

DUAL  
UNIVERSE

NOVAWRIMO  
WRITING CONTEST  
2016 COLLECTION

NOVAQUARK

By submitting fanfiction to NovaWrimo, all authors fully and explicitly transferred author rights to Novaquark. These works may be used (in full or in part) by Novaquark as promotional material or marketing purposes and cannot be sold. Novaquark releases these stories for free and under the authorization of their respective authors. For more information, please read our "Terms & Conditions" (<https://www.dualthegame.com/en/terms-conditions/>) and our EULA ([https://dual-static-web.s3.amazonaws.com/static/pdf/Dual\\_Universe\\_Pre\\_Alpha\\_Eula.pdf](https://dual-static-web.s3.amazonaws.com/static/pdf/Dual_Universe_Pre_Alpha_Eula.pdf)).

© 2018 - All Rights Reserved.

# Contest Explanation

NovaWrimo is a contest inspired by "NaNoWriMo" (National Novel Writing Month) that happens throughout the month of November. The goal of NaNoWriMo is to write a 50,000-word novel in 30 days (For more information, visit <http://nanowrimo.org/>).

NovaWrimo is different that it is not exclusive to the month of November. It is accessible to a broader range of participants in lieu of a 5,000 word count for the first edition. It took place between November 16th and December 15th, 2016. More details can be found on Dual Universe's forum: <https://board.dualthegame.com/index.php?/topic/10415-novawrimo-contest-2016-rules-to-participate/>.

All text reproduced here is with permission of the original authors and without modification by Novaquark.

## Winners

1st Prize: Aetherios, "That Bright Dawn"

2nd Prize: Temerian, "Rebirth"

3rd Prize: Devious\_T, "Left Behind"

Honorable mentions:

Peregrin, "The Sleeper"

Lethys, "Memories of a Pirate"

Community Prize: Kurock, "Experiment Alpha"



# Table of Contents

Foreword .....	vii
That Bright Dawn by Aetherios.....	1
Rebirth by Temerian .....	23
Left Behind by Devious_T .....	40
The Sleeper by Peregrin .....	56
Memories Of A Pirate by Lethys .....	82
Experiment Alpha by Kurock .....	102
First Contact by Arkanos.....	117
Parting Gifts by Ben Fargo .....	134
Crossing Lives by H. "Ashteron" Johnson.....	147
< bloodAndIce /> by Rockerboy2020 .....	163
The Space Trix by Rrovall .....	181
Yellow Submarine by Temerian.....	193
Pis Aller by Velenka .....	209
Everyday Life Of An Agent by Zamarus .....	252



# Foreword

Creating a completely new MMO in a brand new universe is a fascinating technical and creative challenge. Since 2014, the Novaquark team has been hard at work to make Dual Universe a reality. A game where anything can happen and players can experience unprecedented freedom. In a way, due to its sandbox nature, Dual Universe is a story generator. As developers, we don't intend to "tell a story" in the traditional sense and instead, let the setting empower community creativity.

Premise and lore are prevalent in Dual Universe nonetheless, and the short stories you'll read in this NovaWrimo collection are based on them. However, we can't stress enough that Dual Universe isn't strictly a story-driven experience. It's player-driven and relies entirely on emergent gameplay.

At the studio, we all like a good story, whether it takes the form of a video game, book, movie, or a TV series. We're huge fans of Science Fiction and every other pop-culture genre that we all share as modern nerds. But when you develop an MMO that is a sandbox game of unprecedented scale like Dual Universe, the game and metagame tell an endless number of tales, stories, and narratives which build myths and legends.

A number of MMOs began to pave this direction in the past. Here at Novaquark, we have the ambition to create something modern, new, and refreshing for the genre. The thousands of stories that Dual Universe will feature will be entirely in the hands of its players. Nothing is written in advance. Everything can constantly change depending upon the forces at stake. For the first time, everything you do matters. You can become whoever you want, acting as a leader to many, or being a lone wolf.

It is because of this that NovaWrimo is a special and relevant event. We were thrilled to read these and wanted to share them with the community, knowing these could potentially be the basis of role-play to each author. We'd like to give a shout out in thanks to everyone who participated! It is our hope that these entries will influence others to do the same, whether it's for a future NovaWrimo contest, or directly in-game!

Jean-Christophe Baillie - CEO & Founder of Novaquark



# That Bright Dawn by Aetherios

**K**az, the Sash are on the next street.”  
“Got ya. Try to not die.”

My hoverboard fell to the floor and I tapped the UI overlay on my fore-arm, causing the Ita to quietly whistle to life.

The setting sun cast an orange hue on the industrial landscape of Shi Hong. From the vantage point on the tower, I looked at the sandy wasteland beyond the southern suburbs. Small gazebos and dots of human activity here and there intensified further south, until they reached a climax at the Arkship. Our gargantuan salvation stood like an imposing creature, dwarfing every other structure for miles around and reflecting the orange rays of the sun at whoever dared to look upon it. Crafts in the air and on the ground delivered essential materials, cargo and personnel like devout followers giving gifts and paying homage to their ruler. On their way back, they hurried across the landscape as if jubilant and anxious to go back again.

Heavy gunfire and screams from below cut my day-dreaming short. A few shouts, silenced by a deafening explosion followed immediately after. Not so far away, the sirens of the Sash signalled every sensible human being to hide.

With an irritated sigh, I jumped off the roof of the five hundred storey building, manoeuvring between other structures, high pressure pipelines, decaying metal

rods and oblivious vehicles with my Ita. All the way down to the ground, the industrial sounds and scents of the city surrounded me: the hissing of pressure; the pounding of machines; the drone of nano-forming that took place beneath the ground; the techno sounds of heavy cyber-rock music, the sirens of the Sash; and the warm, acrid air ascending from the subterranean factories reached this high; while the cool howling wind tugged at my red hood. The dark blue smog got thicker near the floor and most people used artificial eyes or contact lenses to see through the eternal dusk that existed at the bottom of most major cities and suburbs. Wearing respiration implants or devices was mandatory—taking them off meant death within a week.

Once every while, the great string of man-made miseries is eclipsed by such a discovery that it changes the fate of the human race: fire, electricity, splitting the atom. This time, we discovered Doomsday. With a neutron star hurtling towards us, it was clear that the end of the world wasn't going to be caused by environmental decay. Forces beyond our power were determined to put an end to us.

For centuries, we have continued to fight among ourselves, even as Death mocks us. It's just two years more till we all die or find a way to flee this place. The Arkships are leaving and the rules are the same as they have ever been: some will live, others will die. Whatever the case, humanity must survive.

I reached the bottom, and slowly hovered to an alley, amidst the neon like signs on the walls and in the air that offered everything from cheap cybernetic parts to the darkest of pleasures. Drifting to a stop, I gave a nod to Haldol and hid in the dark.

"Turner, Kaz's here." He said and we waited for the security forces to show up.

The noise of their vehicles grew closer and some dense human beings still on the street shouted in terror. Gunshots were fired and we heard the unmistakable drone of a heavy patrol craft.

I uttered a silent prayer to whoever was listening.

*I want to leave with the Arkship. Don't let me die today.*

A bead of cold sweat streaked across Haldol's cheek, but his eyes were hard as flint. Without a doubt, he was ready to kill or be killed. Heaven knows most of our late friends killed and were killed.

As a vehicle raced by the alley and toward the approaching convoy, sporadic gunfire erupted, causing the vehicle to explode.

"Let's go!" Haldol shouted, revving the hover-bike, and rushing into the mayhem.

Shaking the fire arms on my wrists and gripping the guns in both hands firmly, I bit my lip and rushed after him on the hoverboard.

Squad One ambushed them from behind, drawing most of the fire, while Squad Three hit from the shadows. Haldol and I engaged the officers at the front, while we waited for the cloaked patrol craft to make its move.

My artificial eye on the left warned me of an incoming seeker from the right while the contact lens on my right eye continuously classified and prioritised threats. I barely managed to duck in time as the miniature missile slammed into the wall on the other side, throwing me into the air. Just then, the cyber-eye zoomed in on a glowing spot in the air. The patrol craft was aiming at my head.

*Bloody Hell!*

A bad shot from Squad Three bounced off the craft's invisible hull, jerking it to the side and a flash passed before my eyes.

"Haldol! 10 o'clock!" I screamed, as I regained my composure and my hands shook from the shock of almost dying... again.

Explosive tracer rounds from the Peruvian's bike disrupted the cloaking plates of the patrol craft, exposing it to our desperate gunfire. But the pilots put up a stiff resistance. Concentrated fire on Haldol forced him to retreat and recharge his shield. A look at Squad One told me they had their hands full.

"This better work..." I muttered with my heart beating wildly as I air skated under the craft, placing three explosives under the belly and holding onto it as the pilots frantically tried to shrug me off.

I guess being called "Red Riding Hood" means I need bags of tricks to take care of the many "Big Bad Wolves" in this dystopian forest. Sweating, I fled as far away from the craft as I could, while the craft ascended into the air. Two seconds later, the bombs blew bringing the patrol vehicle violently to the floor. But that wasn't the end of it.

The other officers called in reinforcements while Haldol and I broke into the small cargo bay to steal the nanopacks. Shots repeatedly bounced off the opposite side of the downed craft's hull and a pilot almost succeeded in killing Haldol with a shot.

"Squad Two! Put speed in your work! Two light patrol vehicles are but a minute away!" Turner shouted through the communications implants.

Haldol gritted his teeth and wiped sweat off his face.

"The bay's empty, Turner! It was a de—"

A second patrol craft came out of stealth mode and bolted for the Sash station half a mile away.

"Decoy!" I screamed as a laser ray passed dangerously close to my head.

A forlorn, but defiant shout came from Squad One on the other side.

"Leave it, Kaz! Grab the stealth chips and black box. Let's get out of here!" Haldol said, cursing as he jumped on the bike and shot the hull open. I managed to grab both sets of loot before the reinforcements made their presence known.

"Retreat, men! Retreat!" Turner's voice commanded, even as the world around erupted in laser rays and explosions that echoed and bounced off walls and shattered the store glasses. People screamed and shouted in terror as the buildings shook with the violence of the blasts.

A member of Squad One ran for the alley in an effort to get to his Goblin, but was gunned down with multiple shots.

Turner cursed loudly.

"Kaz! Run for the bay!" Haldol advised speeding into the shadows and disappearing.

Sweating, shaking and cursing, I fled on the hoverboard like there was no tomorrow. Rays and shots bounced around and passed me as I ducked, slid and moved over objects and vehicles on the Ita in a desperate bid to escape. One member of the raid party was already dead and the patrol craft chasing me was bent on increasing the casualty count to two.

"Do not faint, Kaz! Salvation is beyond the corner!" Turner urged.

My artificial eye put on the red overlay and hinted at a seeker locking target on me. The contact lens on the other eye blurred out the rest of my vision and put the bay in focus. Behind me, the engine of the patrol unit sounded dangerously close.

*Heavens, no!*

---

"How in the Seven Seas did this this happen, Haldol?!"

Those were the first words that greeted me as I rushed into the white bay and the plasma shield blocked any outside entry. Trembling, I strapped my Ita to my back and crouched behind a heavy patrol craft our engineers made themselves. Turner was

berating Haldol and the rest of the raid party for bad intel. I just wanted to find a place to lie down and pass out.

