely forgotten, was central command for the Sentinel program. Its sole mission was to monitor the Einstein-Rosen bridge that had opened up past Mars's orbit in 1998, in case something came through it. Calling it "ERB Prime," as if it might be the first of several, seemed ridiculous then and even more so now. In the fourteen years that Kenny Turner had been working the graveyard shift for Sentinel, nothing ever came through. In fact, in the entire lifetime of the Sentinel program, exactly one thing ever had: the Voyager 5 probe, expected and ahead of schedule. Until now.

At 0341 Central Standard Time, the alarm went off, startling Turner away from his nightly perusal of various subreddits. With hands suddenly clammy, he scrambled to his computer to see if he could identify what had just appeared out past Mars.

He couldn't believe what he was seeing.

The ship's transponder identified the craft as *Sagittarius*, a ship that wasn't supposed to exist anymore. A phantom ship. Kenny's skin crawled. The crew of the *Sagittarius I* mission had been lost six years ago. After some initial earthshaking reports back from TRAPPIST-1f—evidence of the existence of primitive, mostly microscopic life on the planet—all transmissions had abruptly stopped, and the life-support readings for all six members of the crew failed.

Who the hell should he call? There were protocols in place if something unidentified came through the wormhole, and who to call when a planned mission made its return . . . but there was nothing on the books for what to do about a ghost ship.

The *Sagittarius I* mission was over, finished, and the mission's original flight director had died two years ago. *Sagittarius II* was still in the works . . . maybe he should call that flight director. No, Kenny decided, this was too big for anyone but the top. He placed the call to Sentinel's director, George Golding.

"Golding," came the growling voice over the phone. "This better be good."

"Sir, this is Kenny Turner. We have a situation at Sentinel."

Kenny could hear his boss snap to full attention. "Tell me."

"*Sagittarius*, sir. It came back."

"Is this some sort of prank, Turner? Who put you up to this?"

"No joke, sir. I'm picking up the transponder signal loud and clear. No radio contact yet, but it'll be a bit before we'll hear."

"Jesus Christ on the cross." Golding took a deep breath. "All right. We gotta wake up the folks at JSC. I'll call the administrator. Oh hell, you should probably call someone with *Sagittarius II*. Llewellyn's off on some godforsaken wilderness trek right now. Morganson's covering for him. Call him."

Kenny stopped short of groaning. "Sir, don't you think that call would be better coming from you?" Kenny had heard about JSC's wunderkind. He'd never met him, but everyone knew his reputation. If there was a problem to find, Cal Morganson was the guy who was going to find it. And he walked into every situation expecting to find a problem. It was too damn early in the morning to deal with that.

Golding laughed. “You woke *me* up, you get to wake *him* up too. Call Morganson and I’ll handle the big guns.” He hung up without another word.

Kenny took a long swallow of coffee gone cold and grimaced before looking up Cal Morganson’s contact information.

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Cal Morganson drove like the devil from his apartment in Midtown, Houston, to Sentinel’s tiny office. He’d been awake when Kenny had called, staring at the ceiling, his mind swirling with logistics and timetables and question after question, all unanswerable. The closer they got to the launch of Sagittarius II, the greater the specter of Sagittarius I’s unknown fate loomed over the crew and staff.

*Sagittarius* returning! It was impossible, more than they could have hoped for.

Now, finally, they could get some answers about what had happened out there.

The Gulf Freeway was nearly empty this time of night, and he made it much faster than he’d expected. He jogged through the darkened office building that served as Sentinel’s home base, bursting into the control center.

“What’s their ETA for Earth?” he asked Kenny immediately. “Does JSC have a plan for getting them back on the ground yet?”

“Current trajectory puts them back in Earth’s orbit in about three months. Director Golding is probably on the phone with the folks at Johnson as we speak.”

Before Cal could throw out any more questions, the radio crackled to life.

“—of *Sagittarius*. Come in, Houston. This is Catherine Wells calling from *Sagittarius*.”

Cal fought the urge to whoop. “*Sagittarius*, this is Houston, we read you loud and clear. Boy are we glad to hear from you!”

“Oh, thank God.” The relief in Wells’s voice was palpable, even across the millions of miles. “Any chance I can get a landing trajectory from you guys?” She laughed, the sound faint and staticky. “I’d like to come home now.”

Something was wrong, something in the shaky tone of Wells’s laugh, in the way she said “I” instead of “we.”

“Colonel Wells, this is Cal Morganson. I don’t think we ever met, but I work with Aaron Llewellyn. Who’s with you up there? Status on the rest of the crew?”

“It’s just me. They’re . . . they’re not here.”

Before keying the mic again, Morganson glanced at Kenny. “Are you recording this?”

“Yes, sir.”

Cal turned back to the mic, leaning into it as if he could get closer to her that way, could reach through space and pull the answers out of her. “What happened, Catherine? How long have you been alone?”

