

SINGULARITY DEFERRED

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A NOVEL BY LIAM R.W. DOYLE

27 MARCH 2012

(SAMPLE VERSION)

Dedicated to the memory of William J. Burling. This story was nothing more than a first chapter, futilely rewritten a hundred times, until he introduced me to a fundamentally life-altering ideology encompassed in this key question to be asked of anything and everything:

“Who uses it and what is it for?”

Many thanks to Dr. WD Blackmon and Professor Brian Shawver.

And no less thanks to Liza and Chris. Without them, well, this novel would be significantly more painful to read than it currently is.

And more thanks than I can express to my family for their support, their love, their occasional kicks in the pants, and their patience for my grumbles and ignoring of them as I forced the words onto the screen.

CHAPTER ONE

I woke up to what sounded like fireworks going off in a coffee can, and I was in that can. A sound that was less a *sound* than a full-body reverberation. I felt it through the hard metal floor and in my bones. As much as my body kept trying to keep me down, convincing me I needed to keep sleeping, I fought the fog and climbed into that kind of wakefulness where you can't quite clear your head and get a grip of where you are and what's going on around you--made all the worse in this case by the fact I *didn't* know where I was.

Wherever I was, the room was dimly lit by weak and sputtering fluorescent lights hinting at metal walls, floor, low ceiling; smooth, dirty-white crates and bins here and there; and at my feet some unusual piece of machinery that reminded me of three interlocked bicycle tires stuck in the middle of a pile of computer parts. Lying against it was my mother's long, heavy, silver flashlight. *What the heck was that doing there?* I thought. *Forget that, what am I doing here?* I sat up, trying to remember anything about what led up to this moment.

Another felt-not-heard explosion caught my attention, and I struggled to my feet. Then struggled to my feet again. I felt unbelievably weak, unbalanced, like right after a too long, too hard weight lifting session (which, as anyone could tell by looking at the hundred and fifty pound me, I did not commit often), and it took a few tries to stagger to the door until I collapsed against the wall. I felt both concerned by my unusual condition and a little disgusted by my physical state, as if I had suffered through a nasty bout of flu, wearing the same clothes the whole time.

I pushed a recessed, oblong "open" button next to the door which slid aside into the wall, revealing a short, narrow corridor that reminded me of movie submarines: exposed wiring ducts and odd pieces of metal frame jutting here and there. All of it painted a dull white. I called out, "Hello?" No response. Narrow doors to the front, left and right. I called out again, and again no one responded. I struggled against the wall, making unintentionally wild steps and over-reaching for portions of the bulkhead, unable to find my balance or

completely control my limbs.

Once I got to the door in front, I peered through the little smoked-glass window set at eye level. Inside looked like the cockpit of a plane, and my confusion started to solidify into a needling anxiety. *How in the world did I get into a plane? What in the world did I do last night? Why is there no one in the cockpit?*

I pushed the open button for this door and a loud, rhythmic beeping flooded out. I examined the three windows in front. Black. Very black. I figured it was the darkest night I'd ever seen, or something was covering the glass. The cockpit was tight and cramped--I had to literally climb into the single large, black chair. I looked over my shoulder out the door to see if anyone had come yet (no one had), then turned my attention to the console of . . . controls that didn't look like any airplane controls I was familiar with. Instead of toggles and dials and a yoke, the console was covered with all manner of computer screens and small clusters of buttons. Some of the smaller monitors showed images I couldn't make out: circles, lines and curves, scrolling numbers and words. Some looked like animated navigational charts, in full color 3-D even, while others looked like calculators gone insane. One of the main monitors in front caught my eye:

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--HULL DAMAGE: undetectable. (.0045 stress factor)
Course deviation corrected – minimal energy usage
--COMMUNICATIONS HAIL (23.2.88)
--COMMUNICATIONS HAIL (23.5.40)
--Incoming object (q67754)
----SRS Identification: energy based (factor 7)
--NEAR PROXIMITY ENERGY RELEASE--
----Gauss Barriers inactive -4-
--HULL DAMAGE: undetectable (.016 stress factor)
--Unidentified Craft: distance at 66k (5-5-7)
Course deviation corrected – minimal energy usage
--COMMUNICATIONS HAIL (23.16.82)
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The last line appeared as I read, causing the first line to scroll off the top of the screen. If this was what was currently going on, I assumed someone was trying to call us. I craned back around and yelled again, "Hello? Anyone out there?" and again received no reply. I looked around the console at buttons and words that were just too many to take in. A small monitor off to my right had one flashing label on its face, in a couple of rows of touch-

screen icons. The flashing one read "Communications." *Why not*, I thought.

I touched it and the other icons disappeared with a set of new virtual buttons replacing them. I could make sense of most of them. I did what seemed most obvious and pressed "receive Xmission." Instantly, the loud beeping turned into a slight background noise and, while the control screen I was paying attention to didn't change, the main one in the middle showed some movement. Turning my attention to it, I was surprised but relieved to see a person looking back at me. A man of some exotic ethnic decent I couldn't place. No hair on head nor face, angular structure, dark complexion.

"How good of you to answer," he said in a gravelly baritone. "It took some work getting your attention." Actually, what he *really* said was something like: "*Masayang* proper *tú* comeback *la sig-wei*. *Nulij'yu tú* ears up." I never got proficient at speaking the mix-up of Spanish, English, and various Asian languages that formed the predominant tongue spoken by most traders, haulers, pirates, and the like, but I eventually got good at understanding it. Not at that point I wasn't, though.

"Uh, I'm sorry I have no idea what you just said." He looked right at me through the screen, examining me as I was him. I glanced up and around quickly for the lens of a camera but saw none.

He continued, but in a simplistic English still peppered with slang I had to guess at. The conversation went more or less like: "Who are you? You're not Jarrod. You do look a lot like him. . . . Where is he?"

"I, uh" I began most eloquently, "I don't know any 'Jarrod'. In fact, to be perfectly honest, I don't even know where I am. Could--"

"Humorous," he interrupted, "We detected only one person on board, so either he's dead, or you've taken his ship, or both." He had a creepy smile: "As much as I would appreciate that, I'm going to guess it's more likely he's run off, as expected, and you're covering for him." (That last bit, he actually said the figure of speech, "*y tú* fufffacin' dachi." I could never hear that and keep a straight face. I had to constantly have him rephrase what he said, which certainly contributed to his bad attitude.)

"Look, I'm sorry, I really am, but I'm in some trouble here. I honestly don't know how I got here--I woke up, and here I was. No one else seems to be here, and I'd really like to know where I am and why."

He continued as if I hadn't spoken, "To come to the point, Jarrod, you, both of you, I don't care, there's something of mine Jarrod took from me, and I intend to get it back. I'm

willing, for old times' sake, to ask nicely and forget this happened. Maybe. But the more I'm delayed, the more apt I am to simply take it back. At whatever cost, to whoever has it."

"Okay, go ahead. Seriously. Come aboard and get it, whatever it is, and then tell me how to get back down or up or, uh . . . over, or what-the-heck-ever. Better yet, take me with you, and we can find Jarrod together and get some answers. I like that one, actually."

He snorted, "Funny. We already know it's not on your ship. If you really don't know what you're doing there, I'd say that's *your* problem. Since neither Jarrod nor my property is currently on board, I'm going to give him one chance. And you give him this message: He's to meet me on Sandiki in ten seds. If he doesn't, I won't come politely knocking next time. Understand?"

"Hey, I--"

"Hao." The monitor clicked to darkness, followed after a pause by:

--Communication terminated (23.42.7)

--Ship Identified – NT: *Tsaul Ki* (revenant class)

--*Tsaul Ki* distance +5.33k -> (5-5-7 5-8-7+)

I sat in silence, uncertain what exactly just happened. Who was that? What in the heck was that all about? The only thing that came to mind was *I'm back where I began*. Except, now I had some communication controls, at least. I felt a little more collected despite my situation, what with having some human contact--even if weird and belligerent.

I turned my attention back to the little monitor on the right for clues as to how to reach anyone else on it. Some of the labels on buttons and panel sections on the console started to catch my attention. At first, I couldn't quite make sense of the words, as if the odd lettering made the word unreadable, then I realized I was reading things I simply couldn't have expected to see: "Shield control," "astrogation," "artfl. gravity control. . . ."

I started looking around more closely, reading everything, becoming increasingly curious, then disbelieving, then nervous. "Orbit modulation," "anti-matter drive control," "dark-matter focal control," and finally my eyes happened upon and stopped at "fore-window opacity." That set had an oblong button with "+" and "-" symbols on either end. I looked up at the three blackened windows in front of me, separated by thin strips of hull structure just barely keeping the triptych of glass from being one long swath of ebony. Without looking away from the middle window, I depressed the "-" end of the flat button and watched as the dull black steadily dissipated to allow what was outside become visible, like window tinting fading away. What came into view was a similar yet deeper blackness

filled with pinpoints of light. Just to the right and below, the size of an orange held at arm's length, was the most beautiful and terrifying image of what could be nothing other than an alien planet. Not the blue of Neptune or Uranus, or the orange-striped Jupiter, ringed Saturn, red Mars, or blue and white Earth--but something I'd never seen in any astronomy text or television program. It was a disk of green, brown, and yellow stripes slowly but visibly grinding against each other as they moved across the surface, causing little eddies of storms at the meeting places.

A planet. Stars and a planet not just out and forward, or above, but *below* my eye-level, where if I were in a plane I should have been able to see land. I felt dizzy and nauseated, weak and light-headed. I put my head between my knees for a few minutes and controlled my breathing. It was a while before I could convince myself to look back up.

CHAPTER TWO

I became aware of my bladder screaming in agony. Strange how a very basic need can actually drive away mind-boggling questions like, oh . . . how and why was I in *space*! By the time I'd willed myself to look back up into the impossible, the planet had already passed from sight. All that remained was a field of pitch black awash with stars. A gorgeous sight, really. Something that can rarely be seen anymore from Earth, where standing in a rural field, the light pollution from towns and cities miles away still prevent people from being able to see the stars in the same way our pre-industrial ancestors were able to. This view of space was not at all intimidating, but rather hypnotizing. I left it only out of necessity.

I climbed delicately out of the chair, woozier than when I first sat down, and exited into the small passageway I came through earlier. I hoped the toilet was behind one of the other two doors. The one now on my left was big, solid, intimidating. Air-lock, or, the-door-to-not-good-results, probably. The door opposite it was more like the one to the cockpit but without the window. I opened it and found a sleeping cabin. The disheveled bed and stale smell gave it away. My hope of finding what I was looking for was rewarded by the small, sliding partition off to the side that opened just wide enough to allow me to sidestep into what could generously be called an alcove containing a toilet and shower, of sorts.

After having dealt with one pressing matter, I felt more capable of dealing with the present situation . . . which I still couldn't really grasp. Space? How is that even remotely possible? And that's when it hit me: *virtually* possible. I had to be in some sort of simulator. Why I woke up in a simulator was equally beyond me, but it was light-years more reasonable than being in *actual* space. That ominous door was probably the door-to-a-warehouse-and-laughing-jerks.

However, as I lumbered to the hallway with the air-lock, two and two suddenly made four. The reason why my movements and my balance were off since I woke up: less gravity. Of course, I'd never experienced less than Earth gravity before, so the thought never occurred to me until that moment that would be the cause for my awkwardness and, well,

light feeling. It certainly wasn't zero-gravity, but as I started walking around in a tight circle, making little hops, I guessed it was probably more than moon gravity (one-sixth if I recalled) but still less than what I was used to on Earth. I didn't semi-float like the astronauts in the videos from the moon walks did, but this feeling was unmistakable now that I could associate it to something. Was this even possible to simulate? I didn't think it was, at least, I'd never heard of anything like that. Even NASA had to use water or short and vomit-inducing arcs in a DC-10 to simulate weightlessness. I went back into the sleeping cabin and sat down on the cot jutting from the wall, my head swimming.

I couldn't understand it. It made no sense. I was just a techie for an Internet service provider, a small local one at that. How could I possibly be in a spacecraft? Last thing I could remember was . . . I couldn't remember. It was odd, like trying to remember a dream you just had--you know you had it, you remember having had it but can't remember the dream itself. I couldn't remember yesterday. I remembered pouring over server logs at work; I felt as though it *should* have been yesterday, or maybe the day before, but seemed more like a couple weeks ago. I tried to think and felt certain I worked the day before, and the day before that, and all week, but my memory told me I hadn't been to work in many days. What did I do, then? I couldn't recall. *Was* it a party? Was I slipped something to knock me out? I seriously doubted it, since I hadn't been to a party since college and my friends really weren't the partying kind. And I certainly didn't know anyone who would play with chemicals that knocked people out and screwed with their memory.

I felt my anxiety building, my "lizard-brain" telling me to flee instead of fight. I knew that if I didn't have something, anything to grasp hold of, I'd panic.

I stood up, a little more used to the altered sense of balance, whether from experience or new acceptance, and again stepped gingerly toward the hatchway. I looked back through the little window in the door to the cockpit, command cabin, or whatever it should have been called. Bolted down bucket chair, wide console filled with little screens, buttons, and lights--but dominating the room were the three windows. I looked back out at the void, held away from me by the glass in the ship's hull and the glass in that door.

The thought came to me that there was glass, transparent sheets of glass, filling three good-sized holes, where otherwise all the air would be almost instantly pushed out into vacuum. I wondered how that was possible. The space shuttles had small glass windows, and I'd not heard of any emergencies arising on a mission because of cracked glass. I stood fascinated by that thought before finally realizing I felt better. Thinking about the glass in

the windows of NASA's space shuttles actually subdued some of my anxiety. Perhaps it was from thinking about something specific and not trying to grasp the enormity of my situation in general, or possibly from feeling like if the shuttles could spend hundreds of hours in space without any failed windows, I felt somehow I was fine and was going to remain fine.

I tried not to think of problems with valve seals and insulation debris.

I retained my newfound calm as I turned back around and faced the more solid door I came out of earlier, into the room I'd woken up in. I opened the door, and it whispered aside. I gazed around to take in all that I missed earlier in my haze of first waking up. Boxes, crates. Mostly white, off-white, scratched and scuffed up, with various labels and logos I didn't recognize. Cargo boxes, I suspected. Strange device in the center of the room: It was a hodgepodge of parts stuck together obviously using function over form as a design philosophy. It reminded me of the time I had to jury-rig a computer together in a case that was not meant for upgrading. I had drives and parts laying on static-plastic on top of the case and on the table, ribbon cable and wires in all directions, and cooling fans attached in strategic places using plastic-coated twist-ties. This object at my feet reminded me of a much bigger version of that.

Except, in addition to electronics that had no recognizable purpose, there were the large parts in the middle of all the wires and circuitry and unusually placed buttons and toggles. The inner-tube looking tori I saw earlier were the largest of the parts, set directly in the middle, intertwined amongst themselves like the rings of a gyroscope. I touched them, ran my fingers along them, tried gently to make them move. They didn't yield but certainly looked like they were meant to. They weren't rubber, as I first thought, but some kind of matte black metal. Much colder to the touch than they should have been. I picked up the flashlight and turned it on. In the dim illumination of the room, the sickly yellow light from the ancient flashlight was even dimmer.

I looked at the floor around the device . . . and noticed the blood. I saw it in very fine dots on the floor not far from where I had been lying. Of course, I know for certain *now* that it was blood, but somehow I also knew it *then* as I looked down at it. Dark brown, dried, but unmistakable. Blood splattered on a floor is something I think most people recognize immediately, and, if not, if their first conscious guess is paint or stain, they're simply lying to themselves. We living creatures recognize the leaving of blood where it shouldn't be found. I didn't have a good feeling about it.

I knelt down and slowly scanned the floor for clues as to what it was doing there. It was

a fine mist. No, not even really a mist, just a lot of tiny dots that got fewer in number but larger in size as they got closer to a particular off-white cargo box. I shuffled over to it in a crouch, following the trail, and stopped when I recognized half the blackness on the bottom edge of the container was not a shadow but a thick rivulet of blood along the line where the crate met the floor.

The container's door faced me, opening outward. It bore a faded, scratched label for something called "Syr-Synergy," below that some Asian characters, and then a line of dots in what I figured was some kind of shipping code. I looked at it for a while, unmoving in the glow of the light-strip situated at shoulder level along the walls--casting shadows at unusual angles. Of course I had to open the door, of course I had to see what was in the crate, and of course I was frightened to petrification at the idea of seeing what I knew was in it. Nothing good is ever seen where pools of blood are involved. I considered remaining ignorant. What would be better, to stay inside a mysterious spacecraft I had no idea how I got into or where it was going, with what I was sure was a dead body--or stay in said spacecraft with the unknown bleeding and likely dead creature constantly calling to me to look at it? Nagging at my mind, knocking like a monkey-paw-created aberration at the door of my consciousness, rapping and demanding entrance until I finally swung the door wide.

I clutched the recessed handle on the door and in one quick move pulled it open. No reason to play shadowy peek-a-boo with whatever was inside--best to get it over with, like removing a bandage on a scraped knee. Yep, exactly what I feared and worse than I'd thought it'd be. A man, dressed in some kind of jumper or flight suit, crammed with no dignity into the small space. Bloated, discolored, skin around the eyes pulled back and shrunken, making them appear to bulge out. Dried blood soaking the stomach of the jumper and pooled on the bottom of the container. The odor was an unbelievably putrid, gassy, sour smell that I will never, as long as I live, forget.

I'm certainly not proud of losing it like I did. Manly-man image and all that. But I also don't think, considering the circumstances, anyone would blame me for it. Growing up in a middle-class, suburban environment, video games are the closest you tend to get to dead humans and a pound of hamburger a couple days beyond its freshness the closest you get to that kind of smell--and then that's only a sliver of the impact. The olfactory evidence of a human being reduced to spoiled meat. Add to that the fact I was once again acutely aware of being alone in a box floating in unknown space: well, I let myself break down for a while.