"Akazuki! Cease your cowardice and march up here!" Turner shouted in my direction. I flinched and moved out like a guilty child caught eavesdropping.

"I do hope that thou didst not think thou wouldst escape?" He said, softening his tone.

I stuttered and breathed in deep.

*Calm down, Kaz. You're alive.*

"I've been in the Nest since I was fourteen, Turner. I knew you'd find me, eventually."

"Rexon's dead, Turner." Siren said quietly, loosening her long white hair.

Everyone kept quiet and looked at Turner.

The man shrugged and scratched his chin.

"He was not a soldier of Nest. Do not concern yourselves with his fate. Nest, comes first and only."

Chul sat on her grey Interceptor, cleaning some dirt off the hood of the agile craft.

"Yo know, UMF transferred whole lot CYC packs t'day. We coulda just taken some o'theirs: they won't care 'bout a couple doz' nanopacks, anyway." She said and wiped her chin with her iridescent prosthetic arm.

Turner sighed and walked out of the bay.

"The UMF are naught but the just ones; they seek to help the feeble people. Their armies are second to none: it is foolishness to offend them—except it is not your desire to be chosen for Project Rebirth."

"Whaa yo think, Kaz? Wanna pinch CYC from "memf"?"

I shook my head. I always had a soft spot for the United Mankind Federation. My father was a soldier enlisted in their Alpha ranks for twelve years. A large part of our family's welfare was hung on his pay; the rest came from Nest and my brother's freelance cyber security and social status networking. Mom did what she could to help—a nice marketplace on the Net helped us every now and then—but her chronic illness never allowed her to stay away from the hospitals for more than a few months. Dad died four years ago, killed in action while defending a UMF base from bandits on the outskirts of York. My brother moved to Kyoto and as for Mom... Mom entered a coma.

*Everyone has their scars...*

"Thanks, Chul. I'll pass this time."

With a tap, I switched on my Ita and went upstairs. A notification thumbnail popped up at the edge of my vision when I entered the balcony. From the safety of our tower, I watched the suburbs descend into night. Days in Shi Hong suburbs were terrible enough, but nights turned to a living hell amidst cries of oppression and the darkest of human imaginations. People did whatever they could to live, even if it meant selling one another as slaves for paltry compensation. UMF crafts were having skirmishes with the Sash again tonight—evident by the bright flashes that sparked on the horizon. In the suburbs, vehicles hovered on the ground and in the air, while people briskly walked along the colourful retail windows, stepping into puddles of slightly harmful chemical waste and dirty water. Once in a while, a Sash squad would walk down the roads with the powerful remotely controlled Grim Reaper robots shaking the ground as they guarded the officers and looked out for trouble.

A little rain began to fall, even as a woman screamed for help on the street. I knew what would happen, but didn't bother to intervene. We in the Nest care about our own, first and only.

... *Except for Check.*

A mess of blue hair poked into the balcony.

"Kaz, did you hear that woman? She needs help!"

I cast an irritated look at the man.

"She needs help, I need help, you need help. Everyone needs help in this place, Check. Get used to it." I slid down against the wall and held my head in my hands. My mind went to the Arkship in the distance and my brother in Kyto. The notification overlay on my artificial eye displayed three messages; none of them had any news of my family's or my selection for any Arkship whatsoever. I sighed, hanging my head.

The man jerked me and I barely managed to snatch the Ita as he spoke the code and the transparent blast proof panel separating the balcony from the outside world vaporised. He jumped off the balcony, dragging me with him and forcing me to use the Ita to stop us both from suffering serious damage; if we were immobilised on the floor at night, we would be separately sold body parts in minutes.

"You're crazy, Check! You know that?!" I screamed at him as we skated down the wall of the safe house with him on my back.

"Just make sure you get to her in time!" He said, forcing my face to look at the woman being dragged into a green car. At nine feet above the ground, I headed towards an

armed woman on the left. She had a deformed head, obviously a result of one too many “Pixie” narcotics her mother must have taken. I felt sorry for her . . . I really did, but what they were about to do to the damsel in distress was far worse. Spinning with the Ita, I used the edge to hit her head, knocking her out instantly.

Chech jumped off and dove for the shrieking woman, while a man tried to push her into the waiting vehicle. Another man grabbed the hover board from behind and hurled it away, along with me. I jumped off the Ita and fired a headshot with the wrist weapons. Chech was unsuccessfully trying to subdue the other man in what resembled an awkward wrestling match. I sighed, taking a leisurely shot at the kidnapper’s heart. All I wanted was to get back to the safety of the tower, before Chech’s stupidity claimed both our lives.

Chech turned to the woman, but she’d already fled down the street. Another car cut her off and two men pushed her—still screaming—in. I gave Chech a forlorn look as the vehicle sped away.

“You can’t save them all, Chech. Forget it.”

“Yo, bastards!” A voice shouted behind us. I turned back at the voice, pulling Chech behind me.

A man high on “Pixie” lumbered towards us with a left prosthetic arm that was clearly a small cannon.

“Gimme the preeetty toys!” He drawled, aiming at my head.

He looked unstable and his eyes were heavy, but “Pixie” was a narcotic that heightened senses and reflex time, while granting the user a “high” and aggressive feeling. The result was deadly: murderous clowns that reacted twice as fast as normal human beings. The contact lens faintly focused on a lifeless body at the foot of the addict. The text algorithm of the artificial eye displayed an utterly sadistic statement:

“Next!”

*Thanks for the heads up, eye! Wouldn’t have hurt to tell me before I let this fool drag me into this, would it?*

I gritted my teeth and scolded Chech.

“This is why we stay indoors, idiot.”

In all honesty, I was scared. The bum would kill both of us and there was little we could do. If I so much as raised my hand to call for help, he’d shoot. Slowly, I removed the firearms from my wrist.

"Thaat's good. Attagiiirl..." he said and prepared to fire.

On the other hand, I could push Check in front of me and escape.

*He deserves to die...*

A laser ray cut through the junkie and a second one disabled the cannon arm.

"Kaz!" I looked up to see Tom heading towards us on his hoverboard and waving his laser pistol. The teen went for my Ita and threw it over to me.

"Let's get out of here!"

"Thanks, Tom!" I called and roughly pulled Check onto the hover board. Targeting lights from the Nest's tower reassured the three of us that our team had us covered. As we speedily ascended up the tower, I heard Tom cry out in pain.

I gave a horrified gasp as I saw him bleeding from the neck and falling towards the ground.

"Tom!"

Instantly, I went after him. Two gangsters shot at him thrice more, before our friends killed them both. As we reached the floor, I pushed Check off my back and left the hover board with him.

Stumbling across the wet floor, I called Tom's name again as the rain increased in intensity and body part dealers made their way towards the warm corpse.

In fury, I shot at any one that dared to come closer and hugged the dead body. Right there, I lost all composure and shot at any one that I saw.

"Kaz! Let him be or you both will perish!" I heard Turner shout into the implant.

I shouted louder, firing anywhere.

Light gunfire erupted and Haldol's cold metal arm jerked me up, but I refused to let Tom's body go. The brawler put us both on the bike and sped back into the open bay.

Once inside, he roughly dumped me and the dead boy on the cold floor.

"Are you crazy, Kaz?!"

For a moment, I stayed silent. Then I flew at him in blind rage; tearing his shirt, clawing at his face—doing anything to make him feel the pain I felt. With a deft swing, he punched me away and I blindly flew at him again. For the second time, he punched me away. I stood up for a third round, but someone held me back.

Crying in anger, I swung my arm at whoever it was, but Turner's quick reflex held it and pinned me down in a moment.

"Calm yourself, Kaz. Tom is no more. The blame lies not on Haldol."

I sobbed deeply.

---

The boy was only fourteen. Just the day before, he met me after a successful raid on private convoys. We were in the black marketer's shop, surrounded by implants and vehicle parts in an over-crowded store.

"How are you so calm, Kaz? You dropped five guys without blinking!"

I smiled at him.

"Been doing this for nine years, kid. The skill grows on you. Besides, at twenty-three, I don't get scared anymore." I lied.

"Teach me how to fight like you."

I nodded.

"When you turn sixteen, I'll take you out on an easy job. You'll learn the basics. But, that won't be possible."

"Why?" He asked, dismayed.

"You'll be selected for an Arkship. You'll be gone before the year is up."

He gave a glowing smile.

"You really think so?"

---

I did then, but as I looked at his cold body through tears now, I felt nothing but bitterness and anger at the punks, at the Sash, at the UMF, at Providence for letting a bright future fade ... most of all I felt angry at myself for pulling him into this. Check looked sullen in a corner.

And I was *raving mad* at Check too.

"You bloody Etherean!" I screamed, twisting free from Turner and leaping at him.

He stood there shell-shocked as I pounced on him and punched his face again and again.

Eventually, Chul pulled me away, while thirty or so Nest members watched silently. Check's face was black and blue, but he didn't fight back.

"I'm sorry, Kaz. This was my fault." He said, touching a swollen eye.

"Yeah, yo right. Yo got poor yung Tom dead as a doornail. Getouta here!" She shouted at him and he left in silence. I pushed the Korean assassin away from me and stormed upstairs to my room.

Once alone, I cried my heart out. All this evil, just because people had given up on the future. After an hour or so, a knock sounded on my door.

"Kaz... I have news for you." Siren said quietly.

"Leave me alone, Siren."

She kept quiet for a while and continued softly.

"Your brother will be coming in from Kyto tomorrow."

*My brother...*

"Has he been selected for the Arkship program?" I asked quietly.

"I'm afraid no. Not yet."

"...I don't want to see him, but you do. Go meet your sweet heart, just don't bring him near me."

The door opened and her soft steps echoed on the hard stone floor.

"He's your younger brother, Kaz. And he's schizophrenic. He needs to see his elder sister. Why are you avoiding him?"

I sat up and pulled my knees to my chest as she lounged on my bed.

"How am I to explain to him that he will die in two years' time because his elder sister couldn't find a way to put him on an Arkship?"

"You burden yourself too much, Kaz..." she said, combing through my black hair.

"He will be happy to see you. He's nineteen, not nine. He understands he might die soon."

I shrugged.

"You're nineteen, not twenty-nine, stop lecturing me... Just keep him away from me. I'm going to see Mom."

"How is she doing?"

I looked at the walls filled with posters and slideshows from my younger days—my happier days.

My entire life was on these crowded walls: from my embarrassing first try on a hoverboard to my scenic painting that placed second at the UMF Etherean Arts Award and my exciting first day at Nest. Faces came and vanished on the walls, almost the same way they came and went in life. We'd lost no less than two hundred and eight

members in the Shi Hong Nest and the Kyto Nest where my brother was, fared a lot worse. A picture of my family and I appeared on the wall. I looked at it and whispered.

“Pause.”

The slideshow stopped, showing a happy family of four with cheeky grins. Dad and Mom were obviously happy. I was sitting on Dad's knees grinning from ear to ear, while my brother sat on Mom's laps; his mischievous grin making him look silly. Loki, one of the last Great Horned owls perched on his head, obviously trying to smile as well.