There was a long pause before she answered, long enough that Cal wondered if they’d lost contact. “Almost six years. I think.”

*I think?* What the hell were they dealing with here? “We lost your life-support signals about six years ago.” He drew a breath and said, “Colonel Wells . . . you and your crew have been presumed dead for those six years. Are you telling me the other five *are* dead?”

“I don’t know. I-I think so. It’s just me. No one else is on board.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?” This might be Cal’s only chance to get unfiltered, raw answers. The more time Wells spent talking to other people, the more her story might shift and change. Right now, her relief to be talking to anyone would be the only thought on her mind.

“I don’t remember.” Her voice turned plaintive. “When can I talk to Aimee and David? I want to talk to my daughter.”

Kenny shut off the mic. “Sir, she’s been isolated for six years. We don’t know what her mental state is. She sounds unstable.”

“I know the effects of long-term isolation, Mr. Turner.” He didn’t bother to keep the chill out of his voice as he turned to Kenny. “By now, Wells has probably experienced hallucinations and breaks with reality.”

“Then why ask her anything?”

“Whatever she tells me right now might not be real, but it won’t be a lie. Don’t you think it’s odd that she doesn’t remember *anything*?”

“Are you saying you think she’s lying?”

Cal loved the astronauts he worked with like family, but he wasn’t blind

to their faults—they were family he understood all too well. “I’m saying, Mr. Turner, I want to get as much information as I can, as quickly as I can.” He turned the mic back on. “We’ll have someone contact your family, Colonel Wells. I’m sure they’ll be overjoyed to hear the news. In the meantime, can you tell me what you *do* remember?” To Kenny, he said, “Let me know when command contacts her family.”

“Yes, sir.”

Cal watched the radar showing the ship’s continued path home. *What happened to you out there? And how do we keep it from happening again?* Catherine—unstable or not—had those answers, he knew she did. He just had to dig until he found them.

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Aimee Wells jogged down the stairs and headed for the kitchen. Her dad was at the stove and Maggie sat at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee, reading something on her tablet.

“Morning, Aims,” her dad said. “How do you want your eggs?”

She wrinkled her nose. “On someone else’s plate. I’ll just grab some cereal. Morning, Maggie,” she said as she went to grab a bowl.

Aimee was glad when Maggie and her dad finally stopped pretending that Maggie wasn’t basically living with them. She’d been about to tell them to stop when they finally sat her down and told her what she already knew, that they loved each other and were talking about getting married someday. Maggie was great, and she made Dad happy. They’d been practically a family for years now anyway. Maggie wound up helping Aimee with her homework more than her dad did, especially when Aimee got into advanced math. Her dad had a natural, instinctive understanding of calculus—which meant he had no idea how to help Aimee understand it. Thankfully, Maggie had struggled with it a little more, so she knew how to help.

“Morning,” Maggie said, looking up with a distracted smile. “Sorry, getting ready for an early meeting.”

“Who is it this time?” Aimee poured some granola into her bowl then mixed in some corn flakes. It was one of the many things she’d picked up

from her mom. Memory was weird. Aimee could remember her mom's habit of mixing cereal with crystal clarity, but she couldn't remember what the last words her mom said to her were, or how her laugh had sounded. It had taken her a long time to stop feeling guilty about that. She smiled at Maggie. "Eccentric billionaire who wants to be buried in space, or rogue start-up that says they can colonize Mars?"

"Neither, thankfully." Maggie and Aimee's dad both worked for NASA just like her mom had, David as an engineer, Maggie as a consultant.

"That's—" Before David could finish his statement, the house phone rang. "—not a cell phone," he finished, and got up to answer it. "Hello? Yes, speaking." He paused. "Director Lindholm, I—"

Aimee and Maggie exchanged glances. Paul Lindholm was the director of all of NASA. Why would he be calling their house before 8 a.m.?

"What's going on?" David asked. He met Aimee's eyes as the voice continued on the other end. "I—" The color drained out of her dad's face. "Are you sure? How is that—?" He leaned heavily against the counter behind him. "Yes. That's . . . that's wonderful." It didn't sound wonderful, whatever it was. "No, I'm just surprised. After all this time . . . yes. Thank you. Thank you so much. We'll come down there this morning."

He hung up the phone and looked at Maggie and Aimee, reaching out for both of them.

"Dad? What's wrong?"

"That was . . . Aims . . . I don't know how to say this . . ." His gaze moved to take in Maggie as well. "*Sagittarius* came through the wormhole last night. Catherine . . . your mom's alive, Aimee. Your mom's *alive*."

Maggie's face went pale. David hesitated for a second then broke into a smile, and pulled them both in for a hug.

Aimee didn't understand what he was saying at first. Losing her mom had been the worst time of her life, but it was over. It had been years. How could she—The full meaning of her dad's words hit Aimee and she grabbed him tight. "Mom's coming home?"

"She's coming home."