I ended up staying in the cockpit, or control room, for quite some time. I distracted

myself with the console, displays, and readouts, finding some innocuous-looking button and switching it on and off, overly interested in whether the indicator light was an LED or some other technology I didn't know about. I was in there so long playing around with whatever I could, to keep my mind occupied, that I found a few games on one of the consoles: word and number games, puzzles, solitaire-type games. Those ended up being a great time-and-attention waster until my thirst became so great that it had become more of a distraction than anything else I could come up with in that tiny room.

After some out-loud discussion with myself, I finally worked up the nerve to exit the control room, keeping an eye on the cargo door as if it was poised to betray me in some evil-door manner, and entered the bedroom/bathroom/who-knows-whatall room.

The more I looked around, the more I got the impression of a dorm room. Clothes drawers, foldaway desk, well-hidden and diminutive kitchenette devices. A mini-pantry filled with both dried and tubed foods and boxes and bags of foodstuffs that probably would have been quite the no-no on a space shuttle. Stuff that was in the form of flakes and pieces and grains. Fortunately, aside from a couple of containers of liquid in a small fridge, all of it smelled perfectly edible. Although, the moment I smelled what I think was some kind of milk, the sense-memory of the cargo box hit me full force and I found myself dry heaving into the toilet for a while.

I tentatively nibbled, munched, and sipped on stuff that didn't seem bad, or capable of going bad, while I examined the containers they came in. Much of it appeared to have been repackaged into plain storage containers, but there were a few products that were still in colorful commercial packaging. Most of it was in English, though there were many sections on some of the packages, and some entire packages, that were obviously Spanish (although I couldn't read more than a word or two), and some that had Asian characters. I know now that it was a conglomeration of the once disparate languages of Japanese, Chinese, Tagalog and Hindi called, uncreatively, "Asian," but at the time I couldn't guess what it was.

I was comforted to see stuff that made sense, even if I didn't recognize it specifically. A cereal box (with a crazy cartoon character I'd never seen before but was as familiar to me as all interchangeable cereal mascots throughout my life) with a panel of unpronounceable nutritional information, a slew of marketing hyperbole, and a smattering of legalese on consumer assumption of responsibility for use of this product, and I felt right back at home and that all was going to be well.

So long as I got to wherever I was going before the food ran out.

I stopped munching when I pondered the idea of having to search the cargo boxes for any stored food once I'd gone through this cache.

I remembered what that creepy-looking guy said earlier: I looked just like this Jarrod. I made myself remember what the guy in the crate in the next room looked like. It wasn't hard calling up the image, it'd been lingering in the periphery of my consciousness for the last two, four, however many hours it'd been since I saw it. I hadn't kept track of the time I spent trying to not think of it. Now, thinking of it, I was certain that if the guy who was supposed to captain this ship looked like me, then it wasn't that guy in the crate. Even with the state he was in, his blond hair, receding jaw, and wide nose didn't look at all like me.

I spent a lot of time looking around the bed-and-breakfast room, trying to get a sense of what kind of ship this was and who owned it. What kind of person was this Jarrod that guy had spoken of? He was undoubtedly bi-orderly: the room was in a general state of disheveled, but there were individual things that were well-organized. The clothes created a mess somehow bigger than what few articles there were. Then there were books, several, maybe twenty or so, of varying shapes and sizes, organized on two shelves with an elastic strap keeping them firmly in place. While I'd never heard of most of the authors represented, I recognized a couple books like the seemingly ubiquitous *Moby Dick* and a collected works of Shakespeare in faux leather binding.

Seeing these books, I thought about my own book collection and how much of it has migrated over to e-books. Surely, in a spaceship, there must be an e-reader with countless books. I looked around for some kind of handheld device, a slate or tablet, but couldn't find anything. Well, surely, if the proper pilot of this craft is Jarrod, and Jarrod's not that body, then if there's a handheld he likely took it with him. I hoped to God I wouldn't be here long enough to need a library of books.

Though, I was glad that, in this spacecraft, familiar paper books were around, and it suddenly occurred to me what other information these books could provide. I fingered through the various books I'd never heard of and tried to find what looked like the most recent, newest one. They were all somewhat weathered and used, well-read with creases in the spines and dog-eared pages. None of the covers were glossy, none of the pages crisp. So, I just started pulling them down one at a time, flipped to the second or third page in each book, and looked for the small, bunched up writing each one would have behind the title page.

I found that the last book to have a familiar publisher's info page had a copyright date

of 2026 (there were actually only six or seven books in this collection published before that one), the others had decidedly different formats. A couple had “professional” looking (but very different than what I was used to) publishing info on the first or last page, or inside cover, and some even had End User License Agreements, while a few had printed statements expressing more or less the opposite intent: use and copy and change at your leisure. But most had little more than title, author (if even that), and maybe what looked like a year. 2214, 2265, 2177, 2031, 2271, 2240, 2276. . . . I pulled each book from the shelf, and the highest number I found was 2301. Is that what year it was? 2301? Nearly three hundred years . . . in the future? I don’t know why I hadn’t really thought of it before, why I hadn’t really, consciously, considered the fact that it might not be the same year I last remembered any more. I mean, when you wake up in a spaceship and don’t know how you got there, being in a different time really isn’t outside the realm of possibility.

I supposed.

I sat down on the bed, the novel *Exponential Threat* hanging open in my hand. I looked at the front: some military sci-fi story to judge the book by its cover. How did it get to be 300 years in the future? I entertained the thought of having slept in that cargo room for three centuries. That was exactly as absurd as the situation I was in, no more, no less.

I sat there for a while, absently fingering the pages of the book in my hand, thinking. When I got tired of thinking, I lay down on the bed and tried not to think any more. I fell asleep eventually.

CHAPTER THREE

I was surprised I could sleep at all, much less as soundly as I did, that night . . . day, whatever the time period was. The sleep did me good. However, when I awoke and acknowledged I was still there and it wasn't a dream, a wave of despair washed over me. I seemed to have accepted where I was on some significant, subconscious level. It felt like when I stayed at a co-worker's cabin a couple of summers ago, where I was in a strange and uncomfortable place I couldn't leave until the Labor Day weekend was over. I guess I adapt well. What pained me the most, now that I truly accepted my situation, was my separation from my family--my wife Lori and sprite-like daughter Chloe. Five, almost six, and just started first grade. I imagined those mornings when I'd lie in bed, no Saturday morning alarm. I could hear them in the kitchen down the hall: muffled, unintelligible speaking punctuated by laughter. The clink of dishes. The clack-clack-clack of Boosh's paws on the tile as he followed them around while they made breakfast. I'd lay there in the soft sunlight, tinted orange and red by the pattern of the thin bedroom drapes, and put off getting out of bed until Lori sent Chloe to jump on the bed until I got up, smiling.

Finally, I don't know after how long, I wiped my face dry on my sleeve and took some deep, controlled breaths. Yeah, I could be a putz and do nothing but weep and moan about what mysterious hell I'd found myself in, or I could be proactive. Or, as my manager would say: "Synergize my resources and action plan my positives." Well, I imagine he said things like that; I didn't really listen to him all that often.

The light in the room had auto-dimmed to a night-light level during my sleep. As I moved around, the room slowly illuminated to a soft glow. If I was going to actually *do* something and move forward, I was going to need to get out of my foul clothes, and possibly my own skin if the stink didn't wash off. I figured out how to use the surprisingly convoluted shower stall and its trickle of a water spray. I found some clean clothes that fit me remarkably well, then I went back to the control room, munching on a handful of Fruity Flavored Cardboard Oh's (and if that hadn't been their actual name, then "truth in

advertising” was still non-existent these centuries later).

With a determined spirit and mission, I began a concerted effort at trying to figure out where and when I was and where I was going and when I’d get there. Eventually, with significant caution lest I accidentally vented the air into space, I hunted and pecked the controls and until I figured out I was five days out from some destination called “Gadreus.” After a little happy-dance I went directly to the living-sleeping-dining room and made sure I had enough food. Confirming that, I had myself another happy-dance. Little favors were all I was counting on right then, right there.

By the time the fifth day rolled around, I had passed stir-crazy and was well into blended-into-a-puree-crazy. It’s amazing how quickly the novelty of being in space can wear thin when there’s nothing to do or look at. If it weren’t for the display that kept a constant and unswerving countdown to arrival, I’d probably would have gone nuts with fear that I’d never see any civilization again, not just my family. Space, after all, is pretty big and empty. My mind often pictured scenes of a gnat flying around the Sahara in search of another gnat. I figured that’d be a close approximation of what it’d be like to randomly run into something else out here.

When I awoke the morning of the last day, I saw in the distance a point of light that was brighter than the other stars in the black field. Within a couple of hours, it had grown to the size of a pea. I guessed it was a planet, and most likely Gadreus. My boredom quickly turned to elation, and swiftly evolved into impatience. I watched the dot become a small disc, and by the time it was as wide as my extended thumb, I could see it was primarily a cream-colored white with thin bands of orange and yellow and swirls of soft brown. When it was half as large as the view window, I decided with a good amount of certainty that the coloring and swirling was not atmosphere on a rock planet, but that it looked more like a gas giant like Jupiter. (I started to get concerned about just where I was going to be landing, if at all!)

Fortunately, after another couple of hours of mixed impatience and awe, when the planet had grown well beyond the size of the window, I saw a dot directly ahead, appearing black against the white of the planet. It grew slowly bigger and became obviously separate from the planet and not a storm on it. It was a moon. I figured *that* must be Gadreus. When I had gotten close enough to see specks of light against its black face, indicating technology, I literally jumped for joy. I was in space and couldn’t remember how, I was near a planet that as far as I knew wasn’t in my home solar system, and I had no idea where I was or

how to get back home, but I was positively ecstatic at seeing signs of other life.

I straightened myself up, then wondered with some alarm how exactly was I going to land. It would be just perfect if I were to come all this way to smash head-on with a colossal rock. I sat, chewing on fingernails, watching the growing orb that was the moon take over the view. There were flimsy whips of light gray streaks laced out over the surface here and there. They resembled clouds in some loose way, but were closer to descriptions of formless ghosts than any Doppler radar weather image I'd ever seen. Finally, after getting close enough to see that the black land was dotted liberally with black pools of liquid and lines that looked like canals, something changed on the main monitor screen.

--Guidance Beacon theta-theta-mu acquired 3.5.39

--Navigation Lock initiated. . . . Course Change engaged (1-1-9)

I watched the view move and slide as the ship changed from perpendicular to the surface of the world to almost parallel with it. I had no idea what the scale was because, while I could see lights on the surface, there was nothing I could judge size against. A number on a display next to a wire-frame graph of the moon got smaller as we got closer, and slowed down perceptibly as the course changed. I got an idea it was altitude, but I had no idea if the number was a measure in feet, miles, kilometers, or what.

The surface features, the lakes and canals, hills and clouds slid past until a large grouping of lights came from out of the horizon and stopped directly below. The course changed again, and the ship started to head directly down to the surface.

--Local SVN Beacon acquired

--Low-M Atmosphere entry procedures initiated. . . .

--FREQ .003 registry scan detected

--SVN Inner Sphere/Aerial Flight permission granted

<>-- Verification Tracking Number Z-667422\876-HH2 --<>

--COMMUNICATIONS HAIL (3.16.71)

That one I was familiar with. I reached over to the communications display and hit the touch-screen. The main monitor cleared and the image of a very normal-looking fellow in what looked like service station coveralls came into view. He was looking away at something over his shoulder as he began saying, "Jarrod. 'Bout time. A whole sed late and--" he turned finally, and his sleepy look slowly melted into one of curiosity and suspicion. "Who're you?" (Well, actually, he said, "*Tú shéi?*" but you get the idea. This guy didn't speak as heavy of a dialect as baldy a few days earlier, but I still had to ask him to re-phrase himself until he

found a level of English and Spanish I could make sense of. For the first time I was glad for those required Spanish semesters as an undergrad.)

"My name's Mitch Creek, and I don't belong here. On this ship I mean." I'd practiced what I was going to say when I finally met someone, but I could already tell it wasn't going to come out right. "I need to speak with someone from uh, the American government, space program, or military, please. If you would." He stared at me through the distance. "If uh, someone from one of those is available, of course."

"Where's Jarrod?" I wondered if this Jarrod knew how much he was missed by people who keep expecting him.

"I don't know a Jarrod. I told some guy named . . . actually, I never got his name, from the *Tsaul Ki*, I believe it was, the same thing. If Jarrod was here, he's not now. I'm here alone, well, sort of, but I have no idea how I got here. I could use some help."

"*Tsaul Ki*? You spoke with Farrius? What'd he say? Where is he?"

"I don't know. Something about telling Jarrod to meet him somewhere in ten seds. I have a feeling Jarrod isn't going to be happy to see this guy, judging by his attitude. I don't know where he is. After giving me the message, he ended the communication. I haven't seen anyone since, in about five days, until you."

"Are you related to Jarrod?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind. Look, we can figure this all out once you get down here." He looked down at something for a moment. "Take pad K-three. I'll meet you there."

"Wait! I don't know how to fly this thing."

"You're serious?"

"Yeah."

He furrowed his eyebrows and gave me an odd look, something between amusement and perplexity. "Okay," he said, looking back down and typing something, "I see you're still in auto-lock; I sent the procedures to your SVN receiver. Just input the remote override authorization, and then once you land, stay inside. I'll be right there."

"K, thanks." I looked down at one of the smaller displays. Some kind of navigation display had been replaced by an authorization request and an input field. "Oh yeah, what's the remote override authorization?"

The guy looked at me. "You're kidding. You have control of the ship and you don't have the codes? Well, you'd better come up with it in a couple minutes or else your trajectory is

going to put you into the sea. After the atmosphere turns you into a streaming ball of fire, of course."

"Is there some kind of override-override code? Some default manufacturer's code or something?"

"Well, Jarrod usually uses r-r-five-o-nine-x-*ma*."

I paused my finger over the nine, "Wait, what was that last one?"

"*Ma*. You know, *ma*. It's the one on the same key as *mi*."

"You're just making those up."

"Look, the *katakana* should be on the same keys as the Anglo. See? You only have a minute or so; hurry up."

I huffed in frustration. "I don't speak, whatever, *katakana*." The Asian characters that shared the keys with letters I recognized were the same kind of hodgepodge I'd found throughout the ship.

He impatiently drew something on a piece of paper and held it in front of the camera. "Looks like this."

I quickly scanned the keyboard and found the character he drew. I continued with the nine, x, ma and submit. The display admonished, "Incorrect code. Enter authorization."

"No good, that didn't work."

"Must have reset them. You get to work guessing, I'll work on trying to crack it from here," and he began typing furiously.

Guessing? Thirty-six numbers and letters, plus capitals, plus symbols, plus a couple dozen or so *katakana*, what chance did I have of guessing? I tried "Jarrod." Nope. Tried in some various capitalization forms. Nope. I tried the name of the ship itself (which I had discovered on that second day), "*Lysander*." Nope. I tried various words and numbers I'd seen the last few days, yet nothing worked.

"How close are you to that code crack? Some rather scary lights and displays have just come up on the console here, and a sound that I think is meant to really get my attention." I wiped my forehead.

Without glancing up, "Hang on, I'm working on a multidimensional algorithm designed for that ship's A.I. matrix. When it's done, it'll only take seconds to find the right code."

"Doesn't seem like a very secure code, then."

"What was that?"

"Oh, nothing. Mumbling"

I looked at the waiting "Enter Authorization" request, orange writing on a black and red display background. Pulsing slightly and urgently. I'd thought of a possibility, though it seemed too absurd to try; but then, what *hadn't* seemed absurd to me the last few days? I pressed the "submit" button on the keyboard without entering in any characters. The display changed to "Authorization approved," and quickly changed to show various navigation and ship status controls working at making serious automatic changes to my course.

The bearded guy paused what he was doing, looked at something, and then looked at me. "Good job. Figure it out?"

"Yeah, I did, I guess. Not sure what it's supposed to mean. Was pretty easy."

"Well, you have an inside scoop. He's usually impossible with his pass-codes."

"Huh," was all I could think to reply.

"Your ship's picked up my reentry and landing commands, so it should be only a few minutes before you're safe and sound. We'll probably lose communication briefly. See you soon." The screen went black, then refilled with little graphics and numbers related to the moon I was approaching. I noticed from the way I could better see the relative change in distance from the clouds and the ground that I was approaching quickly. I had no idea if entry was going to be rough, but I'd seen enough movies to anticipate it would likely be. I searched around the base and back of the bucket seat for straps, and found them. It only took a moment to get the harness strapped around my chest and waist. I felt secure, but also a little trapped.

The ship started to vibrate. The shaking increased and leveled off to a bearable level. Certainly nothing like I expected--I waited for the other steel-toed boot to drop. A thin, luminescent film, like a layer of northern lights, played over the view-ports as I continued to descend to the moon surface. I gripped the chair's armrests and felt my jaw tighten. I wasn't a fan of amusement park rides; I tended to get a little nervous about unexpected dips, swirls, and loops. And those were all professionally built contraptions intended for safe enjoyment. I had no idea what might happen here, and I didn't think there was a regulation committee that oversaw safe planetary re-entries.

It only lasted for a minute before the ship's speed decreased and I was less falling than gliding through the atmosphere. I unclenched my clawed hands and felt a little embarrassed by what ended up being an over-reaction. I was still on a gentle angle with the ground, yet I could now see buildings and structures: a large town clustered on lake edges and large

islands in a central gathering. Both the land and the water were indeed black; it hadn't been a trick of the light due to the distance I was when I first noticed the blending obsidian. I was perhaps a few thousand feet up and had a pretty good idea of scale now. The splatter-shaped lake that included dozens of islands of various sizes, fjords on the mainland, and large tentacles of water spread out in all areas, was more of a sea than a lake. The small city occupied just a tiny speck of a corner of it. The expanse of water took up most of the moon's surface as I got closer to it.