Those were the good days.

“Continue.” I said and the slideshow moved to a close up picture of the Arkship.

But, those good days were all gone now. I stood from the messy red bed and pulled my hood over my head.

“Mom's still in coma—it's been two months now. The doctor says she might come out of it this year, but they don't think she'll live long.”

Siren sighed.

“Send her my regards, okay?”

“Mh-hm.” I said and left the room.

I stopped by the Heroes' Wall: a weathered iron wall in the building where we wrote the names of our fallen brethren. With an iron piece, I engraved the name:

“TOM” and wrote under it:

“YOU STILL HAVE TRAINING TO DO. WAIT FOR ME ON THE OTHER SIDE. —KAZ”

I planted a kiss on the name and quietly left.

---

The vehicle bay is arguably the most important part of the Nest's home. It was here that most new members of the Nest began their journey and it has always been the place where many of us breathed for the last time. From inside, the night sky shines down in all its glory. We also use the last floor to talk with Manceti, a Nest engineer hand-picked by the UMF for space structure engineering and research. His wife and kids are in the Marcel Nest, but he was raised in this Nest and is still family. Much like Check, he's soft-hearted, but unlike the idiot, he is more sensible.

With my Ita, I moved up to the second floor and stopped at my hover-bike. I called her “Ak”—a name that some of the Nest members still call me by. The red hover bike is covered with paintings that make a continuous comic encasing the entire body. It’s an interesting tale of Red Riding Hood, one that most people would find too violent and others would find too saddening. I was going to make it a short animation, but Turner turned down the idea as being too flamboyant. Instead, I painted all three hundred and eighty-two sections with my hands—a task that took me months to complete when I was nineteen.

I ran my hand over the affectionately polished body. I didn’t use Ak much anymore. A lot of people die at my hands whenever I take her out and it isn’t fair. She was meant to be my pride and joy ... Instead her use shed so much blood that I’m no longer sure if Ak was actually this red when Chul made her for me.

I let out a deep sigh and took out my e-pen. It was wirelessly connected to my brain and with it I continued drawing a painting of an Arkship taking off at dawn on the wall. I’d visit Mom tomorrow; a good excuse to evade facing the new arrival.

---

I woke up aboard Ak and gave a yawn.

*Thank you, Chul.*

She put a lot of work into this hover board: the fact that I could sleep well on the vehicle’s seat testified to that. Stretching, I appraised my progress on the Arkship painting. I would finish it today and christen it: New Dawn, Long Night.

A notification popped up, making my heart race.

*An Arkship selection?!*

“Doth the damsel sleep? —Turner.”

My heart fell.

I set the notification to unread and snuck into the room I shared with three other Nest members. Providence had mercy on me: all three were having breakfast. After a quick shower, I slunk past the large common room where most occupants of the tower were having breakfast.

I’d almost made it to the vehicle bay when I heard Turner shout my name.

*Bloody Nora, Turner! Can’t you let me evade your sight for one moment?*

I broke into a run, jumping off the gallery and using the Ita to move faster. Once at the third floor of the bay, I alighted off the hover board and strapped it to my back while I took a leap of faith and landed safely on the faithful and waiting hoverbike.

"Let's go, girl!" I whispered, ascending towards the plasma shield above.

Something dropped on Ak and I punched my forehead in frustration.

"Where doth the fair damsel fly to?" Turner asked, sitting safely behind me.

I stopped the hover bike in mid-air.

"She is going to see her mother." I replied through gritted teeth.

*Don't you start with the knight personality, Turner...*

"May a certain Knight in shining armour accompany this flaxen haired damsel?"

Frowning, I stood on the bike and faced the grinning forty-year-old.

"How many times do I have to tell you my hair's black?" I asked.

He laughed aloud, running his battle scarred hands through his sandy hair.

"Who said I was the Knight?"

I stuttered for a moment. Turner always did have that avant-garde sense of humour that I found irresistible, but for the sake of saving face, I didn't show it this time.

"Get off, damsel." I said and sat down.

"Very well, good sir." He said and jumped off. He landed on the gallery and turned to me.

"A certain knight on a red horse is expected back in time for a jolly raid when the sun is hot. Send my regards to your mother."

I gave an imperceptible smile and left.

---

Unlike the suburbs, in downtown Shi Hong every inch of land was road, building, park, station or privately owned property. That's because the centre of this city state was jointly administered by the dictatorship and the UMF. Neither liked the other, but for the sake of keeping Shi Hong intact, scores were settled in the suburbs and outskirts. The apartment towers here were much taller and much more densely packed as well. Some reached seven hundred floors, but the tallest building was the black eight hundred storey Tosu Tower owned by the dictator. The Nest was free to operate inside and outside downtown Shi Hong, as long as we didn't let the Sash capture any of us.

It was a fragile life, it really was. When the exorbitant government needed to steal from the UMF, they called Nest. When the UMF wanted to strike back at the government where it hurt, they searched for Nest. When private individuals had requests, they begged Nest. When Nest got on the bad side of any of the afore mentioned groups, they killed Nest. If the Sash happened to find Nest, they massacred Nest. Every day was just another day in Nest paradise.

Early morning in this part of Shi Hong meant busy roads and busy skies. Things were orderly and near surreal at day, but at night, downtown and suburbs were almost the same. The only difference was that the Sash here were more and better armed. If you were going to steal here, you had to be smart, fast and crazy.

I rode Ak through the air, blending in with the clockwork traffic and obeying the rules. Mom was in one of the privately owned hospitals. The services were better than either the government or the UMF could offer, but it cost near as much as an arm and a leg. I had to get a prosthetic leg a year ago, but I didn't intend on losing any of my arms to a robotic replacement till the world came to an end. To keep Mom here, I needed to work harder at obtaining rare goods and completing contracts that the government, the UMF and individuals gave. Black market was even more rife here than in the suburbs. The fact that most trade was done online preserved anonymity, especially with private groups outsmarting the government in cyber intelligence.

I took a deep breath of the near-clean air and revved the bike. Living here would be nice. Especially in those golden towers reserved for the rich. At this height, the city scape was nothing but white, black and golden buildings behind buildings, dwarfed by other buildings and merged into the same or different buildings. Vehicles moved like ants or bees; on the ground and in the sky. Evening is even more beautiful when those monstrous hologram billboards radiate colourful commercials with the brightness of ten moons and the lights of the towers shine like little stars.

Living here *would* be beautiful. My mind drifted to the dozens of paintings I had made of downtown Shi Hong and the hundreds more I could make ...if the world wasn't ending in two years.

A billboard advertised free euthanasia for those who wanted it. I rubbed my eyes and moved on.

*Dust to dust. Ashes to ashes...*

I got to the hospital room in twenty minutes.

“Hey, Mom.” I said, softly entering the room.

Lying gracefully on that bed like a perfect frail sculpture, she reminded me of the masterpieces of art that adorned the halls of the administrative tower of Shi Hong.

I took a seat beside her and moved closer to the bed. Holding her pale hands made me ponder how many times she must have taken my hands the same way when I was nothing but an ignorant child sleeping and unaware of any of the problems of the outside world.

“Brother’s coming in from Kyto today. I know he’ll love to see you—he’ll probably come with all of Loki’s owlets. Remember them?” I looked at her and sighed. Talking to someone in coma helped them recover: it was a proven fact. So, why didn’t Mom wake up?

“Why won’t you wake up?” I asked, my voice cracking.

“I keep talking to you; why won’t you answer me? Just once, just one more time, please ... wake up and smile ...” I whispered, holding her hand tightly and sobbing into the bed.

“Why do you keep falling ill, Mom? I’m not you: I can’t take this pain and fear anymore ... I don’t want to die. Brother must live—you have to live. I’m scared ...”

I looked at the window again as the tears blurred my vision. Then, I talked; on and on. I talked about everything I could remember, I talked about the good and the bad, the meaningful and the senseless. When I was done, I’d spent three hours rambling non-stop, but I felt relieved.

As I stood up, I looked at my hand. Mom was holding it.

“Mom?” I asked, softly.

“You talk a lot, Kaz; just like me.”

I gasped. She’d actually heard everything I’d said. Perhaps, in this hopeless world, miracles still happened.

“When is ...”

I gently hushed her.

“Don’t talk too much. Brother will be here soon.”

Turner’s voice came over the implant.

"Akazuki. Seek out Chul and her rebellious friends immediately! I believe her heart has led her to disastrous mischief!"

I gritted my teeth in irritation.

"Turner, my mother just came out of coma. Find some—"

Mom shook her head weakly.

"Go; I'm not leaving this place anytime soon."

"I won't take that from you. Someone has to stick—"

Turner interrupted me again.

"Thou shalt obey thy mother. Get thy behind on that bike!"

"Shut up, Turner! Shut up!" I enunciated as quietly as I could.

Mom gave me a frown.

"Standing here won't get you paid. You—"

I hushed her again.

"Don't talk, mother. You need to rest. Turner will—"

"Akazuki, if the naughtiness of Chul's heart gets us into trouble—"

*Just kill me. Just kill me now!*

Mom was obviously enjoying the action taking place.

"Turner, I work day and night! If I was working this way for the UMF, I would be living in those golden towers outside."

Mom gave a soft laugh.

"If you wanted to be part of the jeunese dore, you won't have chosen the Nest over the UMF four years ago."

She gave me a the sternest look she could manage and I succumbed.

"I'll be back soon." I planted a kiss on her forehead and ran out of the room.

"Curse you, Turner!"

His angry voice came back.

"Curse me till dusk if you will. Seek and find Chul first!"

---

Abiding by the traffic rules delayed me for ten minutes before I raced out of the dense areas and into the city outskirts to the south. From the information on the contact lens, Chul's Interceptor was in active combat mode.

It took eleven minutes at seven hundred miles per hour to get Chul and the rest of her squad into Ak's two-mile radar.

*I should really get Ak a four-mile radar.*

As much in a hurry as I was, I knew better than to fly faster than I was already moving. I didn't equip Ak with the full combat rig—because I'm superstitious of her bloodlust. If I did, I could have reached twelve hundred miles per hour with the protective plasma shield guarding me from the wind.

At a mile away, I lowered the speed and prepared Ak for combat. I looked in the distance and sighed. One could never overestimate the Korean assassin enough.

There she was, battling a destroyer using nothing but her wits and her Interceptor. The other squad members had a Hobgoblin and eight Goblins to fight off the other destroyer, but my eyes spied something on the ground: a container marked with the UMF insignia surrounded by a half a dozen UMF soldiers.

*So, that's what the trouble's all about.*

"Kaz! Glad y'here! Go, G! Grab 'em R' Nodes!" She said over the comms, blowing apart one of the clunky destroyer's engines.

There were two choices: helping her or securing the container—leaving was not an option.

*Curse you, Turner.*

I loft-bombed the soldiers around the container and followed up with steady fire from Ak's two laser guns and her single heavy cannon. Within a hundred and twenty seconds, she'd just claimed six more lives and I didn't feel a bit of remorse for what I did, at least not yet. That's what life does to you: kill or be killed.

The shield came up and intercepted a shot from a destroyer. For a split second, I froze while the fearsome destroyer turned its bow toward me.