As details and shapes defined, and the relative distances of surface objects got larger, I saw I was headed toward one of the island clusters in particular. Short buildings and other structures scattered around, and cars that, while they didn't look at all familiar, didn't look too unusual, either. I saw trucks, vans, and cars moving around on narrow roads. There were boats in the water--all cargo and haulers by the look of them, no pleasure craft. Most of these vehicles were nondescript and very similar in appearance, but the important part was there were people! People driving cars and piloting boats, and as I glided closer, perhaps just a couple of hundred feet from the surface, I saw people walking in and out and around buildings. As a self-professed socially inept geek, I was never so glad to see people in my life.

There was a small grouping of buildings on the edge of one of the smaller islands that circled around expanses of tarmac. Single-engine-looking planes and a couple of odd-shaped craft sat unmoving in various positions. It reminded me of a small town's local airport. I glided over one of the open areas and continued to descend the last hundred feet or so to touch down softly. It became perceptibly quieter. I hadn't realized that all this time there was some constant low frequency sound, but when it cut out after landing, its lack was noticeable. It made me feel like I had to pop my ears though the pressure never changed.

I noticed a new yellow tint of light in the room. A band of yellow had appeared around the top of the cabin's wall about two inches wide. On the main monitor:

```
--Environmental Assessment complete
<>--N2 79% O2 18% Trace Elements 3%--<>
<>--Atmospheric Pressure 0.91kg/cm2--<>
<>--Ambient Temperature 266.4K--<>
--BioSafety Assessment <>--Level 1.5--<>
--Matching local pressure
```

--Matching gravitation

Now the pressure changed. I had to make some extreme faces and force air into my nasal cavities before my ears finally popped. The yellow band of light turned green, flashed a few times, and stayed on at a low intensity. As quickly as I could I unstrapped myself from the chair and stood up. And sat back down. I was just a bit heavier and a lot more awkward now. I got back up and made my way through the cockpit and into the entry vestibule. I stood in front of the outer door and noticed the panel next to it had a small green light that read "ACCESS READY."

"Well," I said aloud, with butterflies in my stomach and a light head, "here we go," and reached out and touched the OPEN button. The door slid open; the revealed sun (planet) light bathed me in harsh white light and backlit a very large man nearly nose to nose with me. I felt something hard jabbed into my stomach, and the guy pushed me back until he was inside, and closed the door behind him. "Hey!" was all I could manage to say.

It was the bearded guy from earlier, who'd got me landed. "Okay, look at me." I did. "Did you kill Jarrod? Do you know where he is?"

"No!" I felt both indignant and shocked. He was pushing his considerable mass against me, hiding the gun he had in my gut. "No, I don't even know who Jarrod is!"

He studied my face. I could smell some odd citrus odor on his breath. He had flecks of gray in his brown eyes. His staring was making me very uncomfortable. Finally, he said, "What's your name?"

"Mitchel . . . Creek."

I don't know what it was that changed things for him, but he said, "Okay, I believe you." He backed up and quickly pocketed whatever he had in his hand in one of the large pockets that were all over his orange overalls. "We only have a couple minutes before the ISR rep gets here. We need a straight story."

"Huh?"

He examined me for another beat. "You really have no idea?"

I shook my head and shrugged. "Until last week I'd only been in a plane a couple of times. I barely even believed there was life on other planets, much less civilizations of English, and whatever, speaking humans beyond my own solar system! In fact, I'm pretty certain I'm a few hundred years into my future, and have no idea how or why."

He blinked at me. "Oh . . . kaayy. Where are you from?"

"Earth," I chuckled. "Also, until last week, my usual answer to that question had been

'Iowa.'"

He seemed to think for a moment. "Hmm. Earth. Here's the thing--the guy from Inter-System Registry is on his way here. Any ship that comes in from outside the system is investigated by an assessor. He's going to link-up to the ship's manifest, and if we're lucky, he'll be too lazy to ask more than a couple questions. But hopefully not so bored he'll have nothing better to do than be too nosy."

"Uhm, listen, why don't we just tell him? That I found myself on this ship a few days ago, no one else was on here, etcetera? I mean, I do have to talk to *someone* . . . official, about what's going on here. And how the heck I'm getting back."

"Now is not the time. Or place. Obviously you really don't understand what's going on here, because bringing up topics that would prompt an investigation just now would not be wise. Not for Jarrod, or you. Not only would you likely not get sent back to Earth, but you'd probably get brought up on charges."

"Charges? For what?"

"Well, arms trafficking, espionage, conspiring with seditious intent, just to name a few."

I felt dizzy again. I'd had a friend who had a brother whose uncle's friend, or something like that, was picked up by local police in Bolivia for some reason as he was just passing through. He wasn't doing anything illegal, but because of a suspicion and a clerk error, he was in prison for five or six years in horrible conditions before the State Department could affect his release. And that was on my home planet! I was who-the-heck-knows how far away from home without so much as even a passport. I wasn't comfortable about doing anything that had the feeling of deceiving some kind of government official, but I also didn't want to get executed for some huge mix-up. I was going to have to trust someone to lead me around here, get me going in the right direction, and it looked like this guy was going to have to be it.

"Okay. So . . . what do I do?"

He had moved to the entry of the cockpit and was looking out the front windows. "Great. For starters, you're Jarrod. Jarrod Sagson, actually--he may ask. You're carrying a shipment of . . ." he looked down at some hand-held device he was carrying, "medical spore protegens. For the far colonies. Your bill of lading looks in order, so I don't think he's going to doubt it. Unless he's an idiot, I seriously doubt he's going to open up the crates to check. Okay so far?"

I was trying to remember Sagson, spores, far colonies, and don't-open-crates. "Yeah, I

think so. But uh, I think we really don't want him looking in on the crates, more than you know."

He swung around to me, eyebrows raised, "Why, exactly?"

I went over to the cargo bay door I hadn't touched since that first day I saw the body. I opened it and the lights came on, slowly flickering to life. I gestured for the big fellow to go on in. He stepped past me and walked right up to the strange device that came up to our chests. He leaned down, hands on his knees, and peered at the collage of parts, almost as if he could suss out its meaning. "This is fascinating. This, right here," pointing at something blue and striated, "is a prototype phase converter. I read about it on one of the underground tech journals. This thing is capable of multiplying the energy from minute gluon disruption to. . . ."

"Yeah, even better," I pointed to the crate nearby. He looked up at me, stood, and followed my gaze.

Keeping an eye on me, he walked over to it. "What's in there?"

"I'll spare you the shock *I* had. It's a body." His eyes widened, and his face began to contort. "Hold on, I had nothing to do with it! It was in there when I woke up on this ship. And I'm pretty sure it's not Jarrod. I think."

He reached down and pulled open the crate. I kept in a position that allowed me to avoid being able to see inside. The guy stood there for a moment then leaned inside and worked around at something.

I had stayed back at the bay door, but the smell came at me as bad as I could have imagined. I flew to the main ship's door and opened it, letting back in the glaring light, and the fresh air. I leaned against the edge and took in deep breaths.

The sound of scraping caught my attention. I looked back in the cargo bay and saw the guy moving crates around. He'd rotated the one with the body around so the door wasn't visible and was pushing another in front of it. I went back in and helped him move a couple more of the beaten up boxes. He then went over to the device and tried to pull it toward the back of the bay. It didn't budge. He tried to push it while I pulled, and there was no give. "We don't have time for this," he huffed, and started opening various crates until he found a large empty one. "Help me lift this." We lifted the crate up and over the device, then moved a couple of crates next to it so the open door of the one over the contraption couldn't be seen.

He then moved faster than I have thought a person with his girth could to a computer

console in the wall. He pushed a few graphics on the screen and I felt air rushing through the bay. "That can't get rid of it, but it might make the smell less noticeable."

He took a breath while looking around the room, examining it for any visible incriminating signs, and nodded. He looked at me then offered his hand. "I'm Frankletti." I took his sizable fist. "When we get a moment, after he's gone, we can discuss what to do about getting you out of all this. But, for now, we need to get past this roadblock."

He squinted his eyes at me and asked, "Sure you and Jarrod aren't related?"

I sighed. "Like I said, I don't even know him."

"Oh, that reminds me, speak as little as possible. You sound like either an ancient past recreationist or a hick who'd just walked out of the mines of one of the Proxi-Cent reservations." I just gaped at him half-comprehendingly, but in retrospect, I figure that's about what he said.

Just then, a voice called up from outside the main door, "Hello?"

Frankletti said, "Okay, let's do this." He winked at me. "Good luck." The fact that needed to be said made me feel more uncomfortable.

I bounded to the door and met a short, middle-aged man wearing a rumpled shirt, slacks, and something like a Mississippi string tie. Around his neck was a long lanyard with an ID badge at the end showing the same tired face that sat atop a very similar-looking rumpled shirt. "Officer Rice, ISR. And you're . . . ?"

Jumping right in with nervous energy I said, "Jarrod," and nearly forgot the last name. I was about to try to say it but knew almost instinctively, in that fraction of a second that I'd delayed in mentioning it, it would look odd if I added it, so I went with "Captain." And a wan smile. Rice must not have detected anything unusual in my response as he was looking at his handheld as he walked into the ship. I looked over at Frankletti, and he raised an eyebrow at me.

"What's your cargo? Where's it stored?" Rice continued.

I turned back to him and said "Spores. Er, medical spores meant for the far colonies, right in here," I said, indicating the open door to the hold. It occurred to me just then that Frankletti had said something about arms trafficking. Aside from one body and one strange device that could have been a weapon, or a food processor, I really had no idea what was actually in those boxes. They really could be weapons for all I knew. Officer Rice was scribbling something on his handheld's display, and then looked up at Frankletti.

"Who're you?"

"Max Frankletti. Plat-sys sub-manager. I came on board to check a possible xenon gas leak initial scans picked up." Rice gave him a furrowed eyebrow look. Frankletti continued, seeming to intuit his question, "We met a couple of weeks ago at the comptroller's office. I was filing a claim for equipment reimbursement. You were waiting in the one comfy chair. We briefly spoke about the fluoro-blasts on Cygnus-2. Stunning display and all."

"Oh that's right. I thought you looked familiar. I just transferred here last Cycle and haven't gotten used to all the center's employees."

"Well, no problem. You all work in the complex mainly, and I stick to the platforms." Frankletti smiled charmingly. While I was actually a little miffed at being left out, and I wanted to get this over with quickly, I figured the banter was fine. All the better to get Officer Rice to not think anything suspicious.

Rice stepped into the cargo hold, "Well, let's get this over with, then. By the way, *is* there a gas leak?" He looked to Frankletti and me alternately.

Frankletti answered, "Oh, no. It must have been a glitch in the scan." In the vernacular, he added, "Careful's yesterday's wish, *acuerdo?*" Which I interpret to mean: "Never can be too careful, am I right?"

"No, guess not." He sniffed the air, curling his lip. "What's that smell then?"

Frankletti stepped forward, "That's that refrigerant coil you'd mentioned, Jarrod?"

"Oh, right," I said, taking the hint. "Yeah, one of my food cooling storage coils went out on the trip. A whole day's worth of food, bad. Been pretty dodgy there for a while, thought I'd have to eat the spores," I chuckled. Frankletti closed his eyes and lowered his head.

Rice cocked his head at me, then shrugged and blew air out his nose a couple of times in annoyance and continued over to one of the crates. Frankletti exhaled and mouthed "Stoppit" at me. Rice lifted his handheld up to the sticker on one of the crates, and a thin red light like a grocery checkout scanner's reflected off the solid black strip on the crate. The handheld beeped, and Rice read the results. "Twenty crates?"

"Yeah, twenty," I said with certainty. Rice started counting himself, pointing at each one with his handheld's stylus as he went. I leaned against the doorway and tried to look casual while he counted. I looked back at Frankletti and he shrugged noncommittally. So far so good, I guess.

After he finished counting, he wrote something on his handheld's display and then stopped to read something. After a moment, he started looking around the hold, at the walls, the ceiling, the large hatch in the floor. I kept my eye on the area of the floor where I

had first noticed the drops of blood. It had been days ago so I wasn't exactly sure where the visible pattern was, and I was pretty sure the crates we had moved around now covered it, but at any moment I expected him to lean over in that area like I did.

Finally, he turned to me. "Is this hold certified to transport potentially dangerous bio-material?"

I ignored my prickling scalp and continued to lean casually on the wall and gave a calm look around. He'd said that almost entirely in plain English, so I risked a reply, "Yeah. It was uh, retrofitted not too long ago." I hoped the addition of some information would sound more credible, but short enough that my ign'ant "hick" English wouldn't be too obvious. (I had as much of an idea if the hold was certified as I did that I wouldn't wake up tomorrow on some strange spacecraft in some unknown part of space.) I repressed the urge to glance at Frankletti. I also had considered throwing a little Spanish in, but I figured my ridiculous English would be better than partial and possibly incorrect use of the lingua franca. I hadn't yet figured out how Spanish had taken over many of the function words while many Asian languages infused the verbs and nouns and many short phrases. Sounding archaic was probably better than ending up sounding as if I was making up a dialect.

"You have the ship's dry dock log?" he asked.

I could only shrug and nod as if saying "Well yeah, of course," because I just didn't trust myself to actually speak anymore.

Officer Rice looked at the hold's walls again and said, "Well, that's alright. Everything looks in order." I was incredibly relieved to hear that; I didn't think my body could handle another adrenaline dump and remain standing still. "How long will you be staying on Gadreus?"

"Oh," I glanced over at Frankletti; he remained stoic. "A couple of days only. Need to resupply, uh, stretch my legs, you know." I tried Frankletti's charming smile. I don't think it worked as well on me, but it seemed to satisfy Rice.

"Alright." Rice started for the main door. "Be sure to check in with the B-of-T office for your permit if you plan on leaving the pad complex. Welcome to Gadreus; enjoy your stay." And, like that, he disappeared into the light outside.

"Well, honestly, that went a hell of a lot better than I could have expected," Frankletti said. "So," he said, turning back to me as he closed the cargo bay door behind us, "we have some work ahead of us." He went forward into the cockpit. I looked out the entry door, blinking at the bright light. I realized it wasn't all that bright out there, not compared to a

sunny Earth day. The light was actually about the same as a cloudy day and was coming from the planet that dominated a quarter of the sky. I had no idea if it was generating the light or reflecting it from a sun, but it was much brighter than the very dim, perhaps cozy, light of the inside of this ship.

As my eyes adjusted, I looked at the low buildings that surrounded our landing pad and the handful of other landing pads that formed a giant honeycomb shape on the ground. There were trucks and carts and four-wheelers speeding around from place to place. People in coveralls, some with hard hats, here and there loading and unloading and doing unknown things underneath ships. Other people in various dress doing their own maintenance on ships or speaking in animated gestures to people in coveralls. I noticed a few people in dark uniforms carrying some kind of gun on a strap strolling around or standing by a door.

A static-y, roaring sound above me caught my attention, and I watched as another ship, a couple of pads away, descended from the sky to land gently on the colorfully marked pad. Small jets of steam or gas exploded out of holes along the bottom. A truck with a cargo bed trailing behind it drove up to the newly arrived ship.

"Hey, Jarr--, I mean Mitchel, come in here," Frankletti called from the cockpit.

"Mitch," I said joining him.

"The ship's logs are pretty *completa baka*."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, here, look at this."

I leaned over to the screen he'd indicated. It was some kind of three-dimensional display of squares with text in grids with colored cells layered on top of each other with various transparencies. "That's very nice, but I have no idea what I'm looking at."

"See," he said, pointing to one of the layers, "The ship left Perth-4, a colony about four systems away from here, a few standard weeks ago. It took a twenty-sed trip even farther from the civ-core to some place marked in the log only by its galactic coordinates, then left the same day. It travels for about two days, and then the next entry is for about five days ago, at a position impossibly farther away than it should have been able to travel in that time."

"That's when I awoke in the cargo hold."

"Well, what happened?" Frankletti leaned back in the chair with the sound of creaking leather. "According to the logs, the *Lysander* took what should have been a four week trip in a couple of days. There's about twenty or thirty missing days in the log. Nothing in the

captain's log, nothing in the systems' logs. There should be thirty days of hundreds, if not thousands, of entries indicating fuel levels and power levels and atmosphere status checks and sensor checks and about a hundred other automatic events that get logged--and they're not here."

"Were they erased?"

"That's just it, I don't think so. See, look at this," he pointed to a monitor filled with numbers and letters in regular-spaced intervals.

"Again, no idea what that is."

He looked at me a little shocked. "That's standard Uni-SLOL. Even kids not forced to attend CASS regulated schools learn what this is."

"Hello, remember, Earthling, hundreds of years in the future, don't belong here."

He sighed. "Ah yeah, okay, this is the core data collection for the logs. According to the galactic standard timestamps, the missing days don't even exist. It's like one minute the ship is one place, then a day or two of missing data, and then the timestamps come back in sync but for a position that should be weeks away, not a couple of days. See this section here shows the presence of data for that period. Data was collected, logged, but doesn't appear to exist."

"What's that mean?"

"It means, I need to analyze the data to see what this information is. It could be encrypted, it could be misformatted, it could just be garbage. But it whatever it is, it can provide us with an idea of what happened."

I looked at all the characters on the screen, seeing if I could make some sense out of it. It was completely random gibberish to me. "What about the guy back in cargo? How can we find out who he is?"

"His name's Jon Ronald," Frankletti said distractedly as he typed furiously.

"What? How do you know?"

"Name badge." He reached into one of his large pockets and drew out a plastic card with a small picture of the living Jon Ronald and the name "Ronald, Jon H." along with a thin black stripe, the title "Research Technician - Level 6," and a symbol that looked like three intertwined triangles in cobalt blue. "That was on him. I didn't find a wallet or anything."

"Great! Maybe we can search some . . . what do you have? I mean, does the Internet still exist? Some kind of network of interconnected computer systems providing unlimited data access?"