The artificial eye displayed a text that infuriated me and made me shudder at the same time:

*"You are going to DIE!"*

*Shut, shut up!*

I barely evaded the next volley, panting as I pushed Ak's agile engines to the breaking point. The frigate and the other fighters tried in vain to force the sailors aboard the craft to abandon hunting me. An explosion rocked Ak, setting off alarms that warned me the emergency shield had been fatally weakened. I swung round in an attempt to head

under the destroyer and make my escape. The pilots of a Goblin realised what I was trying to do and heroically put themselves between me and the destroyer's cannons. The UMF showed them no mercy—the Goblin was destroyed in an instant, along with the three Nest members inside. A second Goblin tried to secure my escape, by making a suicide run at the bridge. Its pilots were killed within seconds.

*Stop! Stop, I beg you!*

I saw a third Goblin try to save this worthless life of mine.

"Don't! Don't do it!" I screamed, firing at the Goblin to force its pilots to change their mind.

A voice came over the comms.

"I'm sorry, Kaz. This is for you and Tom."

"Chech?!" I gasped.

His Goblin rammed into the port of the ship, but not before a cannon fired a projectile straight into the cockpit of the Goblin, killing him and the other two Nest members inside. Ak didn't allow me to grieve. The computer of the hoverbike forced the bike forward and under the destroyer.

"You bloody bastards!" I screamed in a teary rage, turning Ak's nose up and going Winchester at the ship's belly.

A notification with the insignia of the Project Rebirth office popped in slightly from the left. I was safe from fire under the destroyer, so I checked it, hoping and hoping and hoping.

My eyes went wide, both with joy and disappointment. My brother had been selected for Project Rebirth and was due to leave today.

*Congrats, bro ...*

The overlay went red and my mind barely registered the muzzle of the single cannon that snapped towards me before the world went black.

*Not n...*

---

I awoke in my bed, with Turner looking me over with nothing but concern. His face turned to pure rage once he saw I was conscious.

"Thou art mad, thou foolish woman! Did I not warn thee against this?!"

A sharp pain shot up from my chest and spread to my neck and waist, causing me to groan quietly. His lowered his tone, softening his face.

"Nevertheless, my heart is glad. Your life went forth from you for an hour. Now you have paid for the hospital fee of your mother with both arm and leg!"

I tried to raise my arm through the searing pain that restrained me, but I pushed on. Horror and disgust were the only things I felt as I looked at the red prosthetic arm with disdain.

"Take it off." I said, quietly.

Turner ignored me, pushing a hologram into my face.

"Behold! Behold, how your brother fought off a score malevolent aggressors two days ago!"

I grimaced as I watched him shoot, stab, trick and tear into his opponents. Half a minute later, I turned my face away, feeling proud, jealous and sickened.

"He was hallucinating, Turner. They know his schizophrenic and they know what happens when he goes into lapses: they're using him."

The man chuckled.

"Be that as it may, he saved the day. Now, hurry up and bid him farewell. From what I hear, he has bid good bye to your mother at the hospital and he should be at the station by now."

I gasped and got up with a little difficulty. Turner held a painkiller device over my shoulder and sent me off. Down at the bay, Chul was fitting Ak with the combat rig.

"Yo, Kaz!" She called.

I frowned at her, pointing at my disdained prosthetic arm.

"Yea, sorry 'bout tha'! Yo were out fo four oes. I helped ya fix 'n upgrade Ak along with these fools!" She pointed at ten engineers that wiped their sweaty faces and palms with cloths.

"We'll talk later." I said grimly, hopping on Ak and speeding out of the bay.

An image of Chech's face flashed before my eyes and I stifled a sob.

*There's no need to save anymore people now, Chech. Rest in peace.*

I knew some part of me died with him.

I sped towards Shuron Station, praying that Brother hadn't left yet. I got there just in time to see him enter a UMF transport cruiser.

I called, shouted, screamed and waved till my voice reached him above the drowning rabble of the crowd.

He looked back and we stared at each other for what seemed like an eternity. I couldn't tell whether he was upset, sad or infuriated with at me but he certainly wasn't happy. Slowly, a tear made its way to my cheek as I realised this would be the last time I would ever see him again.

I sent over a message to him and waited patiently as my younger brother read through the letter of apology and farewell that I'd written with sadness and love a hundred times over.

Slowly, a smile appeared on his face that grew wider and wider until it was the brightest grin that any human could ever express. The people around him looked at him strangely, but he didn't stop there. He laughed and waved his hands at me. I watched him mouth the words:

"I love you, sister!" Before a UMF soldier gently pulled him in. Someone in white hair waved at me, smiling genuinely. I gasped in pure delight. It was Siren! She'd been selected, but hid it from me.

*Naughty girl.*

She blew me a teary kiss and entered into the cruiser. That was the last I ever saw of them.

That night, we watched the Arkship ascend into space and with it went most of our hope, joy and spirits. There was still hope of being selected for an Arkship, but for most of us, this was the end.

---

It's just a three Arkships left now, and euthanasia's on everyone's minds. We don't talk about it much... Among the last fifty members of Shi Hong Nest, there is hardly anything to talk about. With every passing week, one member or the other commits suicide without euthanasia—almost all of them plunged to their deaths from the top of our tower.

The tyrannical government fell two months ago. It turned out they were oppressing people in order to build an army to storm the last Arkship in the region. The UMF and

the government warred for three months, killing thousands at the site and in the city. The reprisals reduced the once bustling Shi Hong into a ghost town.

I looked towards the south where the Arkship once stood. An empty space stood there as symbolically large and physically vast as the hole in my heart. Sighing, I ran my hand over Ak and picked the hoverboard, remotely instructing the hoverbike to return to our new tower downtown. The dark orange sun had almost disappeared behind the horizon, leaving twinkling stars in the east that reminded us all of how many had escaped doom. With most of the factories shut down and the population cut down to a fifth of what it was once, the air was surprisingly cleaner. It blew, whispered and soothed my sadness, reminding me of the beauty that still existed in an almost destroyed ecosystem.

I watched the hoverbike disappear into the distance before I jumped off the tower. Ak and I caused a lot more deaths in the past few months than we had ever caused before. The Nest members and I fought for each other, and fought against each other in some cases ...

*Mascot, Beck, Dre, Alex, Chris, Golem, Breezy, Sue, Kat, Karl, Kyle, Jake ...*

I counted all of my close friends that died protecting us against an insane world.

*Turner ...*

I reached the bottom and hovered to the alley where Turner exhaled for the last time. The "No Future" movement claimed his life like many other faceless people that struggled with the prospect of suicide, but chose to be brave and live.

While moving down the deserted streets of the suburbs, I caught my reflection in the partly shattered window of a derelict store. Some lights inside were still functioning, but my eyes were drawn to the silver necklace, with the ruby pendant around my neck: Mom's parting gift. She died only a month after Brother left, the doctors said it was sadness—I know it was her chronic illness that won the final battle. That day, I cried like a nine-year-old. First Turner, then Haldol and now Mom. As I felt the life fade from her hands, most of my humanity faded along with it.

Without a word, I moved on towards downtown, remembering the joy I felt when Chul was selected. Many other members of Shi Hong made it, but the great number of people from the mainly Luminous Kyto Nest that were picked surprised us.

Among deserted towers and mostly empty streets, the last of the resilient bill boards shone their light like tens of moons and some towers still retained their little

stars. It was night already, with the real stars washing the city in their glory. Vehicles passed by in singles and doubles, never pausing to look at the stranger on the hoverboard with the red hood.

I stopped outside a well-kept golden tower: the new Nest Tower and remembered the times I would dream of living here as a little girl. Now, I did and I felt incomplete. With the Sash all but gone, we kept to ourselves, using the money from the sale of the Resurrection Nodes to get by. We spent it lavishly and somewhat carelessly: the money was too much to finish spending before the neutron star would greet us.

By tomorrow, Shi Hong Nest would be no more. We were moving to the Marcel Nest in Franco-Iberia: one of the last stable regions. Manceti would be waiting for us. His family left three weeks ago and his assignment in space ended five days after. He wasn't picked, but tried all he could to stop me from losing hope.

At the top of the tower, I looked over the city: still glorious, but without most of the people. On my red prosthetic arm was another painting of an Arkship taking off at dawn. Fourteen dawns from now, there would be no Arkship left on Planet Earth.

A call came in on my comms.

"Kaz, are you there?"

"Yes, Manceti. How are you?"

He paused for a few seconds with his voice breaking when he spoke at last.

"Is Brix still alive? The UMF gave me a wild card pick."

I stuttered. Brix was his niece and a wonderful little girl, but she was her health was plagued with infections and illness. She passed away today.

"Kaz? *Is she still alive?*"

I looked at the host of stars and sighed.

"No. She died today. Why don't you take the wild card and go? You deserve it more than anyone I know."

He stayed silent for a while.

"Kaz, I have some information regarding your Arkship selection."





# Rebirth by Temerian

## **Fire & Ice** by Robert Frost

*Some say the world will end in fire,  
some say in ice.*

*From what I've tasted of desire  
I hold with those who favor fire.*

*But if it had to perish twice,  
I think I know enough of hate.*

*To say that destruction by ice  
is also great,  
and would suffice.*

**I** will not leave them!" she shouted as she slammed her closed fist down on the table in between us.

The golden waves of her long blonde hair fell off of her slender shoulders, gathering closely around her face, outlining her flushed and heated skin.

I stared across the table at her, momentarily caught off guard by her loud outburst, trying desperately not to let my own emotions rise and cause another argument.

Her lips were pressed tightly together, causing slight wrinkles to form around her mouth, and I could see the slight bulge of the muscle that clenched her jaw, a reminder of her fierce stubbornness.

Her eyes, those stunning blue orbs that had so often captivated me and held me prisoner in their soft embrace, now glared out at me dangerously, almost challenging me to respond.

I looked at her closely, this woman that I dearly loved, and behind that anger and defiance she looked tired and frail, and still she was one of the most beautiful women I had ever known.

My expression relaxed and I forced myself to take a deep breath as I slowly reached out across the table, "Cassie," I said quietly, trying to soften that anger.

She pulled back quickly saying nothing, and stood up, storming out of the room.

My hopes for a resolution crashed in defeat as I watched her go, once again there would be no discussing this ongoing issue, no solution to the dispute that had recently caused so much disagreement between us.

I lowered my head and wondered how in the world we had gotten here, and more importantly, how we would ever move forward.

We had each received our notification of acceptance (NOA'S) on Rebirth day of 2536, a day for me that would always be one of great joy and happiness, for Cassie, one of great sorrow and anger.

Due to our relatively young age, diverse genetic makeup, and professional skill sets we had both been selected as candidates for the "Rebirth Program," and while there were still a number of tests ahead, both physical and mental, many of them were mere formalities. It was the initial selection that was the primary hurdle, and once past that, you were almost assured a spot in the program, unless you were sick or mentally unstable.

"The program" as it had come to be known in the common, was much more than just some new initiative created by the [UMF], it was life itself, a ticket off of this doomed world to possible life on another world as yet unknown, unexplored. It wasn't a guarantee of course, nothing about the program was, but it was a chance, and that was more than anyone here on earth had. I like to think of it as winning the lottery, especially since we were both chosen.

The [UMF] always made a big deal out of the notifications that were provided on

Rebirth day, and this time was no exception. A number of [UMF] employees were gathered at our door at the time of our NOA delivery, as well as [UMF] media coverage. An impromptu photo session began when we actually received the notifications, it was all quite surreal, as if we were winning a prize on a game show;

*"Congratulations! You've just won an all-expenses paid trip off of this doomed planet! Where you'll be frozen solid for potentially hundreds of years! If you're really lucky, you'll find a planet worthy of human repopulation and then you'll be thawed out, and dropped on the planet surface with nothing more than a Nano field displacement unit to survive!"*

*"All of this can be yours, if you don't die in the coldest reaches of outer space first!"*  
Lucky you.

All things considered, it really was lucky, because those that didn't receive an NOA had almost no chance at all. The neutron star was coming fast and when it arrived there would be nothing left of earth, nothing left of this solar system for that matter.

A number of Arkships had already left the earth, each one heading off to a different location in deep space, far away from the devastating effects of the coming destruction. This could be one of the last Arkships to leave the planet, and I for one, would be happy to be on it.

Cassie however, was not.

It was her family that she was concerned with, her parents were older and would not be eligible for selection. Her younger brother did not have any particular skill set, nothing important enough for the selection committee to consider anyway.

There would be no last minute NOA's for them, no reprieve from the coming devastation.

There was still a small chance through the random lottery system, but most people felt that was rigged. That it had basically become a way for those "pre-selected" individuals with money and power, to get their loved ones a ticket as well.

They were probably right.

I sat back and briefly looked out the window, the last rays of sunlight were already dimming and dusk was well on its way. Much like the light of this day, time had run out for humanity, and everything that we took for granted, everything that was dear to us, was coming to an end sometime within the next few years.

I composed myself and stood up, following the way Cassie had gone out of the room. After a few moments I found her in our bedroom, sitting on the corner of our bed.

She looked up at me when I walked into the room, her bright blue eyes, gloomy and sad, peeking out from behind golden locks of hair. Her cheeks still wet from the tears that flowed easily from her beautiful eyes. The anger and defiance that was so obvious before had since disappeared, replaced by misery and sadness.

I sat down next to her and she melted into my arms while I pulled her close to me tightly.

"I can't leave them," she whispered, under her breath, between the tears.

I rocked her gently in my arms, "I know."

Nothing else was said, it had all been said before.

She was lost, with no hope and no way out, when in fact, the only hope was to get out.

It was an impossible situation with no easy answer, so we sat quietly, holding on to each other like we had done so many times before.

At some point, sometime after nightfall, after she had cried herself out, and we were both emotionally exhausted, I pulled her up into the bed and we fell asleep.

---

I was in a strange field with golden grass, some of it grown to waist high, I could see outcroppings of rocks, odd looking plants and tree-like outgrowths, all of various colors, scattered throughout the field. In the far distance I could see huge red and black mountains against a sky of light grey. There were three large planets visible in the sky and two small suns; one yellow and one white.

I was running through the field, and I was free, and I was happy, so very happy.

As I ran, I realized I couldn't hear anything, and that was odd.

I stopped running and looked around but couldn't see anyone else, no signs of civilization, nothing, just a never ending field as far as the eye could see.

I stood there and listened intently, but there was no noise at all, no sounds of other people, no sounds in the distance, nothing but absolute quiet.

It was so very quiet, an alien quiet, a quiet that I had never experienced before. An eerie quiet that permeated everything.

And then I became aware that I was alone, and suddenly I was afraid. I wondered where Cassie was.

"Cassie?"

I started running again, slowly at first, but then faster, and this time I wasn't running because I was happy, I was running because I was afraid, and the faster I ran, the more afraid I became.

"Cassie!"

There was no answer, and it was so quiet, and I was terrified, and I was running, trying desperately to find her, trying desperately to get away from this place.

Suddenly, behind me the field was on fire and everything was burning. I looked up and the sky was boiling.

I was running but nowhere was safe from the fire, it was all around me; it was everywhere.

And then I started to burn.

**"CASSIE!"**

---

I jerked up out of sleep, and sat bolt upright convinced that I was screaming. My heart was beating so hard I thought it might burst from my chest and I was sweating and gasping for breath.

There is a moment when you wake from a dream (*nightmare?*) where you are caught between the dream world and reality. A moment where your mind is foggy and you are still trapped in the panic of the dream. A moment that seems to last for an eternity, and you aren't sure where you are or what is real.

That moment can be terrifying.

As my mind cleared, and I realized that I was home in my own bed, I turned quickly, half expecting Cassie to be gone, to be alone as in my dream, but she was there, still sleeping.

I wasn't sure of the time but the early morning sunlight had already begun to brighten the windows behind the shades. A single shaft of light spilled through a small opening and shot across the room painting a bright patch of sunlight on the far wall. I could see dust particles floating lazily in the light of the shaft.

I yawned and thought briefly about laying back down, but there would be no more sleep for me. I quietly rolled out of bed, trying not to wake Cassie with my movement. She made a slight sound and rolled over pulling the covers up over her head.

I quickly grabbed some clothes from my dresser and then knelt down next to the bed, pulling the covers down so I could speak to her. She crinkled her face up in response to the light and made an unintelligible sound.

I whispered, "I'm going out for some supplies, I'll be back soon."

She replied in a sleepy, dreamy voice, without opening her eyes, "mmm, get me some chocolate if you can?"

I smiled and kissed her cheek, "chocolate for my lover, got it."

I stood up, pulling the covers back over her head and retreated from the room, closing the door behind me to let her have her rest.

At one point in human history, we were able to order anything over the Internet and simply have it delivered right to the front door. Food, luxury items, household goods, electronics, clothing, it was all available in abundance and delivered at the click of a button.

But all that had changed and it was now impossible to have anything delivered due to pirating and criminal activity, not to mention rioting and outright battles in the streets.

Anything that you needed now, you had to go out and get yourself, at a local marketplace or trading post, which more often than not, was someone selling merchandise out of the back of a heavily armored truck.

Taking care of the requirements of daily life was something that was done much easier, and much safer, in the early hours of the morning.

I finished cleaning up and put on my clothes. Before heading out I grabbed my backpack and opened our safe, grabbing my LP6 and a few rechargeable power units (RPU) to trade with. It was getting difficult to deal in money as people saw less and less value in it. Having something to trade was much more important, and at this point the only thing better to trade than RPUs, were weapons.

I looked at the LP6 in my hands, it was the smallest of the laser pulse weapons available today, but still very effective at personal protection. It could pulse six times before needing another charged RPU. I certainly wouldn't be trading it, though it would bring a very high price, but I never left the house anymore without it. I checked the

charge light on the loaded RPU to make sure it was fully charged before going out the door.

It was early in the morning so I didn't see many people out. The fact of the matter is, there just weren't that many people left. Some had died or moved away to be with family, others had simply disappeared with no explanation.

I suppose, if some of them were lucky, they had entered the project and moved to a [UMF] housing facility. It was hard to say, because becoming part of the project wasn't really something that you talked about to others. People had mixed emotions on the subject and many times they were just as likely to kill you, as they were to congratulate you. It was much safer to keep to yourself, and if possible, leave quietly.

I guess some of them might already be on an Arkship headed for another planet. I looked up in the sky as I walked along and wondered briefly about them and their voyage; what was it like to be up there, travelling through space, on your way to a different planet?

Probably lonely, and quiet.

In either case, it was much safer than being here, that much was certain.

In the early days of Cycle2, 2500, thanks to a hacking group known as "Gaia," and the global Internet, high resolution images of the neutron star, barreling through space toward our planet, were transmitted around the globe. Everyone on earth saw the terrifying and startling images. The power of the [SKiD] was seen firsthand as wholesale destruction of stars, planets and entire systems was observed in its wake.

As a society we never really recovered from that, most people just gave up and stopped going to work. Everyday systems that we all took for granted started failing on a regular basis.

Massive electrical power outages regularly roll across the country, sending entire regions into darkness. Water is sometimes not available for days. Police and emergency responders are overwhelmed and understaffed. Crime is rampant and fires often burn out of control.

We lived just outside the city, but Looting and robbery had still become commonplace, so I stuck to the sidewalk and stayed close to the buildings as I moved. Keeping myself keenly aware of any signs of potential danger.

As I got farther away from my home, I tried to avoid other people whenever possible, crossing the street if necessary to avoid any confrontation. It was sad that this is

what we had come to as a people, instead of clinging to one another for comfort in our final days, we had become isolated and suspicious. Each of us trying desperately to survive on our own. It made no sense at all.

The only hope for survival was leaving the planet, but there was no convincing Cassie to leave, that much was certain. I had been trying since we had first received our NOA's at the beginning of Cycle1, and now we were almost to Cycle2. She simply wasn't going. That left me with a choice, stay here with her, or go without her.

Not really a choice as far as I was concerned, I love her, she is everything to me, so I will stay and we will face our end together. Romeo and Juliet as it were, doomed lovers who give up everything, even life, to be together.

*"If only our history was as noble as theirs, perhaps then they would tell stories about us?"*

I chuckled at the thought, as grim as it was, and rounded the corner of a building.

Just ahead, in an open parking lot I could see the familiar trucks of the traders that I had been dealing with for the past couple of cycles.

A small group of heavily armed men patrolled the area around the trucks, one of them acknowledging me as I approached, "what's your business here, citizen?"

"I'm here to trade," I replied quietly.

"And what have you to trade?" He says coldly.

I took off the backpack and pulled out one of the RPUs to show him.

He looked at it and then nodded, signaling me with his hand to go on up to the trucks.

I moved past him quickly and continued on toward the traders. Behind me I can hear the guard addressing someone else.

"I told you before, we don't want your filthy clothes. Find something else to trade or go away!"

I glanced back to see the guard talking to a thin, younger looking man. He was dressed shabbily and carrying a sack. The guard is turning him away and he is saying something in reply, but I've walked too far and can't hear them anymore.

Just ahead, at a table setup behind one of the open trucks, I see the familiar face of a trader that I have worked with before.

"Hello Sam," I said with a nod and a smile.

Sam was a much older gentleman who looked like he had seen his fair share of hardship. He was tall and looked like he had spent way too much time out in the sun.

He had longer grey hair and wore an old cowboy hat. I had been dealing with him for the last few times I had been here. He seemed to be fair and had an unusual vocabulary that I found enjoyable, to say the least.

Sam looked up at me and nodded, "Tem, it's been a while since I've seen you."

"Yeah," I say as I approach the table, "that last batch has kept us pretty good, up till now."

He looks me up and down, as if assessing an opponent, "how's everything?"

"Doing ok so far, how's everything with you?"

"Slower than a herd of turtles," he replied, "but now that you're here, things are looking up."

I wasn't quite sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing, but I was always amused with Sam's conversational sayings.

"Whatcha got today?" he asked with a smile.

I suspect that he knew exactly what I had today, the same thing I've had the last few times I've traded with him.

I held up the RPU that I had in my hand.

He looked at it and smiled, "Well butter my butt and call me a biscuit!" He exclaimed, "You don't disappoint, do you?"

"I do my best."