He paused to look at me curiously, "Yeah, something like that. It's called, 'The Net,'" he said ominously, then cracked a smile and chuckled. He turned back to resume typing. "Actually, the local systems are called 'Nets'; the connected Nets are called 'Pansys.' But, anyway, we can't just go asking about a Jon Ronald. The Net is generally monitored. And if he's been reported missing or connected to a crime, and since he doesn't look like some anonymous *pulube*, he probably has been and we go making information requests about him, it could get us involved in uncomfortable ways."

I plopped back against the doorframe of the cockpit. "Great. So what do we do? He obviously has answers. Well, okay not he himself, being dead and all. But, maybe, I don't know, where he worked, last place he was seen, all that detective stuff."

"In fact, speaking of which," I continued, "why *not* go to the police or law or whatever about this?" I stood up next to Frankletti and made sure I had his attention. "I haven't done anything wrong. I didn't kill anyone, steal anything. I'm caught up in something weird and not my doing. The . . . law, government, whatever, will have the resources to figure this out and send me home."

Frankletti slowly turned and penetrated his stare through my eyes, making sure *he* had *my* attention, "Are you absolutely certain about that? Absolutely sure? You have no idea what happened, so you say?"

I nodded weakly. "In fact, I can't quite remember very well what the last thing I do remember is, before the waking up here part. It's kind of a fog."

"Then you can't be certain that you *didn't* have anything to do with killing that guy, or making Jarrod missing, or whatever else illegal is wrapped up in this, can you?" I shook my head. "And even if you are one hundred percent guiltless, you don't know what the officials are like. At best, you'll be arrested just for being in a suspicious circumstance, and the bureaucracy will probably keep you in a cell until there's some agreement about what they should do with you--which may never happen. Even if the right people hear about your story, they probably won't be able to get past the system to convince the CASS that you're not either a criminal or insane, and nothing will happen to explain your circumstances or get you home." I was deflated. I leaned back against the wall with my arms crossed, looking at the floor. He continued, "And to be honest, I'm not convinced you're *not* a criminal and/or insane, but I'm giving you a bigger chance than the officials ever will."

"Alright. I get it. *Entiendo. Verstanden. Je freakin' comprehends.* So what do I do?"

"Well, I need to send this data to my system in the office to better work on it. I'll get a

couple of guys to clean out the cargo bay. In the meantime, you browse the gift shop. Maybe you can find a nice mug to take home with you," he said, smiling. I deigned a courtesy smile.

Frankletti wrapped up some business at the keyboard, got up, then led me out. "Jarrod and I go way back. I want to know what happened to him, and his ship, almost as bad as you'd like to go home." We started down the short set of stairs to the tarmac. The smell of fresh air mixed with oil and a surprising hint of coriander, of all things, was a nice change from the stuffy ship. "I've ways of asking questions, getting information, that doesn't risk drawing unwanted attention. Well, a lot *less* risk."

I turned around to look at the ship I'd been inside of for five days. It wasn't much: a few odd shapes with odd angles and juttings somehow stuck together to form something that looked a lot like a foil-wrapped semi truck. Nevertheless, I had gotten so used to being inside of it, imprisoned more or less, that the welcome taste of being outside made me surprisingly uneasy. It was a starkly fresh reminder that I'd never been here before, didn't know where I was, and had no idea how to get home. I half considered running back inside the ship and grabbing Mom's flashlight.

We went into one of the rough, weather-beaten buildings and I could smell ozone and electricity. It was also much warmer than outside, which had felt like a cool autumn day. We went past a desk where a woman wearing her blond hair in a ponytail appeared to be helping someone open a crashed program. I guess some things never change. Frankletti led me down a hallway painted gray-green, past people with whom he'd exchange a nod and quick greeting, through a door and down a flight of stairs. The last door had "Systems Control – Area K" stenciled on it, along with what was probably the same thing in Asian characters.

"Say," I asked Frankletti, "on the ship and around here, that *katakana* you mentioned? It's not Japanese, is it? I mean, I don't know any Asian languages, but I'm sure I've seen characters from like Korean, and I think Hindi and Filipino. Tagalog, or something like that."

"I have no idea what you just said," he replied as he opened the door and led me into a large dark room divided into many cubicles and partial offices.

"The stuff that's not English. What language is that?"

"It's called 'Asian.'"

I looked around at the various people, many wearing earpieces or headsets, typing at computers and gesturing on holographic displays. Frankletti appeared to be leading me to a

row of doors at the back of the room.

"What I'm saying is it looks like a mixture of various Asian languages."

"No, it's simply called 'Asian.' I guess most people you'll meet talk like Rice and I do, but some people speak in all Asian."

"Actually, that Farrius guy spoke a lot more thickly than you do."

"Yeah, I suppose it's different depending on what systems you're from and how much you travel. Some colonies and settlements speak languages no one anywhere else knows. Usually some otherwise dead language from the time of Earth."

Oblivious to the implied meaning of what he'd said, I asked, "I guess I can see Spanish and English merging, but how can several such diverse languages become one?"

Frankletti shrugged, "Who knows. Not my thing."

He opened the door labeled "M. Frankletti – Platform Systems Sub-Manager." He said, "Alright, here we are." Then said, "Light," and the room went from pitch black to slightly above regular black. He sat at a semi-circular desk with a couple of monitors and a bank of small screens. He began typing and gesturing away.

"You guys like it pretty dark down here, huh?"

"Hm-hm."

I eased myself on the old pleather couch against one wall. "So, I was just thinking: You'd mentioned 'arms trafficking' earlier. Seemed like a rather specific example of something I could get in trouble for."

Frankletti looked at me sidelong. "Hey, this might take a while. Actually, it might take all day, or two, depending on whether it's just garbage data or encrypted. Why don't you get some real food, look around a bit."

I sat up straight, "Is that safe? I mean, you convinced me about the danger of getting noticed by the . . . officials; should I just be walking around here?"

"Safest thing. You're just in an industrial supply hub, people all over minding their business, waiting for loads. No one's going to pay you any attention. Wear this badge and don't make any trouble, and you won't see any trouble." I took the plastic badge he'd retrieved from a desk drawer. It said "Class A Transient Permit."

"Uhm, where can I go around here?"

"Pretty much any place that doesn't say 'Do not enter.'"

"Like this room?"

"It's keyed to let you in here, of course."

"Of course." I examined it for some kind of bar strip or chip or anything that indicated it somehow could control where I was let in. "Oh, I don't have any money," I realized. "I mean, I do, but, not that I think would be good here."

He sighed and began typing something. Presently a small sheet of paper whispered out from a machine in the corner. "Take that up to the Receiving Office. First door past where we came in. They'll issue you a credstick with the refunded deposit for the equipment you just returned."

"But I didn't return any equipment."

"They don't know that," he smiled. "Then ask how to get to the caf' from there. Just come on back down here once you get bored."

I stood up and took the paper from the printer. It looked like an excellent example of a Standard Form. "Alright, back in a while, I guess."

"Mm-hm."

CHAPTER FOUR

I made my way back up to the first level and found the right office. I hesitated at the door, sure that a couple people who passed me looked back, curious about the guy standing in front of a closed door. I knew in my gut that I'd go in there, a question would be asked, and I'd answer wrong, and the Jig would be Up.

Instead, I went in and handed the guy behind the desk the form. He asked me to sign a slate that was nothing more than a piece of clear plastic with a rendering of a form (I remembered just in time to sign Jarrod's name instead of my own), and I was handed back a small square of plastic. He gave me directions to the café and I was out of there in under three minutes.

I found the café in a connected building that you could get to either from the outside pad or a corridor a short way from the Receiving Office. It was larger than I expected, probably servicing several pad terminals. It had floor-to-ceiling windows along one wall, an automat-like region along most of another wall, and a small area of fresh food at the end. It smelled of mostly fried chicken with an undercurrent of something like cabbage, or was it Brussels sprouts? And cumin. The lighting for the dining area came mostly from the windows. There were about twenty or thirty people in there in various dress--a lot of overalls, flight-suits, and work clothes. A lot of casual clothes that looked just like what I'd expect at what was the equivalent of nearly every large interstate truck stop. Trousers, jeans, t-shirts bearing various unfamiliar designs or slogans, hats that were a lot like ball caps and a couple that looked like Greek fishermen's caps. There were a few people in nicer looking clothes, more suited for an office environment, seated at a couple of tables.

I grabbed a tray and some utensils and passed a couple of people browsing the automat on my way to the mini-buffet. A man dressed in kitchen whites was busy stirring a fresh batch of some pasta into a large bowl of green-tinted pasta salad. The guy looked up at me, nodded, and said, "*Ganda su tali*, hey?" Which, literally meant, "Can I dirty your dish?" But, at that point, all I heard was meaningless syllables. I gave what was becoming my standard

stunned look and said, "I'm sorry, I don't understand."

In a thick accent, he replied, "Oh, you're a light year or two from home, aren't ya?"

"You've no idea."

"I haven't heard that thick a' old tongue since I took a stay at Proxima C'. That where you from?"

I shrugged. "Near there. So, *you* speak . . . English . . . fluently."

"Well, it's good for me to exercise the old Earth-speak, you know. It's not like it's a dead language or anything! I mean, sure, some of your anti-social runners and haulers will tell ya Earth-speak is dead, or at least just for rock-rooted scum in the backwood worlds--but you'll never find a trader or pirate worth their salt who doesn't speak it fluently, know what I'm talkin' about?" He smiled and adjusted his cap. "So, I was sayin', what can I getchya?"

"Oh. Just looking for the moment." I scanned the display of dishes and found many recognizable ingredients. Breaded chicken pieces, (and come to find out, it actually was a species of chicken), a few pasta salads with different combinations of vegetable pieces, a steaming tray of meatballs swimming in a gravy, a dish that looked just like green beans and bacon pieces (although I found out later that it contained neither), and a few dishes that were quite unusual and seemed to have a preponderance of creamy paste and tofu chunks.

"You know, that chicken looks pretty good. I haven't had any in a long time." The sense recall of hot chicken grease and crunchy breading, the smell of it, made my saliva glands ache from over production. "I've been eating cereal and pastes and cardboard for the last week; all of this looks so good."

"Yeah, I hear ya. I started out on a CASS transport, never saw planet-side for months, but we got real food a couple times a week. Then I worked on this dark hauler for a few years; saw more barren rocks than I could count, and went months between meals that didn't smell like molten carbon-pulp. I tell you what, that's a smell that never gets out of your skin, know what I'm talkin' about?"

"Oh, yeah, absolutely." Of course, I had no idea what he was talking about, then. I would eventually.

"So," I continued salivating, the smell, pungent though it was, making my stomach rumble so that the table full of mechanics at the far end had to have heard it, "gimmie a couple pieces of the chicken, a few of the meatballs, a couple scoops of . . . that, and . . .

that.”

“Hey, payday, huh? Yeah, real meat and girls, usually in that order, when a guy from off-world gets a cred’fill. Say, if you want to know a good joint, check out Moonlights about five k’s down 2nd Street. They got this one dancer, Jasiqua . . . man oh man.”

I looked up from the fragrant gravy soaked meatballs he’d just placed on my tray. “Uh, yeah, sounds great, but, not here long. You know. Gotta get right back.” I tried to smile.

“Ah, I hear yeah. You can be on a run that takes a whole month, but the corp won’t let a guy have an hour’s break.”

“Yeah, well, ya know. So, thanks,” I gestured with the tray as I moved to take my leave.

“Hey, have a good run, guy!”

“Yeah, you t-- heh, you know what I mean.” I walked away from the counter, shaking my head at my social gaffe, and moved toward the checkout island. The whole place reminded me so much of a hospital cafeteria, I had almost forgotten exactly where I was. A quick look out the wall-length windows revealed a band of pale blue sky above the buildings, and the faded image of a color banded alien world hanging above us. I remembered quickly.

A youngish kid, maybe early twenties, late teens, was manning the register. He was ringing up someone else who had gotten a couple of items from the fresh food bar. I was able to see on the display “32 CR” before the customer waved a credit stick, similar to my own, across a pad to pay the balance. When I got there, the kid dutifully tallied the items on my tray, “Two chicken pieces, meatballs, fugu salad, veggie medley,” and hit the total button: 68 CR.

I doubted a meal could possibly suck my credstick dry (but I was a little nervous after what the cook back there had said about it must have been payday), so I asked, “Is that a lot, really?”

“Huh?” The kid looked unused to being noticed and acknowledged by customers.

“That amount. I’m new to this . . . region, and really don’t know the exchange rates.” I thought that’d be a pretty safe non-lie.

“Exchange rates? You’re paying with a credstick, right? We don’t accept local currencies.”

I’d gotten the stick out by then and waved it where the person before me did. Thankfully a little green light indicated all was good, and the display changed from “Payment Pending” to “Thank you!” I stammered, “Yeah, sorry. A little confused. No, I was

just wondering if sixty-eight credits is a lot for this food?"

"Hey, I don't set the prices, my manager does. It's what it is here. It's probably a lot less elsewhere; we have to ship most of our fresh stuff in."

I picked up the tray and headed out to the tables. "No, it's okay. I was just curious. Thanks."

"Oh, hey, if you want something to drink, use bay fourteen. Fifteen's kinda off and on."

"Great. Thanks again." I'd just realized I hadn't gotten anything to drink and looked around. I felt a little self-conscious, standing there, like I was back in school and looking for a place to sit that wasn't either going to offend one group by my nearness, or associate myself with another group I didn't want to be associated with, and so I'd just stand there while critical eyes looked me over. Fortunately, I was just being paranoid. No one in the cafeteria was paying me any attention. The two groups of office workers were discussing something in hushed tones, some of the guys who reminded me of truckers were laughing at something one of them had said, the people sitting by themselves were mainly looking at their meals.

I sat my tray of tantalizingly fragrant food down at a smaller table and looked back at the automat wall. The last couple of sections were drinks. I walked up to them and waited for a woman in a light gray dress suit to make her selection. It gave me a chance to look over the couple dozen palm sized buttons with names and brands to choose from. I didn't recognize any of them, although their logos looked strange and familiar at the same time. Like companies from my time that had simply evolved and mutated into new marketing images. Some of the selections were just a word or two in striking colors, but there were a few buttons that were holograms, 3-dimensional images, and animations. I found one that said in a type smaller than the brand name "Sparkling orange soda." A description so un-alien and normal it had to be good.

I inserted my credstick in the slot and hit the button. Nothing happened. I was certain that's what the woman before me had done--simply insert credstick and push selection. Nothing. I looked around the credstick slot for any kind of "exact coins only" kind of display, and found a label with the number 15 on it. I sighed and moved down to the next bay of beverages and looked for the orange soda on that machine.

Not finding it, I decided on another item and was about to inset the credstick when I heard someone behind me say, "Mister Sagson? Jarrod Sagson?"

I turned and faced two men and a woman dressed in uniforms like that I saw earlier on

the pad. These three had pistols on their belts and not the submachine gun looking things the ones outside were carrying. They had very serious expressions.

I hesitated for a minute. These were the law in these parts, and I've always believed you never lied to the police. Ever. They would find out, if they didn't already know, and everything would get much worse for you. The results could be even worse, here, where there might *not* be such things as Miranda Rights. Or, perhaps it was not so bad in that these might just be security guards and have no real and lasting power. They didn't have sleeve patches, though the guns didn't ease my mind any. I decided to ride the fence. "Why?" I replied.

"Mister Sagson, you're to come with us, please." The "please" didn't sound sincere. "We have some questions for you."

"Has something happened? Officer?"

The apparent leader of the trio grabbed my upper arm, not gently, and urged me toward the doorway. "Don't make this difficult."

"But, my food!" I had no idea what else to say. I didn't know what was going on, but I did know that I paid 68 credits for the first real meal I could've had in a week, and there it was, going to go to waste. The other patrons who hadn't noticed me earlier certainly did then.

"Okay, okay, I'm going. Easy." I stumbled forward and started for the double doors leading back out to the corridor.

CHAPTER FIVE

We walked through hallways and through a couple of doors and around a few corners, one of the officers in front and the other two behind. Everyone we passed would step aside, sometimes pretending not to notice us, sometimes stopping to watch us pass.

My surprise eased into a sickening fear. I'd never been arrested before, or even "politely" asked to answer some questions by any police. Once in college I attended an impromptu party in the woods just outside of the city. Some cops came by and asked the group of us some questions, what we were doing, how long we were planning on being there, were there any minors among us, and the like. Even at the time, I was certain that our complete and utter silence and funereal appearance, aside from the two guys who were doing all the answering for us, was extremely suspicious. However, the cops must have had better things to do because they just told us to be careful and went along their merry.

This was quite a bit different. My mind was racing, on only a couple of pistons, trying to think of how much I should tell them. Should I tell them everything? Nothing? How much did they know? Was Frankletti somehow involved? Did he turn me in? Was there something to turn me in *about*? Was he caught, too? Was there something he was worthy of catching for? I kept trying to come up with ways to answer certain questions and constantly stopping myself with the advice: *just see what happens*.

We came to another attached building (it appeared as though the entire complex was made out of attached buildings, and not just one giant building like your standard airport terminal, or dozens of unconnected buildings like a sea port), with the sign over the antecorridor reading "Bureau of Transportation – Management Enforcement Division," and eventually to a door marked "Holding Room B."

Evidently, holding rooms across the universe must all look the same, and they all look like the holding room from your average basic-cable cop drama. One of them told me to sit down and wait. I did. And I did some more. I kept thinking of that chicken I was missing, punctuated by thoughts of prison rape.

Eventually, the door opened and in walked a middle-aged man in a slightly better-looking version of the same uniform as the previous three. He sat in the chair opposite me and pressed a couple of buttons on a small set of controls at the table's edge. "This is Captain Escatado comma Jonah of the M.E. Division of the Bureau of Transportation. It is . . . fourteen fifty-two local time, zero three zero three eff tee, on the third of Tenthmonth, one one two local, twenty-three sixty-two dash zero two dash sixteen CASS Standard. This begins the interrogation.

"Please state your name."

"What? Sorry, I wasn't listening. I mean, I'm sorry. What?" So many numbers, I kept trying to replay the sentence in my head, trying to suss out the individual parts. Local, standard, CASS. The cook earlier said something about CASS.

"What is your name. For the recording." It didn't sound like a question.

"Oh. Am I under arrest?"

"You are being confined for questioning." Captain Escatado casually sat back and crossed his arms. He was being the patient officer who wasn't going to say more than he had to.

I leaned forward, "What did I do? What am I being confined *for*?"

"Let's get the formalities out of the way, get the tedious stuff done, what do you say? Then we can have a nice conversation, and I can answer your questions. Just state your name."

"There are some who call me Jarrod."

"Jarrod what."

"Jarrod Sagson."

The captain sighed, "And is that what you call yourself?"

I had no idea how far I was ready to play this game, nor how much further it *could* be played. "On occasion." All I knew was when I screwed myself into this terrible situation, getting worse by the minute, I could give myself points for not lying. If that counted for anything.

"Okay, so friendly isn't going to be the option, eh?" The captain leaned forward to match me. "Your ship has been impounded. It's secured, and I have officers combing every inch of it. And you know what they have found so far?"

I didn't move a muscle; my pounding heart may have made it appear as though I did. I could feel my head pulse and blood rush through my ears. He stared me down for seconds,

maybe a minute. I didn't say a word. I didn't think I could speak at that moment if I wanted to. So soon. Everything was boiling over so soon. Five days of interminable purgatory, and then within a couple of hours everything was blowing up.

Maybe this was it. This was what had to happen. There was no need to deceive; I hadn't done anything wrong. And I was certain, as always, the government would have the resources to make things right. Right? "My name isn't Jarrod. It's Mitchel Creek. And I had nothing to do with that dead guy, I swear!"

The captain sat back in the chair looking pleased. "There, you see? A conversation." He pulled out a cigarette and offered me one from the foil-looking pack. Of all the things I'd seen so far, that may have been the most unexpected. Being an ardent non-smoker, I had been certain that one day cigarettes would be eradicated. Within my own lifetime perhaps. Here they were, centuries later, still hanging on. Tenacious little buggers. I shook my head.

"So, now." The cigarette seemed to self-light as he initially drew in on it. I had to admit, that was somewhat clever. "The image analyzers didn't pick up on you right off, since you'd changed your face, obviously. And a good job, too--the analyzers didn't pick up on any remnants from the alterations. So, Jarrod, what brings you to Gadreus?"

"You're not listening to me. My name is Mitchel Creek. I found myself on that ship five days ago, with a dead body, and no idea how--"

The captain interrupted, "But what I don't understand is why you were so careless, when surely you must know you're a wanted man."

"I'm from the past, dammit!"

"What did you say?" I seemed to finally get his attention.

We were then both interrupted by a loud, oscillating siren and the flash of a strobe light hidden somewhere in the ceiling tiles. "What the holy--" the captain began, looking up and around.

"Your attention please," came a pleasant and calm female voice from some speaker that also couldn't be seen, "please make your way calmly and quickly to the nearest building exit. Illuminated arrows should be visible along the floor directing you to the nearest exits. A fire has been detected inside the building. This is not a drill. . . ." She began to repeat the recorded message.

"Mother of--" the captain stood up, torn between following this new line of conversation that suddenly piqued his interest, and checking on this alert. He started for the door with a window of frosted glass. "Wait right here."

"If there's a fire, shouldn't I--"

"I said wait here. If there's a fire, you'll be escorted out."

I took long, deep breaths, trying to detect any trace of smoke. Was that smoke? Or the lingering cigarette.

I twisted around in my seat to get a look out the open door. The captain was in the corridor talking to someone. I saw his hand still on the door, holding it open, and his and someone else's silhouettes through the frosted glass. The recorded announcement recommended avoiding elevators. No reference to avoiding being held by the police during a fire. They should really look into that.

Finally, Captain Escatado leaned back in the room, "You, these officers will take you outside the building. Don't make things worse by giving them any trouble, understood?"

"Aye, aye, Cap'n."

He sneered and disappeared down the hall as the door opened and two uniformed officers I hadn't seen on my way here stepped inside. "C'mon, let's go. Think we can do this without using cuffs on you?"

"Yeah, yeah, no trouble. No problem." I got up and started out the door. The officers got in front and behind me.

"So," I said casually, "what's the hubbub? Something blow up? We in any danger?"

"I'm sure everything's fine. Just keep moving. Quickly now."

We started a brisk walk down corridors different than the ones that brought me there. We passed a few people on their brisk way out, but no one paid us any attention. Finally, we came to a maintenance door with a security pad. One of the officers punched in a code on the keypad, and the door unlocked with a serious click.

"Uhm, the floor arrows are pointing that way." They ignored me and escorted me past the door. I caught the one behind me making a furtive look up and down the hallway we exited before closing the door behind us. A long row of thin, rectangular lights, partially hidden behind pipes and wire conduits as wide as my leg, lit the length of the passage. "I don't mean any disrespect, officers, but . . . this seems a little odd."

"Not yet," one of the officers cautioned in a hushed tone. I was having doubts about the intentions of these police officers.

They led me on down the hallway to a descending vertical ladder off to one side. One of the officers climbed down, then the other urged me to follow. I gave him a quizzical look, and he responded, "Go on--we only have a few minutes." Continuing to look at him, I

climbed down the ladder. It went down a tube maybe twenty or thirty feet, then opened into a much larger passageway. It was a maybe fifty-foot tall semi-circle, and on the ground below the ladder was a motorized cart with someone in an orange jumpsuit behind the wheel. "Hurry up! Let's go!" he called out to us.

We finished the descent and barely sat down before the cart went from zero to sixty in the time it took me to land on my butt in the seat. We practically flew through the cavernous passage, banks of fluorescent lights streaking past. I looked over at the officers: one had taken his cap off and the other was holding his on his head. He caught me looking at him, and nodded at me. Confused only began to describe how I felt.

After maybe a minute or two, we entered the rear of a hangar. Larger, more lights, the smell of grease and burning wires . . . and something like burnt Brussels sprouts, again.. There were about three or four ships, similar in size or a little larger than the one I came in, in various stages of being dismantled throughout the hangar. Men and women in jumpsuits were here and there doing various things involving lifting something, drilling something, ratcheting something, or filling the air around them with sparks. They didn't pay us any attention as we barreled past and around them.

We came to a ship about two or three times larger than the *Lysander* and it appeared to be the only one put together. I saw someone standing at an open door at the rear of the ship, waving at us. It was Frankletti. We came to an abrupt and squealing stop at the end of the metal gangway leading up into the ship and the two police officers hopped out and trotted into the waiting ship. Frankletti called to me, "Hey, are you coming or staying? Prison, laboratory, padded room--they're all fine alternatives to getting on this ship, now."

I vaulted over the side of the cart and looked down the way we came. Sparks, smoke, the sound of heavy equipment. Through it all I expected to see a cadre of police or soldiers speeding along to catch up with us, but there was nothing like that. I turned and ran up the ramp, the sound of my heavy steps banging against the metal and echoing above the din in the hangar. I ran past Frankletti, who yelled something to the cart driver, and then closed the ship's door, leaving us in a dark alcove illuminated by various flashing colors from controls on the wall beside us.

"Okay, just what in the world--" I started, but he pushed past me and pressed one of the buttons, creating a weird underglow on our faces.

"We're on. Launch now." he commanded someone on an intercom and then ambled deeper into the ship through tight and narrow passages. I stayed close behind him, amazed

at how dexterous and light on his feet a man of his size could be. We came to a bare metal door that slid aside at the press of a button and opened into a room that looked a lot like the cockpit on the *Lysander*--if it were five times larger and all the walls, floor, and ceiling were stripped of covering to expose metal struts and wiring. One of my police officers sat in one of the three chairs situated in front of a massive console.

"So let me guess, he's not a cop," I said, indicating the uniformed guy who was now engaged in reading off numbers and statuses while pushing buttons.

"No, he is," Frankletti corrected. "He just happens to be my brother."

The officer paused long enough to nod at me and say, "Officer Joseph Frankletti, second class, at your service. But just call me 'Joseph.' This ship's only big enough for one 'Frankletti' on board." He winked at his brother and went back to work. A slight hum and vibration became more pronounced. I heard the hiss of a release of gas from somewhere in the ship.

The elder Frankletti said, "The other guy's not, though," jutting his chin at the slighter rescuer. "He's Ian, a docking mechanic from Area J, and an on-again-off-again member of my crew."

The other guy who I'd not seen come in and strap into a chair in front of the long console, pressed a button and said to no one in particular, "Stand by for atmo-burn in twenty seconds." His voice echoed, amplified, through the ship. Out the window, I saw the hangar moving away from us and realized we were the ones moving, though I couldn't feel a thing. We were moving out into the open.

Frankletti motioned to a couple of large padded chairs with straps against the wall and said, "You'd better get ready. The first couple of miles can be pretty rough." I sat in one of the bucket seats and messed around with the straps until I finally got the wide strips of what I later found out to be a material called steelprene (still not sure if that's a product name or a scientific name) buckled over my shoulders and around my waist.

I looked around and saw Frankletti had left the room. One of the pilots started speaking through the ship again, "Burn in five, four, three, two . . . and mark." It was surprisingly anti-climactic. I had expected to be pushed back in my seat, smooshed into it, with the skin on my face waving around my skull like in a wind machine. Instead, all I felt was a little vibration and rocking like the first section of a roller coaster as it ratchets up the initial hill. The scene outside the windows belied the rather sedate experience I had inside the ship: The ground rocketed away from us at an amazing, dizzying, gut-dropping speed. The

relative lack of expected vibration and movement made the scene out the narrow window that ran around the front of the room seem like a video instead of reality, and that probably saved the floor from getting the contents of my growling stomach.

This reminded me of my poor, carefully selected meal, possibly still sitting untouched, in the cafeteria.

CHAPTER SIX

"I had Kara go get you soon after you'd left the office," Frankletti explained to me after we'd successfully entered Q-thrust. "I'd discovered that the officials had an all-system alert out for the *Lysander* and knew the second it'd landed. It just took some time for the left hand to tell the right hand to find you."

Karayitri, or Kara as she preferred ("Unless you want to swallow your teeth"), was sitting in the chair opposite me in the dingy kitchenette area of the ship. She had her feet up on the table, leaned about as far back as physically possible in the chair before it'd break off its base, and added, "You're lucky Joseph and Ian got to you when they did. An entire detachment of fed Protectors was on their way to you. Then we'd never have been able to get you out."

"Well, thanks, guys," I told them. Ian grabbed something crunchy from a cabinet behind me and went back to the control cabin. "But, you faked a fire alarm, probably breaking some laws there, at least one of you impersonated a cop, and you broke out a prisoner in police custody who was about to be handed over to . . . government officers."

"Don't forget launched a Haz-Mat transport ship without B. of T. authorization, stole five kilotons of earmarked power cells, jammed CASS sensors, and some of us left work without permission," Frankletti smiled.

"Yeah, that, too," I swirled the velvety, yet surprisingly crisp and light, purple drink in the cup in my hands. "But what I mean is, why? Why do all that? Why put yourselves at so much risk?"

"Just the desire to screw with the officials, especially in anything that has to do with Jerrod or his ship, is enough for me to consider breaking a couple laws. Well, I'd consider it," Frankletti grinned large. He leaned forward, "But I found something particular when I saw the alert: Red level. All passengers of the *Lysander* wanted in connection of political terrorism, sabotage of CASS property, and theft of vital intelligence and dangerous experimental research."

"Wha-- I-- what? That's what?"

"Yeah, I thought so, too." He leaned back in his chair. "I didn't think you were any more a political terrorist than you were an expert pilot." He said, winking.

"So," he continued, "that just seemed to make the mystery of the Jarrod-less *Lysander* all the more intriguing, and all the more reason to keep it out of CASS hands. I knew that once you and the *Lysander* were in their control, especially with charges like these, I'd never find out what happened."

"You have the *Lysander* stored in this?"

"Well, one out of two--it could be worse," Frankletti sighed.

"Oh."

Kara spoke up, "The only way Max here got me to risk my neck like this," she said, pointing a thumb at Frankletti, "was with some going-on about you and time travel or some nonsense."

"Uhm, not to be a jerk, but if it's 'nonsense--'" I started.

"Max here is about as solid a guy as I've ever known. Unless he got a hold of some rancid poly-prot juice, he's not one to go spewing fantasies about time travel. I don't really believe it, mind you; but, if Max says it, I want to see what it's all about."

"So," I turned to Frankletti, "You do believe me, then."

He shrugged. "Look, I'm not one-hundred percent convinced myself." He gave a look at Kara, who gave a look back. "There's just . . . something going on that's obviously outside 'normal,' know what I mean?"

"Yes. Yes, I very much do."

He chuckled. "Yeah. Well, I'm also not one-hundred percent convinced that you're an angel in all this, either." I started to interrupt, "But, I'm also pretty sure that if you're a party in jacking with the officials in a major way, I want to see how it turns out. Or, kill you myself if I discover you *did* off Jarrod."

"Look! I told you--"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm messing with you," he said, smiling. I wasn't so sure he was.

Ian leaned in through a doorway to the control cabin. "So far so good. Not a blip of anything with wires or fires as far as we can sense. We have enough cells to get to New Torment in four seds." He popped back out.

"'New *Torment*'? Sounds nice. But, what about that place that, uh, that guy said to meet him?"

"Farrius and Sandiki? Eh, not important." Frankletti stood up. "We're on our way back where you came, see if we can figure out what happened. We're heading to that location marked in the *Lysander's* log, but we have to make a stop first. Get some things, meet some people."

He stretched his neck side to side and said, "It's pretty late; get some sleep if you can," then walked through one of the other portals out of the dining room-slash-kitchen, his footsteps hardly making a noise on the metal floors.

I looked over at Kara; she looked at me and said, "All I have to say, is you better damn well be from the past, or I'm gonna be real pissed." She got up and followed Frankletti, whom I heard call back to Kara, "Technically, we're all from the past. . . ."

"You know what I mean, you big *culo*."

It was suddenly quiet and I had no idea where I was supposed to sleep.

I sat in the kitchen ("galley," as I was reminded) later that night, munching on a rather dry and colorless yet tasty sandwich I'd made from various ingredients I found. According to the clock in the room I was finally told I could crash in, it was about two a.m. I had no idea according to what planet that time belonged to, but everyone in the ship appeared to be asleep--so I guess time is relative, in a manner of speaking.

That first week-like period of days I'd spent back on the *Lysander* proved to me I wasn't dreaming all this oddity, and that if I was insane and delusional, insanity is tedious. However, just as soon as I was over the shock of that situation, I was suddenly thrust into a whirlwind of moons and spaceports, inspectors and cops, escape, and space again--all in the span of a few hours, reigniting the anxiety and displacement, fear and uncertainty I tried to work through those first few days.

I couldn't sleep. In the dark, with nothing but the quiet hum of the ship, all I could think about was Lori and Chloe. Did they know I was gone? Is time moving on for them as normal? When I get back, *if* I get back, will it be the same time I left or will the same amount of time that has passed for me have elapsed back there? Even more, what with the whole relativity of time thing, I had nothing to relate to. I didn't even know what happened; how I could possibly imagine what conditions surrounded going back, if that was even possible.

If I'd woken up on a ship in the South China Sea, I could plan and consider viable options: Find a way to make it to a port, get a map, find someone who speaks English, find a American embassy or military post, use my credit card to buy a ticket back home, get myself on morning talk shows to tell about my strange journey. The world, *well, better start being specific*, I thought, Earth, was finite. Somehow, some way, I could get back home if lost on Earth. I had nothing I could be so certain about in *this* situation, aside from the fact I was certainly lost, confused, alone, and scared.

In the dark with the quiet hum of the ship, acutely aware of the fact there was the infinite vacuum of space below me, above me, all around me, I felt the fear and uncertainty of cosmic insignificance. I, this whole ship, was *nothing* in the cosmic sense, and there was nothing that required that I should find myself back on solid ground, much less back home, nearly three centuries ago.

So instead of lying there half-asleep with fear amplifying that feeling of one's body being weightless but jerked around with unexpected muscle twitches, I got up and found the kitchen. Galley. Getting my feet moving on something solid, my mind away from drifting thoughts and spirals of anxiety that aimed toward panic, made me feel a bit better. More substantial and less an ephemeral plaything of the infinite. Besides, for being something that was probably ninety-nine-percent preservatives (and please please please not Soylent Green), the faux-ham wasn't too bad.

I sat at a round, off-white table in the roundish, off-white chair of the room-that-wasn't-impressive-enough-to-be-called-a-"galley," finishing my off-white midnight snack, when Ian came in. He was still in his clothes from earlier but this time covered in patches and swaths of grease and grime.

"Hey, you're up late," he said in his slight Spanish accent as he ran his hands under the utility water. I'd later find out that in many ships, they tended to have a system of pure water for consumption and a less-stringently-pure recycling system for water used just for things like cleaning. Recycling water evidently took a lot of ship's energy.

"Couldn't sleep."

"Mmm," he replied.

The sound of chewing in my head, the running water, the hum of the ship.

"So," I said after a while, "what have you been doing?"

"Hmm? Oh, finishing some of the rewiring of the secondary Fabric Tear System. *The Bluerock* was in for maintenance back on Gadreus, and we left kind of in a hurry." He was

leaning back on the cabinet and wiping his hands on a rag that was almost as dirty as his hands still were. "Lots to get done, and hopefully before we need to use what isn't finished."

"Fabric Tear?" I asked.

"Yeah, the system that tears space for interstellar travel."

"Whoa. 'Tears space'?" I asked.

Ian sat down across from me, excited to be discussing something of interest to him.

"Yeah, you know. The FTS. It creates a tear in the fabric of space micrometers in front of the ship."

My head was swimming. "Oh, yeah. Of course," I smirked. "No, no no no. Back up. We're falling through a rip in space?"

"Well, not quite. More like a million-gazillion tears in space in a row," he said.

I raised my eyebrows.