He nodded, "Whatcha looking for?"

"Canned food."

"Water?"

"I have plenty, just the food."

He nodded, "meats, soups or vegetables?"

I tilted my head and shrugged, "a little of each?"

"Alright then," he said standing up and turning to get the cans from the back of the truck, "how many?"

"Same deal as before?" I questioned, "Twenty cans for one RPU?"

Sam stopped and turned toward me, "You know Tem, I'm so poor I can't afford to pay attention most of the time, why you always squeezing me so tight?"

I ignored his cry of poor, he was not poor, "and some chocolate, if you have it?"

"Fifteen cans and two chocolate bars," he replied quickly, trying to get an edge.

I thought about Cassie and how much she loved chocolate, "five chocolate bars."

"Four," he replied.

I gave in, "done."

He smiled and laughed, "oh boy Tem! You almost had me there!"

He continued laughing as he put the cans and the chocolate bars on the table.

"You sure you don't need anything else?" he asked.

I put the RPU on the table and loaded the cans and candy bars into my backpack, "that's about all I can carry right now."

"Well then, you keep your saddle oiled and your gun greased!"

I looked at him for a moment, not even sure what that meant, but it sounded positive.

"I'll do that, Sam," I said with a smile.

He nodded back at me with a smile as I grabbed the backpack and started walking away.

It was getting later in the morning now and the sun was fully up over the nearby buildings, everything was a little brighter and it was starting to get warmer, the wind was picking up a little.

As I walked out of the parking lot, I saw the young man from earlier, the one who had been turned away from the traders. He was sitting on the ground about fifty feet outside of the parking lot directly in my path. He was hunched over and his face was hidden from view. I watched him closely as I approached, making sure he made no sudden moves. I had decided to go around him, but as I moved closer I could hear something.

It sounded like crying.

I should have left him, I should have turned away, but I could hear Cassie in my head.

*"The world has become a cold, dark place. Don't let it make you one too."*

She was always saying things like that, always showing me how to be a better person. In spite of everything that had happened she was still compassionate and caring, and expected me to be as well.

I approached him slowly, cautiously, and as I got closer I could clearly hear him sobbing.

When I got close enough to him, he looked up, his face covered in streaks where the tears had washed away the dirt. His dark hair was matted and unkempt, his clothes torn and dirty, his eyes haunted and empty. He made no attempt to hide the pain and anguish that he was suffering.

He looked like a broken little boy that had been abused and beaten, lost and alone, pushed to the edge with no one to turn to and nowhere to go.

"My children ..." he said stuttering and crying, holding a bag of dirty clothing up and staring at them as though they were useless, "... I have nothing more to trade."

I moved closer and knelt down, putting my backpack on the ground between us.

He cringed and pulled away from me like a tortured animal might, staring at me wide eyed, with tears running down his face.

"I won't hurt you."

He relaxed slightly but continued to watch me carefully.

I reached in the backpack and pulled out one of the remaining RPUs and held it out, motioning for him to take it.

The tears stopped and a look of amazement slowly crept on his face, his dirty hand came out slowly, cautiously. It shook slightly as he opened his fingers.

I dropped the RPU in his hand and then closed his fingers around it with my own.

"Twenty cans of food for this," I said, motioning toward the traders.

He stared at me, eyes wide with surprise, as though no one had ever done anything for him in his entire life. He looked at the RPU in his hand, and up toward the traders, and then back to me, almost in shock, unable to speak.

I smiled and stood up, turning to walk away.

I had only gone a few steps when I heard from behind me, a muffled, "thank you."

I turned around and he was standing now, no longer a hurt little boy, but a man once again. A man that was grateful for the help, and perhaps now, even a little proud.

He seemed to stand a little straighter, a little stronger. He held out the hand with the RPU in it, "thank you."

I nodded and continued on my way.

As I walked, I wondered how much help that would actually be to him. I mean, was it worth it? That RPU was going to get him and his family a few more days down the road, to what end? At worst starvation or a violent death, at best they'll survive until the [SKiD] cooks the earth and everything on it.

I shook my head as I walked.

*"You never know what a little more time will bring."*

I took the same route back home as I had when coming, the familiar path being the

safest route. I moved quickly now, but still cautiously, wanting nothing more than to be home with these few supplies.

It certainly wasn't a treasure trove, but it would do nicely to supplement what we had back home already, and the chocolate. Cassie would love that.

I was about three fourths of the way home, only a couple of blocks away, when trouble finally found me.

I was walking up the sidewalk on the left side of the street, staying close to the buildings and moving quickly and carefully. About a block away I saw a group of young men on the same side as me, moving toward me.

They didn't appear to be hostile, they didn't appear to be causing any trouble, but I crossed the street anyway, just to play it safe. No point in risking a confrontation.

They stayed on their side and continued moving until they were just about across from me and then they started crossing the street toward me.

*"So much for avoiding confrontation."*

For a moment I considered running. I could easily be past them before they got over here, but then the moment passed and I thought it better to wait and see what happened. I stopped walking and put my hand in my pocket, firmly on my LP6.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" One of them said as he stepped onto the sidewalk about ten feet in front of me.

He was slim, but well built, obviously muscular. His hair was cropped short in a military style cut. He had no facial hair at all with narrow eyes set deep in dark olive skin. He was obviously the leader of this group as the rest of them stayed behind him, spreading out slightly.

One of the others laughed quietly, and a few of them were smiling. They all stared at me like wolves staring at a sheep.

No one said anything and there was an awkward moment of silence.

"I don't want any trouble," I said.

"Neither do we, right boys?" The leader responded quickly. The laughing one just laughed a little louder. It was a laugh that screamed, *"I'm unstable!"*

A moment crawled by, agonizingly slow.

"I'll tell you what," the leader said, his eyes narrowing, "how about you put the pack down and then you can be on your way?" he smiled quickly. A wicked smile, a sneering smile.

He took a menacing step toward me.

I pulled the LP6 from my pocket and pointed it directly at him.

The situation changed instantly. It was like someone had flipped a switch. All of their expressions changed. There was no longer any question about their intentions, these men were evil and they preyed on people.

The leaders' smiles faded. The laughing one stopped laughing. A few of them pulled out knives, no one else moved.

A few seconds ticked by, unbelievably slow.

"Oh look, he's got a little laser," came a voice from the back.

The laughing one started laughing again.

"Yeah, he's only got six pulses," the leader said confidently, "there are eight of us."

The LP6 certainly wasn't one of the biggest weapons available today, but it could easily kill a man at close range with a pulse of its laser.

I lifted the LP6 so it was pointing directly at his face and took a half step toward him, "yeah, but I'm gonna make damn sure I blow you away first," I replied calmly, "and then I'm gonna kill as many of your friends as I can."

I pointed the LP6 at the laughing one, he stopped laughing. Then I pointed it at one holding a knife, and then to one standing behind him, before bringing it back to rest on the leader once more.

"And the ones I don't kill, I'll wound so badly that they'll probably die later anyway."

*"I wasn't so sure of that, but it sounded good."*

I waited a moment, "Are a few cans of food worth that?"

No one moved, they all stared at me, waiting and watching.

A few more seconds ticked by, time had measurably slowed.

The leader smiled a nasty smile, "nah, after the sweet little piece of meat we just had, you ain't worth it."

He spit in my direction.

*"I didn't know what he was talking about, and I didn't care."*

I nodded, "I'm going to cross the road now. I'll kill anyone who comes after me."

Without waiting, I started across the road slowly, making sure to keep the LP6 pointed towards the leader.

They all watched me go, but no one made a move to come after me.

When I was finally across the street, I lowered the LP6, but kept it in my hand and turned away from them. My heart was beating fast and I felt like I might throw up.

I forced myself to keep moving. I didn't run, but walked very quickly to put some distance between me and them, turning back often to check on them.

They were already moving away, looking for their next target. They didn't care about me, there were too many other opportunities, too many other victims; the world was ripe with them.

When they were far enough away and almost out of sight, I stopped and leaned against a wall to collect myself. I was breathing shallow and my hands were shaking, the remnants of the adrenaline that had just flooded my body.

*"I'm glad I wasn't shaking when I confronted them, things might have gone differently."*

I looked back to see where they were but they were gone. No sight of them anymore.

I took a deep breath and tried to calm down, telling myself that it was ok now. After a few more minutes I turned to go.

I could see the stoop of our townhouse up ahead, I was almost home.

As I came up the front porch stairs I noticed that the door was open slightly.

*"Didn't I lock this door when I left?"*

"Cassie," I called out as I entered, "you left the door open a little."

"You've got to make sure you..." the words froze in my throat.

It looked like a bomb had gone off in the house.

The entire room had been ransacked, there was stuff thrown everywhere. Nothing had been spared, everything was either broken or displaced.

"CASSIE!"

*"After that sweet little piece of meat we just had"*

I ran through the room.

"CASSIE!"

*"Sweet little piece..."*

The kitchen was destroyed, the house was a disaster.

I ran into the bedroom and there she was on the bed, naked and bloody.

"Cassie?"

*"...of meat"*

I took her in my arms and held her tightly.

"Cassie, you're gonna be all right sweetheart," the tears flowed down my face.

Things got a little blurry after that; everything foggy and unclear.

I sat there with her for I don't know how long, just holding her and crying, until I couldn't cry any more.

I buried her the next day and then burned our townhouse to the ground, maybe the whole block, I can't remember.

I searched for those wolves, but I never found them.

I only see them in my dreams now, where I kill them all in the most brutal and imaginative ways possible.

Cassie always told me to look for the good in people, she always did that; she was so good.

*"Sweet little piece of meat."*

I can't see the good in people anymore.

---

At some point, I reported for the Rebirth program, they poked and prodded and tested me, and then declared me a successful candidate.

*"Lucky me."*

I didn't tell them about your death, or my dreams, or the wolves.

They tell us the ship is ready and we're leaving soon. The name of the ship is the Novark. We're supposed to be heading toward the Scutum-Centaurus arm of the galaxy.

*"I really don't care."*

---

I'm standing on the gangway to the Novark. Other successful candidates are pushing past me into the ship, its complete mayhem. I'm holding onto the handrail and looking out.

There are thousands of people screaming and pushing against the force fields, trying to get in, trying to get to the ship. [UMF] militia is firing sonic weapons at the crowd to keep them at bay, large numbers are being stunned and then trampled by

the remaining crowd. Others are being pressed against the electric wall by the people behind them and frying like eggs, the air smells of burnt hair and skin.

The sky is filled with huge kites. There are hundreds of them, some have writing on them.

*"Kites? Can you imagine that Cassie? It's the end of the world and people are flying kites?"*

I didn't know there were that many people left, it is a never ending wave of humanity.

*"I hope the wolves are out there, I hope they're suffering."*

I let go of the handrail and move with the other candidates into the ship.

*"I'm letting go, I'm leaving. I'm moving forward Cassie, I really am."*

*"But I'm not sure I can ever move on."*

## Author's Notes

In this story, somewhere around the end of the 21st century, shortly after the "Rebirth" program was implemented by the [UMF], the Gregorian calendar was replaced with a calendar based on seasons, known as the cycle calendar.