"As you know, tears in the fabric using current technologies last only milliseconds, but that's just enough to get the ship to 'fall' into it at faster-than-light speed. Well, relative to an object *not* falling through the tear, of course." My expression hadn't changed. "Didn't you learn this in a school or anything?" he asked.

"Uh, time traveler here, remember."

"Oh yeah, sorry." He continued, "Okay, it's like this: the anti-matter. . . . No, that's too complicated. okay, phased neutrinos which we force to interact with dark matter, we. . . . No, that's even more complicated." He sighed and looked pained. "You know what? It doesn't really matter how it's done. What matters is that it results in a tear that lasts only for a millisecond, but that's long enough for the ship to fall into the tear and appear on the other side of it instantaneously. Relative to where we were a millisecond ago. It's the only way, as far as we know, to get past Einstein's speed limit for energy."

"A millisecond isn't instantaneous enough?"

"Oh God no. Not when you're talking about moving a five-hundred meter ship ten or so light years across space. A millisecond is an eternity."

I was balancing on the fence between being fascinated about something I could just grasp (like late night college dorm conversations about the meaning of life) and being overwhelmed (like early morning college math classes). "Okay, so, we move to the other side of a tear in space instantaneously. A gazillion times or so."

"Million-gazillion," Ian smiled.

"Heh, yeah, okay. So, what's that mean? I mean, what does that do for us?"

"Well, it allows us to make the Procyon run in only ten parsecs."

"What?"

"Sorry," he chuckled, "old space navigator's joke." Ian got up and grabbed a bottle of warm fruit juice out of the cabinet. "But that's not too far from the truth. We're in essence making our path to wherever we're going much shorter by constantly falling through tear after tear after tear each microsecond after the next. Put this way, Procyon is about one-and-a-half parsecs, or five light years. Before FTS, the fastest that trip could be made is about, I don't know, a thousand years or so. But with FTS that trip becomes a ten-thousand kilometer fall through space taking only about a week."

"Oh my God."

"Pretty amazing, huh."

"I'll say." I thought about that for a moment, sandwich in my hand completely forgotten. Falling through space. Trips between stars taking only days.

"Wait," I started, suddenly excited. Things had been going so fast the last day or so I barely had time to breathe, and now here was someone that could give me some definite answers--give me some much-needed grounding, so to speak. "Where are we? Right now? Where exactly are we coming from and to? And, God, where the heck is the Earth in all this?"

"Well, we're coming from the Sirius system and heading toward Procyon, actually. And Earth, hmmm," Ian thought for a second, "is somewhere around there," he said, pointing to a spot on the wall of the kitchen.

"Cute," I said.

"Seriously," he laughed. "Yeah, okay, sorry," he said as he slid open a panel on the galley table, revealing a control panel. "Let's see," he pushed a couple keys then sat motionless, except for his eyes, which moved around as if he were looking at something I couldn't see inches in front of his face. "Here we go." A three-dimensional image of a spiral galaxy appeared in the air over the table in front of me, with a little sign reading, "You are here," pointing to a dot in one of the spiral arms. I gave him a look. "Oh come on," he pleaded, "that never gets old."

"You know, it actually does," I chided, but smiled, anyway. As anxious as I was to get some answers that I knew I was so close to, a little humor may be what I needed to take the edge off. But I was still impatient. "So?"

"Yeah, yeah." He continued to move his eyes about is small, almost imperceptible

twitches. "Okay, here we go." The galaxy faded into a plane of concentric rings with lines emanating out to the outer edge from the center. The circle was in the middle of a faded and barely visible sphere. At the center point was a tiny set of numbers and letters. Around the plane of circles and in a sparse scattering through the sphere were dots of various shades of yellow and red and white with splotches of alphanumeric characters accompanying them as well. I peered at the display, trying to understand.

"Oh, sorry," Ian said. Eye twitch and the labels changed into words. At the center was *The Bluerock*. "Okay, we're that, in the center. Over here," he made a white dot floating on the air in the circular grid, about three or four feet away from the center, flash slightly, "is Procyon. It's actually two stars, a binary system. Behind us," another white dot, this time a few inches away from the center, flashed. "And that's Sirius, another binary system."

"We were just there?"

"Yep. That's where we came from. Gadreus, Alpha Sirius-Four's third moon."

"I didn't see two suns," I remarked.

The reply came from the doorway, "Sirius Beta's a dwarf. It looks like just another star from where we were." Kara was standing there in her shirt and pants disheveled in a way that looked like she slept in them. She walked over to the thing that made coffee. I'm tempted to call it a "coffee maker," but it was as similar-looking to a coffee maker as a cube looks to a Bundt cake. Joseph, equally disheveled, came in behind her and collapsed with a sigh into one of the molded plastic chairs.

"I got the new navigational array programmed," Kara informed Ian as she poured a mug of the black oil. "It's running diagnostics now. When it's done, I'll start the swap-over process."

"If we can stabilize the feed," Joseph mumbled.

"We don't technically need the array online for another couple of days," Ian told them. "You really should get some sleep."

Kara flopped down into a chair and took a long drink from the mug. She shrugged, "Better sooner and work out any bugs."

"So," she continued, "Giving our . . . guest here some astronomy lessons?" I couldn't tell if her pause was ironic or derisive.

"I'm sure you can imagine I've been pretty curious as to just where the hell I am, you know." My tone was probably a little harsher than I intended. She nodded but avoided looking at me.

Ian played around with making the holographic image of our place in the galaxy rock

and twirl listlessly. "Okay, well, there we are. . . ."

After a pause I asked, "Here's what I don't get. We're in space. In my opinion that's pretty, far out. No pun intended. I mean, real far out. Where I'm from, or *when* I'm from, we barely got to the moon. But we're already playing around with cyberware and genetic manipulation and things like that." They were looking at me blankly. "What I'm saying is that in three hundred years or so, in a time where we can literally tear holes in space . . . I don't know. Everything else seems so, normal. I mean, clothes, buildings, the smell of gasoline--with the exception of, oh, flying through space, it's really not so different from where I came from."

Joseph chuckled, "What'd you expect? Foil clothing and crystal buildings like on the show *Slip Star*?" Kara sniggered at that. Joseph continued, "Functionality never goes out of style, my friend."

"No no," I searched for the right words. "I just figured we went from horses to space craft in less than a hundred years; we should, three hundred years later, I don't know . . . be cyborgs ruled by an artificial intelligence life form, or something." I chuckled at myself, but only so I could say I was half joking in case they laughed at me. I was serious.

"Ah," Ian said. "Yeah, I can see that, I guess." He leaned back in the seat and stared at the floating image still in the air between us. His eyes darted from white dot to white dot as he thought. "Well, I guess there are limits to some things," he said finally. "Not everything can advance faster and faster year after year. I mean, I guess computers got as fast as metal, glass, and bioneurofibers can make them go--and after that, it's basically a matter of tweaking it. Computers can think, if that's what you mean. But I guess it's a matter of how far God lets us develop things."

"Or more like war and scarcity," Frankletti said as he walked into the galley, running a big hand through his tangled hair.

"How's the cell containment holding out?" he asked Ian.

Ian twitched his eyes for a second and replied, "Twenty-seven fifty at the moment. There's some degradation from the relay I had to replace--the sync delay may be caused by something further in." Frankletti grunted as he leaned against the cabinets and yawned. Ian continued, "I can check on that when we port. Until then, I just have to tweak it every few hours or so and we'll keep from blowing up."

"Good to know," Frankletti yawned again.

"What were you saying?" I asked.

Ian answered, "Oh, a section of the anti-matter cell containment's been throwing--"

"Uh, no," I interrupted. "That, I think I might be interested in hearing about, later--but I mean the comment about 'war and scarcity.'"

Ian looked at Frankletti. The big guy shrugged. "When the only human planet is set back to the Dark Ages for a century, constant war destroying half the planet, and natural resources scarce . . . probably makes for slow progress out of the cradle of ash."

"The Tribulation," Kara mumbled from out of where she was laying her head on her arms atop the table, just under a cluster of holographic stars.

"Wait a minute: you're not talking about like a religious 'tribulation,' are you?"

"Yes," Ian said.

"No," countered Frankletti, who gave Ian an exasperated glance. "Although religion had no small part in creating it." He poured himself a glass of drinking water and continued after a long gulp. "Thought it started around when you were from," he nodded at me, "but guess it's some time after. In short, old Earth's ecosystem went crazy, fast. Religious fundamentalists went crazier, and, between the two, the web of Earth's economies and governments collapsed. Half a century or more of half the world killing itself while the other half tried like mad to get out of the way from both the fundamentalists and the planet itself trying to kill them."

"Not all the religious were crazies," Ian protested, as if he'd said the same thing to Frankletti many times before.

Joseph shook his head, perhaps amused, and Frankletti said, "No offense." Ian rolled his eyes. (I'm sure that for an instant I felt the ship lurch when he did that, but I could be wrong.)

To me, Frankletti said, "In any case, the two most important goals for everyone who wasn't flinging bombs at each other, was fixing the planet or getting away from it. Terraforming and faster-than-light travel. All other development had to take a number."

"Hey," Ian said, perking up, "right back to what we were talking about! The FTS. Once the Anhouse-Mortsen principle was discovered, it was just a matter of one or two or hundred failed attempts before the first working FTS drive was developed. Then, zzoom!" He made a shooting motion with his hand, "Off we went to the stars!"

"Sort of," piped in Kara from the crook of her arm.

"Yeah," explained Frankletti, "enter the religious nuts again."

Ian's expression took an uncharacteristically serious visage as he said, "Look, some of

us tried to stop them, and you know it. Not all of the religious were nuts; there were many who worked on helping the Exodus happen and you know it.”

Frankletti continued to look straight ahead, Kara raised her head enough to look at Ian. Both Joseph and I looked back and forth among them.

Quietly, I said, “Look, I know I’m the new guy here, and I don’t want to walk into any old minefields, but I just want to put it out there that . . . I have to agree with Ian.” Ian smiled again, but looked like someone waiting for the punchline to a joke. “I mean, obviously I don’t know how it all happened, but, while no one could ever accuse me of being religious, I grew up Christian. Most everyone I know is as well. I don’t . . . didn’t? No, don’t know any zealots or fanatics. I would think most of the religious people in question in this situation you’re talking about weren’t, I don’t know, mad instigators?”

Ian looked to Frankletti for the punchline. Frankletti said, “May be, may be. But let me ask you: Between the everyday ordinary believer, like yourself, and the fundamentalist-- which type made the most, and the most drastic, changes in *your* society?”

The path of progress in history and culture came to mind and I started to say, “The billions of ordinary believers,” but stopped myself. I couldn’t help but think of the tiny handful of Muslims with a fringe minority view of Islam, who have flown planes into buildings, and how that resulted in such a fundamental change in the way my country became. I thought about the minority of fundamentalist Christians who have loudly hijacked the discussions in politics and culture, turning every issue into one of some war between faith versus secularism. The world, my world, may have been made up predominately of believers in one religion or another, going about their lives and making the world turn, but it was the most violent or divisive and outspoken of them who seemed to change the course of society in stark, and usually negative, directions.

Everyone was looking at me, waiting. Finally, I said, “Okay, so, yeah. I guess the zealots do tend to out-shout and out-kill the liberal and moderate of us.”

Frankletti gave a half shrug and said, possibly ironically, “It’s the fundamentalists and ‘true believers’ who make things happen.”

Ian smiled humorlessly. “There’s only a couple fundamentalists on *this* ship.”

Joseph propped his feet on the table and leaned back in his chair, saying, “And they’re dragging the rest of us along for the ride.” He winked at me. My thoughts would return to this conversation many times in the days to come.

Ian relaxed back into his seat, seeming to shake off the earlier wave of darkness. He

turned to me and continued, "Anyway, my family stayed on Earth while those who could, left."

"And continued to leave as fast as ships could be built," added Frankletti. "Cities, already falling to scrap, were used for raw materials."

"Finally, I guess even the most patient of people can get fed up," Ian said, shrugging. "My great-something grandparents made it off the planet and headed out for the colony on Centauri. That's where I'm from."

"Okay," I finally spoke up, "what happened to the whole terraforming thing? Obviously the getting off the planet thing worked."

Frankletti replied, "Well, turns out, in the century it took to develop the FTS, they also figured out how to adjust ecospheres on a grand scale. Unfortunately, it was all theoretical. Nothing could actually be done without a lot of resources that weren't available. By the time the survivors of Earth had gotten out far enough and found enough resources to make it work, no one wanted to go back and fix the planet they came from. The planet that, as they saw it, was the source of all the problems in the first place." Joseph chuckled at that and Frankletti passed him a look of agreement. "There were enough near-habitable moons and planets that could be transformed so that Earth could pretty much be forgotten."

"Except by those who stayed and tried to make a difference." Ian shot a glance at Frankletti.

I asked, "So, when was all this, anyway?"

"Well, like I said, I think the worst began sometime around your time. Early twenty-first century, yeah?" He nudged Kara. She shrugged and mumbled what I think was, "I guess." Frankletti said, "The famine and plagues and what. . . ."

"Tribulation," Kara mumbled.

"Lasted a century or so, and the Exodus finally got going, what, late twenty-first, early twenty-second?" Frankletti looked up in the air, and I was certain he was examining his own thoughts and not some unseen computer display that Ian referenced.

"The first colony ship that successfully left Earth, The *Nova*, was in twenty-one twenty-four. You know, all this should have been on the *Lysander's* computer. You didn't look?" Ian looked both incredulous and amused.

I stammered, "I, really didn't know what I was doing on there. I mean, I tooled around a bit, sure! But didn't want to take the chance of screwing something up. So, I slept a lot, read a lot--would have loved to have found the . . . wiki or encyclopedia online, or

something, but. . .” I shrugged, a little embarrassed. All the hours I spend on that ship wishing I knew what had happened, clues or news, and I never found anything that seemed helpful. It was very much like a boat in an endless sea cut off from everything. But now, I smiled as I thought, that wish was coming true.

Ian said, “Well, I can set you up to access the computer here. You might find it better than *our* versions of ancient history.” He smirked at Frankletti and I felt more of the lingering tension drift farther away.

“Tomorrow,” Frankletti said gruffly. “Ian, take a quick look at the containment, and then let’s get some rest. We have a lot more work tomorrow to keep this thing together if we’re going to reach New Torment.”

“I’ll set up a maint-macro to keep an eye on containment.” Ian was already staring out at the invisible, eyes darting nearly imperceptibly.

Frankletti gave Kara’s chair a little kick, “Bunk it, Kay” Kara got up and walked right out as if sleepwalking. Joseph plopped his feet back on the floor and groaned as he stood up. He clapped Frankletti on the shoulder and shuffled off without a word. Before he followed, Frankletti said, “You too, not-Jarro. I’m going to be putting you to work on this boat. We don’t take mere passengers.”

I smiled, “Doesn’t being three-hundred years old give me some elderly dispensation or something?”

“My mother’s a hundred and sixty and is still working an asteroid ore extractor,” he said and walked out.

CHAPTER SEVEN

And put to work I was. I learned enough about menial labor over the next few days to earn a mail-order degree in it. I was tasked with everything from "Stand there and hold this for a minute," which would often mean half an hour, to, "Strip and reinsulate that leg-thick bundle of wires with matching f-block resin or else we all die!" Although I can say one thing about it: It was a lot more interesting than those days of catatonic uncertainty aboard the *Lysander*.

However, the most valuable benefit of those days was getting to use the ship's computer. And one of the many things I learned is that if I thought the Internet of my time was a jumble of mis-matched facts and information, it had nothing on the eclectic quasi-informative chaos of the pan-stellar information system, or Pansys. At least with my familiar Internet, changes and additions and connections between data happened nearly instantaneously. When you're dealing with a system of networks that can take days, weeks, or even months to sync-up or respond with new or counter-information, it makes for a lot of confusion and contradiction. The ship's computer apparently syncs up and caches data from the Pansys node on whatever system it's docked at--which is itself usually a cache of static data it's received from other nodes on other ships, bases, and distant planets. Very rarely does it maintain any kind of live connection as distance outside of a planetary system, and its particle-to-laser signal accelerators, means having to deal with regular ol' radio frequency speeds. That doesn't tend to work very well when the ship is traveling faster than light through space-time rips.

Much of the interface with the Pansys was familiar, and the frequently necessary 3-dimensional interfacing using holographic displays wasn't too difficult to pick up on. Although, I was constantly plagued with problems of missing data implied to exist from various sources. Ian informed me that often links from one node-base would refer to data located on another node-base that would be blocked by local security. Sometimes node A would allow connections to node B, but not C. Yet C can access B. So when C is told there's

data on A, it's blocked. This also happens when the node-base happens to be destroyed, but that's rare. You also had to know what node-base applications and tools were the best to use, yielding the most info in the quickest time: something I was very slow in picking up. What would take me an hour to look for, Ian could find in seconds--and not just because of cybernetic implants. The others were also adept at navigating the Pansys, they just didn't bother all that much with it (aside from technical manuals, navigation guides, and astronomic news).

I did learn some more surrounding the events of the last three hundred years, although I was never sure how much I could trust. A lot of the information was conflicting and contained obvious slants. Sometimes specific dates and names would conflict from one reputable-looking source (a quality that was shaky-at-best to deduce) to the next. Yet, the general story told by Ian and Frankletti seemed to bear out: The Earth went through ecological and political melt-down, creating massive refugee problems, resource shortages, disease epidemics, and social chaos despite what appeared to be valiant relief efforts from public organizations and individuals working together. Religions seemed to bear nearly universal condemnation for either encouraging the strife, or preventing efforts at finding the solutions. Although, at the same time, I learned religion was still a viable subject out in space. It seems many people still believed in radically changed versions of the traditional religions I was familiar with. (Interestingly, Buddhism changed not so much.) And then there's a religion, or, more a faith, called "Theoversism," which is some kind of pantheism that worships the universe itself as a divine being. It has few elements of traditional religion and much of what I saw as "New Age" spiritualism. Some things never die.