The new calendar was implemented partially to promote the Rebirth program (Rebirth Day!), but also to assist those involved in the project, in the hopes that when/if they arrive on another world, they have some kind of calendar/dating system that they are familiar with and is easily adaptable to the new planet. (i.e. a seasonal calendar)

On Earth each cycle has roughly 91 days and correspond loosely to the following months/seasons:

- Rebirth Day = The 1st day of the year in the cycle calendar and is always on the Spring Equinox
- First Cycle = March, April, May (Spring)
- Second Cycle = June, July, August (Summer)
- Cycle Day (also jokingly known as Recycle) = The Autumnal Equinox
- Third Cycle = Sept, Oct, Nov (Fall)
- Fourth Cycle = Dec, Jan, Feb (Winter)

Cycle dates are often referenced as the 40th day of Cycle1, 2536 (or 40C1, 2536.)

*Robert Jones  
A.K.A. Temerian*



# Left Behind

## by Devious\_T

**D**on't forget to visit your local clinic for a complimentary euthanasia consultation!" Barrs glanced balefully at the plate, then looked back to the news-flik he was reading; it was just some more useless, Empi gabble about things no-one could afford.

*"Remember, you get to choose!"*

Barrs flung down the news-flik and stared at the plate.

*"Remember, you get to choose!"* it droned again, with its robot-happy voice and sickening smile, and a picture of the pink pill showed on the screen with the lie of 'choice' printed across its casing.

Barrs slammed a hand into the scratched, plastic screen.

"Hey, what you doing?"

Barrs looked at the narrow-faced shopkeeper, "Sorry." he muttered.

The man shrugged, "You stuck too?"

"Yeah." Barrs said, remembering the innocent chime his tab had made when the UMF gave him his death sentence.

The man took a thoughtful drag on a liquastick from behind the counter, "Seems to me we're lucky in a way;" he said, between puffs of vapour, "everyone's gotta die someday, but not everyone's going to see a friggin neutron star eh?"

Barrs nodded vaguely, then made for the door. The guy was probably a gawker—didn't

seem to matter to them that earth would be blasted with radiation and practically torn apart before the neutron star was as visible as our own doomed sun.

"See ya friend." the man called out after him as he left.

It was raining, the drops thick and grey with the ash that blew in from the huge crematoriums outside the city. It was always worse when the wind blew from the east, so bad sometimes that the gov had to put up shielding around the ark.

Barrs eyes slid to it, as they always did. It was visible even from here, shimmering from the rain and the arc-lights that ringed it. It was like it was a monument, a famous statue for everyone to admire; it said 'Look here! Look here at our salvation!'

*Your salvation*, Barrs thought bitterly.

Euthanasia clinics; it was a joke. Whole hospitals dedicated to killing. That was the legacy of the UMF's glorious 'Rebirth Program', a whole lot of ash and a couple of million left iced and drifting for SKiD knows how long.

Barrs flicked up the collar of his coat and set off through ashen puddles towards the nursery. He trudged, like almost anyone these days. Most of those still in the city were staying in it; those that weren't were either already in the ark compound or knew to keep quiet.

They had had parties back in the day, when the UMF started rolling out their selection process—people congratulating one another on being picked. Then one of those parties had been shot to pieces down in C-Bomen, and the congratulations had stopped.

Barrs didn't want to kill those few lucky people chosen, he wanted to kill SKiD. But SKiD was a neutron star and it didn't give a shit.

A garish poster amid the grey caught Barrs' eye as he walked down the half-deserted street. "*We deserve it!*" it proclaimed in loud letters, with a vivid picture of earth being ripped apart by ghostly hands. Beneath it was the name of some Lumi spin-off sect; sure most of them were scientists or whatever, but more than a few civs used that wisdom and knowledge spiel and went full cultic on it.

'Lumiloons' some people called them—the crazies among the Luminous symphs who thought this was the universe's righteous punishment for the 'corruption of Earth'. Ironically, some of them had even lorry-bombed an ark compound, but all it did was kill a few innocent guards and make life harder for everyone else.

Barrs was walking down 'Joy Street', another one of the UMF's stupid ideas. *Next on to Happiness Lane, and then Kill Yourself Avenue*, he thought bitterly, then he sighed.

Sometimes he hated the grimness that festered in him, but he knew that it was there in every other stucker, really. People were killed before they even saw that pretty little pill by the crushing, gnawing knowledge that there was absolutely no chance of escape; zombos some had begun to call them. That's what the certainty of death did to you—and not the 'We're all going to die someday' gabble that the gov spoon-fed people.

*Yeah*, Barrs always thought when he saw that proclaimed across the plates, *not if you have a nice little res-node*. When that UMF secret had leaked the world had gone to shit in earnest.

Except... and Barrs found his eyes drawn to the arkship again, one of the last this side of Meta-C; the continent they had called Europe pre UMF and SKiD and the gonzo 'Rebirth Program'. But no, his fate had been decided by a computer long ago.

He was close to the nursery now, and so he went through his routine. First the smile, remembering the eyes, then the happy voice, and finally forcing himself out of the stooping posture he fell into so easily these days.

Barrs stopped by the only colourful door on the street, perhaps in the whole city, and knocked.

Clara answered, drawing the door back slowly and peeking through before she saw it was him.

"Barrs." she said warmly, smiling.

"Clara." he replied, in the same tone, and with the same practiced smile.

"Look children, Uncle Barrs is here!" Clara said, and a chorus of happy cries announced the stampede of toddling feet.

"Hey kids!" Barrs said, smiling wide and crouching down to meet them.

The children, twenty or maybe twenty-five of them now, giggled happily, and then screamed in delight as Barrs swooped in and drew one wriggling and gurgling merrily into the air.

"Alright kids, back to drawing now." Clara said, as Barrs set down little Jonas and watched him stumble off in the toddler way.

Clara eyed Barrs, "How you doing?" she asked quietly, once the kids were all back in the other room.

"Fine." he replied wearily, "I just..."

"I know." Clara said, with a tight smile, and Barrs knew that she did. He saw the dark

circles beneath her eyes, and the way she slumped when the children weren't looking; this place was too much for her to bear, though neither ever said it.

"We have to do something Clara." Barrs said.

"Do what Barrs?" Clara asked, exasperated, and he knew this topic hurt her, "What is there to d—hey you monkey!" Clara said, bending down to look at a girl they had called Getty, who was hovering just inside the corridor.

"Miss." the girl said haltingly, "I can't see any green."

"Well we should get looking then, shouldn't we?" Clara said gently, sparing a glance for Barrs as she led Getty back into the room.

Barrs nodded, and followed her in.

'Nursery' was a nice word for a concrete gov-flat that they had pockmarked with colourful pictures, but it was all they had been given. Seeing it again with all the tangled sleeping bags stuffed in one corner and the crates that they used for tables cluttered with loo-roll drawings and empty gel-rations made Barrs sick; sick that the UMF in all their wisdom didn't ever consider that parents might abandon their children to euthanise themselves. In truth no-one had, but humans were always good at surprises when it came to immorality.

Problem was the UMF chose mostly childless people to go on the arks, or only the children, to be as efficient as possible with space and gene-pools and all the rest of it. It was all very logical, and all very cold, but that's what happens when you let computers do the thinking.

There were places like this one all over C-Main, and Meta-C, and the damn dead Earth.

Clara found the green, and Barrs watched the children draw with a kind of numbness. Soon some of them would be old enough to start asking questions, and Clara and Barrs would take them aside and tell them the truth of things. And the light would die a little in that child's eyes, fading and fading as they grew into the knowledge of the death that had been chosen for them.

But between bouts of crushing melancholy Barrs knew that he couldn't let that happen, and he had hoped in vain, among the drawl of the news-fliks, for the announcement that the UMF were holding another lottery, so that he could have entered the children. But they hadn't, and the ark would be leaving soon.

He forced the dark thoughts aside and spent the rest of the afternoon playing with

the children, lulling himself into the pretend world that they still had the luxury of living in. Soon it was bedtime, and the thin, plastic curtains were drawn across the lone window.

Clara waited for him in the small kitchen, leaning heavily against the sink.

"I don't know if I can do this much longer." she said, not looking at him.

"You shouldn't have to." Barrs said.

Clara snorted bitterly, "Tell that to the UMF; tell that to SKiD."

Barrs stayed silent for awhile, not knowing how to reply, "Clara... I'll think of something."

It sounded hollow in the tight space of the kitchen, hollow and weak.

"Yeah, I know." she said quietly, emptily, "Goodnight Barrs."

"Goodnight." Barrs echoed, knowing when to leave.

He began walking to the thin rectangle of light that was the door, but then a small voice called out in the darkness, startling him.

"Mr Uncle?" the girl said in that frail, frightened way.

"Yes Kia?" he said warily, when he managed to make out her face.

"Mr Uncle where's mummy?"

Sudden ice gripped his heart, "Mummy is away darling, mummy should be back soon." he managed, suddenly needing to leave this place, to escape its choking hopelessness.

"Kia darling." Clara called out softly, "Kia come in here and I'll get you some warm choc."

Kia shuffled past Barrs without another word and disappeared into the muted light of the kitchen. Barrs let out a shaky breath and hurried to the door, opening it and stumbling out onto the street. Slowly he closed the door behind him and then slumped against the wall, shuddering as despair fought against guilt. *Why me? Why me!*, an inner voice screamed, and against it came the faces of the children that needed his help, that had no-one else to save them.

It was too much, far too much, and he broke out into sobs as the grey rain continued to drizzle down. Slowly though they subsided, and an emptiness took hold. Barrs pushed himself off the wall with the knowledge that there was only one thing he must do in the rest of his short and sorry life, and that was watch those children board the ark. Beyond that nothing now mattered, beyond that the world could burn tomorrow.

He walked slowly home, no longer feeling the rain or maybe no longer caring, and lay down to a dreamless sleep.

---

The light woke him, filtering through the moth holes in his curtains. Barrs was poor, pretty much everyone was poor, what with the arkships sucking up the world's money and all for the good of someone else. Money was pretty useless now anyway, the economy was going gonzo seeing as SKiD was going to end it all in a few years, and it could for all he cared. He traded for the nicer food, doing little tinkering jobs on old electronics like radios and those mini-fridges people had had so many of back in the day, and the UMF handed out gel-rations to those who could stomach them.

He rolled out of his bed, feeling the cold of the concrete through the thin rug beneath his feet. Same clothes as yesterday, and the day before—he was going to have to visit Maggs again soon. One sigh for the day, one dark thought, then he squeezed out breakfast onto a chipped plate and ate.

It was quiet, that was something else you noticed when more than half the city was either dead or gone. Whole districts were derelict and abandoned, chewed up by fire or fast-spreading weeds. He was the last one left in his ten; two of the other nine were iced in an ark somewhere and the rest... well, they had made their choice.

Barrs left his flat and walked down the stairs, leaving new prints in the thick dust. Out into the weak sunlight of another day, and his eyes went to the ark as they always did. It was a little ritual, as if to say 'You may not want me but I'm still here'; or maybe it was because he was afraid. Hope did that to a person. It crushed you more than anything else as it dragged you along right until the bitter end; it sharpened the pain by showing you the key to ending it.