I was in the medical alcove, taping gauze over a new burn on my calf, when Frankletti called on the intercom that we were approaching the Procyon system. I made my way up to the control room and found Ian and Joseph arguing about something under a floor panel in front of the main control console. If the *Lysander* was my idea of what the inside of a spaceship should look like--gleaming white with rounded corners, *The Bluerock* was something of a kid's flying clubhouse, complete with odd pieces of metal, of seemingly no purpose, tied to the wall.

Joseph was on the floor on his stomach, head and shoulders down the hole, saying, "I told you it wouldn't last. It wasn't rated for that kind of current."

"Look," came Ian's voice from the floor, "those spans are always underrated. They're used to transfer five times as much current as we're putting through it!"

I'd become used to these exchanges after the first day. If I moved just right, I could just make out Ian lying on his back under the semi-porous metal floor tiles. I ignored them as I sat in the co-pilot's chair and looked out the windows. Just off center was a star brighter than the rest: Procyon. Well, Procyon A, most likely. I had been informed that the Alpha was a bright, young star, while its companion was a semi-visible brown dwarf. A star so cold, relatively, that it could actually have a planet-like atmosphere. One made of mostly ammonia, I believe, but an atmosphere, nonetheless.

"How long?" I had to ask twice.

"Huh?" Joseph pulled his head up out of the floor.

"Until we reach New Torment, how long?"

He torqued his torso and neck around to look at one of the consoles without having to actually get up off the floor, and said in a comically strained voice, "Bout a coupla hours."

Ian added, "We'll drop the FTS as soon as we replace this span, then go in on Q-thrust the rest of the way."

I hmm-ed and sat back in the chair. If I kept my eye on the back edge of where the window met the bulkhead, I could sometimes catch a star inch across the black and disappear beyond the edge. Just a speck of light, now and then, barely discernible amidst the field of sugar spilled on a black cloth, separating itself from the others to move independently behind us. At home on a planet in fixed orbit, I was so used to traveling and turning so that the entire collection of stars moved as one across the sky, like the inverted bowl with pinholes moved around me as a unit. Here, to see the star field move and shift in such a way as I'm literally tearing through space, so fast that we cause the closest stars to individualize and move in parallax, made me a little lightheaded. Made me forget where I was for a moment--I was out there. I was in awe.

I was tired.

I glanced over at Laurel and Hardy. Ian had come up from the floor and was talking to Joseph about safe FTS drop procedures in light of some change in this or that equipment. I didn't realize until I sat down and dozed off how much the last week was catching up to me. The physical activity, the constant active process of wrapping my mind around some new task or Pansys finding or just waiting to get on to the next stage of . . . whatever all this was . . . whatever all this was going to end up being.

At times, I was simply waiting for the 6:00 p.m. bus to take me home. Other times I'd break out in a sweat, and my gut would turn to water as I realized this could be it, I might

not get home. I might not even make it to Procyon. This wasn't a vacation. How easy it was for my mind to fool me into thinking it was. How easy I avoided thoughts about my wife and the way she liked extra pepper on her eggs but hated it on anything else, the way she liked to trace my jawline when we'd lie in bed, the way she got upset whenever someone in a city council meeting said something stupid to her (which was often). Or my daughter and the way she'd tell me she wasn't sleepy even as her eyes were closed, or the way she'd talk to herself in the voices of the cartoon characters she was drawing. How easy it was to avoid thinking of these things . . . too often. To keep me sane, I suspect. Good, mind. Good.

I found it interesting that one couldn't tell, by looking outside, whether one was in FTS flight or not. You would think that tearing holes in space would cause some visible effect, but, no. Evidently, if one could see in a couple of the other seven or eight dimensions invisible to humans, it'd be a horrific nightmare scene outside those windows. However, with my humble three-dimensional sight, the only way I noticed we slowed from FTS to Q-thrust was a significant increase in the underlying hum and vibration of the ship. And a sudden appearance of a flashing light right next to Procyon Alpha.

"That's New Torment," Ian told me, seeing my notice of it. "Mining and manufacturing outfit in an asteroid belt."

"Huh. What's it mine and manufacture?"

"Enriched deuterium, heavy erbium, and other elements hard to find outside certain planets of newly formed stars. They also make the ballistic-absorbing alloy used for ship hulls."

I peered around the area of the distant flashing light. "Where's the planet?"

"What planet?"

"The one you said that stuff's found on."

"Oh," Ian shrugged, "that's the asteroid belt. Seems Procyon B hates planets. It's a *way* off-center orbit around A, so its planetary system eventually destabilized and broke up any planet large enough to break up. Everything else it either pulled out of orbit or forced a fall into the belly of A."

"Nice."

Ian, Joseph, occasionally Kara, would approach a console and do a little of this and some of that, and eventually we got close enough that I could just make out a large object behind the flashing light, blocking an increasingly large patch of stars behind it. The flashing light, a beacon, or lighthouse of sorts, was certainly bright; being seen from so far away, it

took a while before I could make out more lights on the asteroid that was itself beginning to gain more visual definition. Dots of light here and there: most stationary, some moving. Huge swaths of light shining out on the black rock.

"Where's the rest of the field," I wondered.

Joseph was the one who answered this time, glancing at a console screen's nav display, "Next closest rock is . . . about five thousand K to the two o'clock and three degrees from GC north. There's some rocks and tiny stuff floating around, but no worries. We could be going max Q and with the shielding and hull we won't even feel a tap."

"Not much of an asteroid field, huh?"

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

I shrugged, "I don't know, I thought you had to like, maneuver through asteroid fields."

"Heh, where'd you get *that* idea? A field that dense wouldn't last a year; they'd all get drawn together and collide and grind up. Not a stable place to do any mining."

"Oh, yeah, makes sense." The number of times my romantic ideas of space were crushed was almost half as many times as I saw or learned something that made me gasp in awe.

When I landed on Gadreus nearly a week ago, the light from the nearby planet and its sun diffused through the moon's atmosphere made the view of the small port town look like it was a cloudy mid-day on Earth. Here, though, the distant, cold white light from Procyon A was too faint to have any effect on the airless asteroid. The approach to the cluster of industrial buildings was marked by a sparse patchwork of harsh lights with sharp edges that barely illuminated towers, spots of walls on certain sides of buildings making a perforation of white spots down roads from building to building and across the surface of the craggy rock. A rocky surface that became barren immediately beyond the outside edge of the outermost factory-like building. Vehicles that looked like crazy collisions of Legos and erector sets crawled and glided to and from the lonely cluster of mechanized life.

We drifted toward the second largest of the buildings. Ian got clearance from a base traffic controller and we were told which hangar bay to land in. The building had several open squares in its ceiling, like monstrous skylights. Ian told me the bay openings were shielded to maintain air pressure inside while the approaching ship sinks through the shield, conforming to the ship's contours like dipping a model ship through the surface of a tub of water. Once inside the hangar, the view was not any more cheery looking than outside.

"De-con' and environ-sync should only take a couple of minutes," Ian said once we had

gently settled in the hangar. His eyes were rapidly flickering at invisible data and interfaces; his hands seemed to move and do things at the console of their own accord.

Kara leaned around the bulkhead into the control room. "ISR's on the way."

Ian looked confused and swung around to look out the windows, which provided a decent view of straight ahead and slightly above but gave no view of the floor of the hangar. "There shouldn't--"

"And Max wants you to secure the cell containment module and prep for repairs. He wants to get fixed and back out ASAP."

Ian got out of the chair and squeezed past Kara, "Yeah, sure. On it." He gave another look over his shoulder out the windows that showed nothing but dim hangar walls.

I was glad I wouldn't have to be the one running point with the ISR officer this time-- now it was all Frankletti's responsibility to fool the bureaucracy. He soon appeared and made a scowl at Kara, who nodded back. The two of them moved off to the smaller exit door situated beside the cargo compartment and its giant descending ramp. Frankletti gestured at me, "Not-Jarro, why don't you come on down here with us."

"Uh, but, I. . . ."

"Safer with us than if you're lurking around aimlessly. Suspicious."

"Oh, okay." I caught up with them as Kara opened the outer door with a hiss and blast of visible steam or gases. A ladder descended and, from around the edge of the door, I watched as graceful and sure hands climbed the rungs, followed by a head of soft brown hair that was bound up with a haphazardness that was both purposeful and oddly attractive. This ISR officer was as beautiful as the one on Gadreus was unexceptional. Once on the ship, she gave us all a steady look and put on a pair of glasses she pulled from a shirt pocket. The image of "smart-girl beautiful" was complete and I had to remind myself to breathe.

"Max Frankletti?" she asked. Frankletti nodded. "You're the registered owner and captain of this craft," she expressed more as a statement than as an inquiry as she looked at a handheld tablet she had at her side.

"Yeah, that I am."

I heard steps behind me. Joseph came around the corner with a smirk and asked in a too loud whisper, "Did I miss anything?" Ian emerged behind him looking concerned. I shook my head at Joseph, and he winked at me.

I turned back to the ISR officer. "Well, let's get this over with," she huffed and started in

my direction. I flattened myself against the wall to let her pass, and she glanced at me as she did so. A few steps toward a scowling Ian, then she stopped and turned back to me. My heart skipped for a couple of different reasons--both originating from nervousness. She gave me a long look. I glanced sidelong to Frankletti at one side, who remained stoic, and Joseph at the other, whose eyes were wide with interest. The officer looked down at her tablet. I tried to look at it without being obvious, but I couldn't make anything out.

"Is your name Jarrod?"

"No." I said too fast and surprised myself. Shit. "I mean, yeah," I tried to laugh, embarrassed. Too shrill. I looked for some clue from Frankletti, who hadn't changed. "Sorry, long . . . flight. Little tired." I smiled. I wanted to vomit.

My beautiful angel of doom asked Frankletti, "This is him?" He nodded, all seriousness. To me: "Mister Creek, will you come with me, please." Again, not a question. She gestured to the exit.

I shrugged and tried to smile. The blood rushing through my ears muffled all sound; my voice was hollow and distant to me, "I . . . don't know what you mean."

Her hand went to her jacket pocket. "Don't make this difficult. I can fill out arrest papers, or cause-of-death papers. Your choice."

Shit!

I searched for some hint of help from the others with whom I just spent a better part of a week in close quarters. Frankletti was stern. That nod. That look earlier between himself and Kara. Did he sell me out? Kara only looked down, her lips pursed. Joseph was also looking back and forth from one to another, expectantly. That's right, he was a cop! But he helped rescue me from his own back on Gadreus. Did he know about this? He wasn't making any move to support the ISR officer. Ian stayed distant with a look of disdain. For who? Her, or me? "This is him?" she had asked. I couldn't believe it.

I started to move involuntarily toward the door, expected at any second to be prodded or shocked from behind by some terrible device, and pleaded to Frankletti, "Why?"

I heard a choked snicker behind me. Joseph. The jerk! Laughing at me. Shock or not, I turned around to glare. His hand was over his mouth, and his chest was jerking from suppressed laughter. The ISR officer was smiling, pleasantly, not cruelly, as I would have expected her to smile in this situation, were she compelled to do so. Ian still looked disgusted.

I swung back around and now Kara was stifling giggles, and Frankletti had a self-

satisfied smile. No. Way. "You-- She-- You. . . ." Frankletti nodded and shrugged as if to say, "Who, me?" Kara and Joseph stopped trying to suppress anything and just let it out.

The officer stood, pleased with herself, but raised a concerned eyebrow, "Hope we didn't get you *too* bad." She extended her hand, empty. "Tabitha Kim, Intersystem Security Rep."

I shook her hand. It was warm, soft. "So, you *are* an ISR, then?"

"Oh yeah. Civilian contracted, more or less. I was Frankletti's assistant on a communications relay base some years ago. We go back."

I wondered why Kara seemed to be the only person who called Frankletti "Max." I confronted him, "Is there anyone in this galaxy you don't know?"

He shrugged, "I just go to the places that have people I do know."

Kara and Joseph were getting themselves under control. Kara started to scare me; I'm not sure I saw her crack a smile the last few days. Joseph looked positively gleeful, but not in a mean way, "Oh, he so got you! *Usted* hung *baligtad*, man! I'm glad I got to see that."

I smiled despite myself and leaned back against the bulkhead. My legs were weak and shaky. I wanted to be so angry; I deserved to be. However, reassured all was well, I had to admit, that was a good get. "I don't know how, but I'll pay you back," I chuckled, trying to sound evil. "Someday, somehow."

Ian huffed. "Is it over? Can we get to work now?" He started to walk away. Odd. I would have thought Ian, of anyone, would have loved to be in on a joke like this. But then, over the last couple of days he seemed to be more stressed and distant. I know it was taking a lot of work to keep various systems from shutting down or throwing errors more serious than just annoying. Being the lead tech on the ship, he had a lot of responsibility. I hated to see the lively and good-natured Ian, who was the first to clue me in on where in the universe I was, change to a dour Ian, though.

"Yeah," Frankletti agreed as Ian disappeared. "We have a lot to do. I want to get as fixed up as we can and restocked in twenty hours, twenty-five max, and get on out toward the unknown."

He nodded at Joseph, "Get the supply list parsed and send the standard stuff to the base requisitioning system. Send the rest to Tabitha."

"Aye, Cap'n," Joseph said jauntily, then saluted and followed after Ian.

"Kay," he said to Kara, "keep working with Ian on the FTS. Every system and subsystem and redundant system. Where we're going, that's the last thing we want failing."

"More than life support?"

"If the FTS goes permanently down light years from anything and off all regularly traveled routes, we're going to *want* life support to fail."

Off went Kara.

Turning to Tabitha, Frankletti said, "Do you have any available crew that we can get to help us? A few extra hands could really help."

"Mmm, I can see what I can do. Maybe Xander's team; they were supposed to do work on repairing platform twenty-one the next few days, but an explosive fault took out the entire rig yesterday. Tore the asteroid into pieces. No one was on it at the time, thank goodness. I'll talk to Sandy; she's the Mech' union supervisor this quarter. I bet she'll have no problem."

"Great, whatever you can do, Tabitha. I appreciate it."

"Hey," she slugged Frankletti's large arm, "anything for my old boss-man, mister boss-man, sir."

"You," he said to me as Tabitha descended the ladder, "come with me. I'm going to start teaching you a thing or two about astrogation. Need to change underwear first?" he teased.

"Har-dee-har, mister boss-man, sir."

Well, I can't say I had the promise of being an expert space navigator--nor a mediocre one. Though, I did learn a thing or two in those hours about general ship controls and how not to blow up too easily. I learned from Frankletti one of the problems with figuring out the story of me and the *Lysander*: "Not enough dark matter."

"What," I asked.

"See, where the *Lysander's* logs seemed to restart, where you woke up far out away from anything, and the navigational point in logs where it last was before the jump . . . between those two locations has very little dark matter."

"Wait, I remember something I came across on Pansys . . . something about the FTS using dark matter to do the tears, right?"

He nodded and leaned back in his chair. We were in the galley, using the holo-display to go over system charts. "See, dark matter kind of comes in clumps and threads throughout the universe. And where the highest concentrations are, regular matter kind of stuck to and gathered and made the known universe."

"Yeeaah. . . ." I said raising a brow. "How's that work?"

"Okay, imagine a giant cobweb. It's stringy and without any apparent order or symmetry. It has holes, and it has places where the strands group together in clumps." To illustrate his metaphor, he leaned forward to the recessed table controls and brought up a three-dimensional image of something very like what he was describing.

"So, that's dark matter," I said.

"Right."

"Why's it look like that?"

Shrug. "Don't know. Just a property of it. Spread out as fast if not faster than the fabric of the universe itself."

He did something else with the controls, and now very slowly an overlay of yellow that lightly covered the entire display appeared and began to gravitate toward the greater concentrations of dark matter. "As normal energy cooled and formed matter, it started collecting at the dark matter clumps. Which is why there's galactic neighborhoods."

"Oh yeah. Whole clusters of galaxies found in groups."

"Yep, like ours, like most of them. Wads of galaxies." As we spoke, the yellow sand formed eddies and swirls and knots of galaxies in distinct clumps with large areas of nothing between them.

"But what happens at the macro level, happens in the micro." He zoomed the image in toward a single galaxy. Strands of dark matter and knots of galaxies flew at my head to disappear past the edge of the hologram as we seemed to fly into a spiral galaxy. Farther, until it no longer had a discernible shape, and the component stars became individual, and we stopped when there were just several white and yellow and red dots floating above the table. "See," Frankletti continued, "as we zoomed in, we can see that giant splotch of dark matter our galactic neighborhood is stuck to is made up of smaller threads and splotches. Smaller and smaller, layered within layers."

"Like a fractal image."

"Yeah, okay." He pointed to an area between two of the stars. "You can see strands and clumps between the stars, between most of the stars."

"Sure."

"Where they're thickest, those, in essence, become the roads between the stars."

I had to think back to earlier conversations of how the FTS worked. "Because . . . the harnessed neutrinos from the anti-matter engine are phase shifted to interact with the dark

matter. And we use that interaction with the help of a graviton accelerator to create the tears in space, which we fall through.”

“Exactly!”

“Okay, I get it. So where the dark matter is thickest, the FTS is the most efficient and effective.”

“Right again.”

“Which means,” I shifted the display to center on a virtual dead-pool of lack of dark matter, “where the *Lysander* had to have traveled: no dark matter.”

“The shortest space between the two points: virtually none, right. Space, even so-called ‘empty space,’ is technically filled with dark matter. It makes up a quarter of the entire universe, whereas all the stuff we can see and touch makes up less than five-percent. But there are places where the concentration’s not enough for the cascade we need to make FTS work. Sometimes it doesn’t work well, sometimes not at all.” The display shifted again. A three-dimensional grid appeared along with names next to the stars. I saw Procyon, Luyten, Sirius, Proxima, Thaedrus, Sol, Kipfer, all connected by computer generated ephemeral strands of dark matter. One strand that connected Luyten and Procyon to Sirius glowed brighter than the others. “That’s the dark matter highway that must be used to get from those systems to this.”

“Dang. That looks pretty far. How far is that?”

“Oh, about two hundred light years.”

“And, how long to get there?”

“It takes weeks because of the arc. If you tried to just go in a straight line, you’re off the highway and the trip will, at best, take months, actually. More likely years, though.”

I scowled. “Wait. Wait a minute. Didn’t, didn’t you say that the logs on the *Lysander* indicated in only took a couple of days to travel that course?”

“Actually, *not* that course.” He made some more adjustments and now two additional points lit up. One was in the emptiness past Luyten’s Star and Procyon, and the other was in the emptiness past Sirius. “Where the *Lysander* was, is that nowhere up there past Luyten’s. Where it ended up and you awoke, is down there past Sirius. To get from that point to the other--”

“That’s another, what,” I squinted at the three-dimensional grid lines and estimated, “five light years added on?”

“Not bad. About that, again, in a straight line. But you can’t travel in a straight line. So,

we're talking, nearly eight light years and two standard weeks."

The impossibility of the history of the *Lysander* just kept adding up. "I . . . how--"

He smiled and leaned back. The chair creaked. "I don't know, but we'll see."

I gave him a suspicious frown. "Do you know something?"

"I know a lot of things, Not-Jarrold, my friend. On this, however, I'm not quite sure. Not yet at least." He smirked self deprecatingly. "But, I may be privy to some *kaalaman secreta* that could shed some light on all this."

"Hello?" came a familiar voice from down the passage.

"In here," Frankletti called.

Tabitha peeked around the doorway. "Hey. How's my fugitives from the unlawful law?"

"Only hours away from being more fugitive." It wasn't often that Frankletti made jokes as bad as that--he deserved my groan. "A couple of Xander's guys are helping Kara make some final modifications, and Ian's about done with what he's doing. We're taking off the moment the last screw's back in place. We can sleep once we're on our way."

Tabitha was looking more casual than when I saw her several hours ago, when she was in a blouse and slacks. Now she wore long, pocketed shorts and her hair in a loose ponytail. She was idly peeking into magnet-latched cupboards as she said, "Well, I was wondering if our time traveler would be interested in a little tour of the facility. Just around the complex here."

"Sure. Love to."

Frankletti called "school's out for the day" and told Tabitha to get me back before dinner--there's a lot more manual labor needing done. Tabitha led the way out the ship casting a "Yeah, yeah," behind her. I followed her, smirking. I could get to like her, I thought.

The main cargo hold was open and we left down the ramp. There were crates and devices surrounding the ship, cables and hoses running hither and thither. Joseph had some kind of computer tablet and was working amongst the clutter with a guy and a woman from what I guessed was Xander's crew. The hangar was cavernous, and the shielded hole in the ceiling was almost as large as the floor space. Evidently, some massive ships have been known to dock here. Our hangar was just one of several in this building; the other hangars were independently walled with connecting airlocks.

"Have you been off-world much?" Tabitha asked as we passed through an airlock into a personnel corridor that ran between hangars and connected with a smaller building Tabitha

would show me was for maintenance, metal shops, a foundry, and some offices.

"Actually, not at all before my time trip. We civilians didn't get to go to space." As we started astrogation lessons, Frankletti let me know that Tabitha Kim knew all about my situation, being someone he trusted and had connections around the star systems as well.

"You mean the military control space flight on your planet?" She seemed disgusted and not surprised.

I chuckled, "Well, sort of. I mean, my planet was Earth, you know. A long time ago."

"Right, I get that."

I looked at her askance. "I mean, back at the beginning of the space age. No one but the government had the ability and resources to build rockets and stations." I thought for a moment. "I guess that was changing by the time I . . . left. Was taken," I shrugged. "Come to think of it, there were rich guys and corporations beginning to get into the game."

"But the government dissuaded them?"

"Hmm? No, actually, I think NASA was promoting them to get involved. Guess they weren't getting enough resources from the government to do the work and progress." I smiled, "But scientists are scientists and adventurers are adventurers, and they're going to aid discovery and progress through whatever means, I suppose."

Tabitha smiled and nodded. I got the sense she was pleased I learned a lesson of some sort.

"You seem rather anti-government for a government worker."

She glided beside me, her hands in her pockets. "Civilian contract. I have that position, and I send appropriately expected communications and reports specifically so that CASS doesn't put an official presence on here."

I was starting to get used to all the acronyms I'd been hearing the last couple weeks. "Cooperative Association of Sovereign Systems, right?"

She nodded, "Mm-hmm."

"Now, I gathered, from stuff I'd read recently, on Pansys, that that's a sort of loose . . . bureaucratic thing. Like the United Nations. I mean. . . . That's, I'll have to explain that later. But that it wasn't a government. More like a union of systems."

We had come to a corner in the corridor that jutted out from the building we were in. Continuing on would make a right turn into another pressurized building. The walls at this corner were made out of the translucent micro-poly-bond "glass" that was used in ships. There was a well-worn couch and molded plastic chair and side table placed against one

wall. It had the feel of an auto service shop's waiting area. The corridor lights, dim in the first place, stopped before the glass. We'd have been in the dark save for one of the complex's outside lights, aimed to illuminate what looked like a cluster of sheds just below us, casting some residual light up into the corridor.

Tabitha sat on the arm of the couch and nodded at the view. "What do you see?"

I looked. "Those sheds."

"Okay. What else?"

"There's another building over there. With the flashing light on it."

"Mm-hmm. And?"

I shrugged. "Not sure. I mean, I guess I can see the asteroid, the blackness where there's no stars. The stars, too."

"Do you know how many people are on this rock?"

"I think Frankletti mentioned something like a hundred or so."

"There are three-hundred seventy men, women, and children on this rock. Another fifty working a rock out that way, twenty out there, and another twenty on one that way. And do you know how many military or government personnel on here?" I shook my head. "None. Why? Because the CASS is a myth."

"I was arrested and detained by the myth last week."

"You were arrested and detained by *believers* in the myth."

"I believed the guns they carried."

"And that's how the myth is maintained: the guns."

She paused. We looked at the stars.

She continued, "Nearly five hundred people, alone in a barren, desolate region of space. Circling a cold star buzzed by another that can barely be seen. No planets. We're visited by supply ships now and then dropping off essentials, picking up materials. We're not on the way to some frontier world, no resort world. We're untouched by the hand of government, save for a charade. To us, government is a myth as distant and unconnected to our work and our lives as the ancient gods of old Earth."

"It seems like a myth to you, out here. But it's not to those where the CASS have bases and officers, right?" I asked.

She smirked, but it wasn't unfriendly. "And that is the dual nature of a myth that people believe in, and not one that has passed into antiquity. Here, it is an abstraction, easily dismissed. Elsewhere, too many places, actually, the myth drive the actions of believers."

"Wait, are we talking about religion now?"

She paused, then said, "Not in the sense that it involves deities or supernatural elements. But the belief in the right of the monopoly of violence held by a few who steal the title of 'leaders'; the right of wealth to buy power over people; and the belief in selling yourself, mind, body, and soul, in a manner of speaking, to people who use you for their own benefit and at the same time make you think it's the right and natural way of things--that all is accepted by people and forced upon others very much like a religion. That is the power of the myth: at the same time it's a creation, a fantasy, a fiction--it's powerful enough to cause people to kill and die for the protection of the myth."

"Whoa, hold on there." I couldn't help but scowl. "That was a lot of concepts you just smooshed together that I need to parse."

She chuckled, "Okay, okay. Sorry." She shifted on the couch and considered me. "Let me put it this way: You come from a world of government, you indicated it earlier. I don't know what it was called, but it might as well have been called the CASS. The name is different but the practice is surely the same. We, here, without the coercion of government--well, not direct coercion, anyway--we're not an aberration, this community. We're the norm. There are other communities, colonies, worlds out there that live exactly as they did when humans escaped the legacy of Earth.

"The CASS *did* start out as a benevolent and powerless council," she continued, "helping aid communication across the disparate new worlds, providing mediation services among interworld merchant unions. But those who didn't learn from the past forgot the reasons why we *fled* Earth like animals out of a burning forest, instead of being able to gently branch out from it, and found the benevolent bureaucracy to have a unique position in the galaxy. A gathering of information on the worlds and their people, a privileged access to these worlds and people--an assumed position of ethical superiority originally based in service and peace. A government infrastructure, grown out of perceived necessity that only needed central leaders to take control and the firepower to maintain it."

I sat in the chair and leaned forward. The soft light of the corridor on the other side silhouetted her. "I think I understand what you're saying. I'm not saying I agree--I have no ideas, especially about any . . . post-Earth history: an organically grown collection of, what, mediators and diplomats, joined forces and created an interstellar government?" Tabitha shrugged as if to say, "More or less." I took that as encouragement to continue, "But after what happened on Earth, with all these new opportunities, how could they, whoever 'they'

are, who transformed the CASS, do it?"

"Years had passed, generations, since Earth, before the CASS in its benign state even formed. Generations before the CASS reorganization. Pre-life-extension generations. People forget. New concerns and problems arise, helping people to forget what'd come before."

"But everybody followed along."

Tabitha leaned back and put a supporting arm across the back of the couch. "Nuh-uh. There were some worlds that made remembering the lessons of Earth a part of their cultural ideology. My family's from one of those. Others found perfectly good ways to manage themselves and their resources without the need for an outside, disconnected mediator, and so weren't as susceptible to CASS's assumption of control."

"Without governments?"

"Some. Some were able to start right off without issues of wealth-based power. Didn't have to deal with other worlds that did. Others developed all ranges of local government systems, but wanted nothing to do with a off-world group involving themselves in local interests."

"Were they . . . what, overthrown? Invaded?"

Tabitha laughed gently, "Hardly any. There were enough worlds the CASS was involved with that those in power had a good galactic empire right from the first month. Only a few worlds that realized the implications of the change in CASS bucked it. A few were let go, a couple had some influence exerted on them. The CASS didn't have anything to worry about regarding the isolationist worlds. They left alone those who left them alone. Unless it was a world rich in certain resources, then, somehow or another, they joined the cooperative of systems."

"So, you're on a mining base far from CASS, in order to leave and leave be." Another "more or less" shrug. I paused for a moment. "But wait. You're an ISR agent. Sort of. In an 'uninvolved' system. Such as it is. I don't get it."

"We've been talking about the past. Live and let live used to be the way of the benevolent empire. It was the way they got so many systems to acquiesce and support the CASS. But when does power ever stay satisfied with what it already has?"

"They're spreading their control?"

"Mm-hmm. But slowly. Quietly. They exert various forms of pressure, whatever works for the world in question, to get some form of eyes and ears there. Usually it's locals, at first. If everything goes passively, they start finding ways to simply insinuate their control

into the local governments. Then the CASS officials start arriving. Bureaucrats, ambassadors. But bureaucrats and ambassadors need protection. And that protection needs a base, a garrison."

"It started here, on New Torment."

She nodded. "For us it was the need to protect our manufacturing from other mining or alloy production firms. Never mind we're part of a self-regulating trade guild. It's for our protection," she said with a sneer. "'Oh, we got reports that your last food shipment went missing. Sorry, but you know how those independent cargo shippers are. Have you considered that request for an ISR office on your base yet, by the way?' After that, they got their officer, me, and an agreement to cut our use of organized independents for shipments in half."

"Is there anything being done to stop it?"

By the gleam of light from the outside spotlight, I saw she gave that gentle, approving smile again. "Let's walk a bit; I have some people for you to meet."

That's when Ian arrived, looking relieved to have found us. "Oh good! Listen, we should be getting back to the ship."

"You shouldn't be ready to take off for a few hours, I thought," Tabitha said.

I asked, "What's up? Something wrong?"

"Hmm? Oh, no. We just have a lot to do to be *able* to leave in a few hours."

"Drat." To Tabitha I added, "Do you have to go back to, whatever? Can you hang around, maybe tell me more about that stuff?" Ian looked annoyed. Maybe he didn't like Tabitha, I thought. Maybe they had a history as well?

She said, "Sure, I can do that. Maybe I can lend a hand. I *was* one of Frankletti's master electricians and comms officer extraordinaire." We started walking back.

When we got about halfway back, the corridor came alive with an undulating yellow light.

"Odd," Tabitha said.

"What's that?"

"Come on, let's get back," Ian urged.

"If something's happened, there's supposed to be an automated message broadcast and sent to our comms." She touched a spot behind her ear. "Nothing at all."

"You have an implant?" I wondered.

"What? No." She pulled back her wavy hair to show me a tiny device hugging the back

of her ear. A nearly invisible wire or tube came off it, went around the top, and into ear. "Can't do implants--they're unstable. It's a multi-channel transceiver that uses my skull as the mic and stims the canal. Perfect signal and doesn't affect my hearing."

Ian was edging on down the corridor without us and gave Tabitha glare, "Come on, let's go."

"Perfect signal, 'til now?" I said.

"Yeah, I need to find a terminal. Let's try the fuel manager's office, down here. I hope it's not some kind of seismic activity, not after what happened last week. We lost so much time and equipment from that."

As if on cue, a sharp shudder passed through our feet and I felt my ears pop from a change in pressure. Down the corridor in both directions, about every hundred feet, a long, thin compartment opened up in the wall.

"*Punyeta*. That's not good."

"What was that?" I asked, hoping the concern in my voice wasn't as obvious to everyone else. Ian looked positively worried.

"A breach most likely, in both the complex structure and shielding," Tabitha answered. She jogged the remaining few meters to the fuel management office and pushed the door open. Inside were two men standing in front of a desk, talking to each other in urgent tones. One of them spoke, "Kim, you know what's going on?"

"No. I came in to see if I can find out."

The other one leaned over and pressed some virtual buttons that were projected on the surface of his desk. "Everything disconnected a couple of minutes ago. The network went down."

The first guy said, "That never happens."

"Mitch," Ian tugged my sleeve, "we should get back to the ship. I'm sure we can find something out from there."

"Yeah, okay. Tabitha, we're going to get back."

"I'll go with you. Hold on." To the guys, "Can you get anything on your comms?"

One wiggled an ear with his hand. "Nope."

"No."

"I'll see what I can find out," she said as she walked out the door with us.

Before reaching the hanger airlock, Tabitha paused at one of the openings in the wall. "Are either of you lunged?"

"No," Ian replied.

"Huh?" said I.

She pulled out clear face masks that dangled a hose with a short cylinder on the end. There were orange suits in the cabinet, as well, but she ignored them. "Put these on."

I watched as Ian and Tabitha strapped the masks over their faces then followed their lead. As soon as the mask covered my nose and mouth, it sealed itself to my skin, and I could feel a slight current of cool, fresh air blown into my nose. She approached the airlock and examined the display next to it. She glanced back at Ian and me, and said in a muffled voice, "Atmo breach on the other side, but shouldn't be bad. Hold onto the wall rail just in case." Ian and I grabbed hold of the metal handrails that ran up to the airlock.

Tabitha punched some keys on the panel and grabbed the rail herself as the door hissed open, very slowly at first and causing a faint whistle as air from the corridor was sucked through, then opened quickly the rest of the way.

Half of one of the hanger walls was missing. I could feel myself being gently pulled in that direction, but not much more than as if in a strong wind storm. The mask tightened a little more on its own over my face and the air pressure being forced into my lungs increased slightly. It was almost like being suffocated with a pillow of air, while breathing it at the same time. It was also extremely chilly--like my body heat was being drawn out of me. Many of the crates and boxes, hoses and cables, had gathered around the hole, although they seemed blocked from going all the way through by an invisible force.

Also among the debris were bodies. The people from Xander's crew. Their clothes were soaked in blood and some left large swaths of blood along the hangar floor as their bodies were slowly dragged toward the breeched wall by the pull of the vacuum of space.

"What? Explosion?" Tabitha asked above the rushing air and muffling mask. She staggered over to the closest body. Ian was stunned in place as he looked frantically around.

I rushed, carefully as the air current tried to pull my feet from under me, over to Tabitha. She was looking down at a woman in workman's overalls. "What happened?" I looked at the person she crouched over and saw holes in the overalls with blossoms of blood soaked around them. I'd never seen any industrial accidents before, but I was pretty sure they didn't cause bullet wounds.

"There," she said, pointing over at a crate that was wobbling on an edge, trying to roll over. I recognized the trousers on the legs under it. I ran, stumbling once or twice, over to

the crate. Joseph was dead. Similar holes.

I turned around. Tabitha was tapping at the device behind her ear. Ian seemed to be looking at something in the air in front of him. "No," he said, nearly too soft to hear. "No. No no no *no* NO!" He ran, scrambling, toward the ship.

"What?" I said as he flew past.

"On the ship, *now!*"

I turned to Tabitha; she was looking at me. Ian was already inside. We ran, having to nearly jump over the lip of the bay door as it was already closing behind Ian. Tabitha and I stood in the cargo bay, raising eyebrows at each other. Seconds later, *The Bluerock* lurched and shook and we were thrown to the ground. I'd learned enough in the last week to know that Ian was making an emergency takeoff--bypassing the gravity compensators and guidance assist. He was going full manual.

Tabitha and I stumbled our way into the ship proper when a violent lurch threw us a foot off our feet and against the bulkhead. A conduit coupling ripped my leg open and I banged my head against the wall. My vision blurred and my hearing faded for a moment. Tabitha grunted in a scary way and clutched her shoulder. I grabbed her around the waist and helped her up as she hissed and groaned. Blood ran down into my shoe. We had to get strapped into something.

We heaved and limped up the steps to the control deck and stumbled around the doorway into the control room. Ian wrestled with the controls, still intoning "No no no" under his breath. I wrapped the chair's straps around Tabitha and, as they clicked in place, she too exclaimed "No!" over my shoulder.

I turned. Outside the windows, seesawing in the view as Ian tried to control the rebelling ship, was a cluster of white explosions illuminating an asteroid as it broke into countless pieces.

(This ends the sample version of Singularity Deferred.

See www.tragic-sans.com/singularity for information on how to get a full copy.)