There was another key, one with a far different lock; but then they would win, then he would be just another pot of ash letting them know that all this was okay.

He remembered his conviction last night and pushed that purpose back into the forefront of his mind; let the other thoughts simmer beneath, as they always did. The gov building was close to where he lived, and though he knew it was hopeless he set off in that direction.

Barrs didn't bother to look up at the few people he passed and they probably didn't

bother either. People didn't have anything to say to each other anymore, it had all been said a hundred times, a thousand, and know it was just noise to bring up the thoughts you didn't want to have. Clara had been different for a while, but Barrs had seen that hollow look in her eyes last night; he knew it well, like they all did, and when that final ark left it would break her.

The gov building was close now, rising above the monotonous rows of tens with a tattered UMF flag at its top. This was the last one running in all of Main-C, another testament to the brokenness of the world.

Up the steps that he remembered from the last time he had come here. Thousands had stormed this gov building that day in protest at the Rebirth selection process. But the horrible truth is that someone had to go, and someone had to stay.

The doors were stiff with neglect, but lights were on, and a hassled-looking man was behind the long, bare counter. Other civs were here, not shouting as people had used to, but sitting quietly with that empty look as they waited for the news that they were still dead, or for the news that they could 'take this' and then they would be.

"Yes?" the man asked.

"I need thirty-ish pods, for children."

"You're funny." The man replied bitterly, staring balefully at Barrs, "Children is it? Do they have cancer, hmm; or maybe their dog died. That would definitely make me feel more sorry for you, you should go with that next time."

Barrs frowned, "I'm not lying."

"Maybe you're not, but that doesn't change skwit." The man said.

"But these children don't deserve to die, they need those pods."

The man's sardonic smile vanished, "And you think others don't want them too, you think that I can just magic you a few pods? Hell, if that were true maybe *I* would be on the ark, and not stuck here sitting in a dead seat in a dead city doing a dead job that doesn't even matter!"

The last three words echoed in the hall, fading slowly, as the man slowly sunk back into his chair.

"I'm sorry." He whispered, "It's just ... it's just, oh god I don't want to die!" he screamed, and his head fell into his hands.

Barrs watched him sob with wide eyes, but then his anger rose.

"Listen to me." He hissed, grabbing the man by his shirt, "You're going to get them those pods."

"Screw you!" the man shouted, flinging himself out of Barrs grip, "And screw this fucked up, gonzoid world."

Barrs took a step back, surprised by the man's ferocity.

"Hey!" someone called out, "Where's my pill?"

Barrs stared at him, and he noticed.

"What's it to you?" he asked bitterly.

Barrs shrugged, for that was all he could do, and made for the door.

"SkiD the gov, eh?" someone said suddenly, from beside him.

*That's a new one*, Barrs thought, and then he looked at the man. "Yeah, guess so." He said, warily.

"Don't worry though, they'll get what they deserve." The man continued, and for some reason Barrs felt afraid of him. He was middle-aged, thin and ragged and smelling of cheap juze.

"Alright." Barrs said, and he started to walk away from the man.

"Just wait till tonight!" the man called out after him, and he started to walk faster.

Barrs shook the thoughts of the crazy from his head and told himself that he had known it would be hopeless, that there was no way he would get those children on the ark, but it wasn't good enough. The guilt remained, gnawing at him, and with a snarl he started walking again, going somewhere.

*Maybe I could find someone who had some pods to sell*, Barrs thought; but no, that was just a myth, he knew that, and with what money?

Hopelessness threatened to swamp him and so Barrs kept walking, staring up at the world as though in defiance of all that irrefutably was. You saw a lot that you didn't want to when you did that: the discarded items of another dead person's life strewn out across the street; the insane, gibbering words of someone utterly corrupted by madness scrawled across hollow, ransacked buildings. But you also saw the sun, and the sky, and the clouds moving in the wind as they always had and would for at least a little while longer.

Perhaps there was beauty in it, as so many Eth-heads had preached to those people stuck behind; perhaps there was beauty in mortality even, in seeing things change, but

Barrs had yet to see it. All he saw was more and more turning to grey, every scrap of colour being drained by the ash and the rain.

After a while he found himself at Maggs', and despite it all he smiled just a little as he saw her shuffling about through the dirty window. Magg's place stood overlooking the river, if you could call it a river anymore; all Barrs could see was the ash that choked it.

Barrs turned to Magg's door and smiled faintly again, remembering the meandering conversations they had had in months and years past, then climbed the steps and knocked.

"Who's there?" a frail voice called out quickly.

"Its me Maggs." He said, and he heard her shuffle to the door.

"Barrs?" Maggs asked, opening the door and looking round it with wrinkled eyes.

"Yes Maggs, its me."

The door swung slowly open, "Well come in." Maggs said, almost reluctantly, and she didn't smile as he thought she might. Barrs said nothing though as he stepped into her cluttered house.

"Looks the same." He said with another small smile.

"Aye it hasn't changed much since last you were here; you haven't seemed to change much either."

"Nothing has." Barrs grunted, perching on a rickety stool. "Nothing ever does or ever will Maggs, not until SkiD comes and knocks us out of the sky."

"That's cheerful talk." Maggs chided faintly, as she always did.

"Tell me of you then."

Maggs didn't reply for a moment as she wiped absently at a battered wooden table, then "Works been slow with the river all clogged and not many people being around for it anymore."

"Yeah." Barrs said, but he found nothing else to fill the void of silence. This was not how he remembered it.

"And the ash is getting worse."

"It is."

Then some more silence, and as Barrs' eyes roved the room he saw there on a desk in the corner of the room something pink. He saw it and knew what it was; knew its shape and the knew the little word that would be printed on its side. He said nothing, but felt a deep despair slowly wrap its cold fingers around his heart.

So now even Maggs had fallen to the emptiness.

Barrs felt suddenly brittle, like glass, and as he tore his eyes from the pink pill he thought for the first time that this house seemed so strange. That it was full of stuff and yet it was empty, and that this woman he had used to know had finally seen the same.

Even Maggs... even Maggs.

All the joy and the wonder and the *life* was being sucked out of the world long before SkiD even pierced the sky. All the hope and all the purpose was gone, leaving the rest tasting of nothing but ash.

Barrs stood up and she said nothing, he opened the door and the cold air blew in and she didn't move. She knew that he knew, but she was too afraid to look into his eyes and see it. So Barrs left her, and thought that if he came back he would not find her here but maybe clogging up the river, or drifting on the air.

---

It was later, almost dark now, and Barrs sat on his lone chair before his lone window to feel the cold wind on his skin. He hadn't gone back to the nursery, he couldn't; Maggs had left him too hollow, had destroyed all that frail purpose he had felt so fleetingly. But that wasn't the end of his despair.

Proudly proclaimed across the plates, as he walked listlessly home, had been the news that the ark was leaving, tonight.

To see those little faces and know that he had failed them would have probably driven him to the pill, just to end it. So he sat.

After a while or maybe only a few minutes there was a great flash a few streets away, and a concussive sound that Barrs knew too well from the early riots. It drew him out of his stupor slowly, for he couldn't quite believe it. But it had been an explosion, a big one, and even now the thick smoke was beginning to twist above the tents opposite him.

Slowly he stood up, and then suddenly he was running.

*It couldn't have been*, he thought desperately, as his numb mind struggled to catch up with his running legs. He skidded out of his ten and down the street, until, when he turned the final corner, he saw that it most certainly was.

A big armoured carry had been flipped on its side, like the ones the gov used to patrol the streets with in the early days, and such was the force it had been thrown with that it had smashed through the walls of the buildings on that side of the road. Smoke and flame were spewing from it, and faintly Barrs heard choking screams and cries for help. Pieces of undercarriage were lying twisted and smoking, and a blackened crater had been ripped out of the road.

But people didn't have vehicles. Nobody had vehicles, and certainly not vehicles like this one. Barrs' stumbled to a halt, staring at the carnage in shock. He took a step forwards, feeling the heat of the blaze, and knew he could do nothing to help those people still left alive inside. This was insane, this was insane and none of it made sense. Barrs wrapped his arms around his head and squeezed, he fell to his knees. But the fires and the heat and the fading cries remained. He lurched upright and stumbled closer still, but was thrown back as something blew up from inside the van.

Barrs fell back to the ground in the senselessness of it all, not even considering that he might too be in danger. But then he noticed something out of the corner of his eye, on the front of the transport. It was the insignia of the Rebirth Program, peeling from the heat but still recognisable, and he knew suddenly who those screams came from.

This must be a transport for the last few people getting on the ark, or it had been until someone had blown it up. This had people meant for the ark, meant for the pods, and those people were now dead or dying. A new idea sprang up in Barrs mind, it was cold and it was desperate and it was crazy, but it was all he had.

So he began running again, leaving those people to die as they had left him. He gasped for air amongst the ash, his heart twisted with an effort that he hadn't spent in years, and he raced through streets and past whispering people who stared at the growing flames. They stared at him as he passed because no-one ran anymore, not even to escape a fire.

More pops sounded, further away, gunfire or explosions or some other madness. There hadn't been anything like this in years; people had learnt that there was no point.

Only a few more streets until he got there but he felt as though he could not go on. His body screamed at him but his mind screamed back, finding for just a while a shred of something that he had to believe in.

Then he was there, skidding to a halt before a colourful door. A hurried knock as Barrs struggled to regain his shuddering breath.

"Who is it?" a frightened voice asked shakily.

"Clara it's Barrs, it's Barrs! Let me in!"

The door opened quickly and Barrs stumbled inside.

"Listen to me." he said in between gasps, "We need to get the children and go, we need to go now!"

"Are you insane? Go where." Clara's eyes were wild, "Haven't you seen the fires?"

"I've seen them Clara." Barrs said, "That's why we've got to go."

"Go where?" Clara shrieked again, and Barrs noticed the many pale and frightened faces watching from behind her.

"To the ark, we've got to get them to the ark; some people were going there and now they're dead. There's space Clara, there's space!"

Clara froze, and at first Barrs thought she might not have understood him. Then suddenly she was moving, some inner decision made, and the children were being clothed and hustled and all frail questions were silenced quickly.

"We're going for a walk, for an adventure." Barrs told them, struggling to find the optimism that just wasn't there.

"Have we got everyone Clara?" he asked quickly.

"I don't know." she said hysterically, "Do a count; do a count."

"Two, four, six—Clara keep them still! Two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve, fourteen, sixteen, eighteen, twenty, twenty-two, twenty-three."

"That's it." Clara said.

"Then let's go!" Barrs said, trying to control his panic.

They left the nursery with only what they could carry, and though they got the children running Barrs knew it wouldn't last, that there was no way they would get to the arkship in time like this. Because soon it would leave, and they would be stuck here till SKiD clawed close enough to kill them all.

But he had an idea, and so he took them to the river; running behind the children, shepherding them and constantly checking behind. They were terrified, but they kept moving and that's all that mattered now.

There was an old man called Jon, and many had speculated that he had been Maggs' lover way way back. But that wasn't important, what was important is that he had lived by the river for a particular reason, and that reason came in the shape of a boat.

And this was why Barrs led them to the river, for that small hope that Jon and his boat might still be there.

The nursery was close to the river, and they made it to the place quicker and easier than Barrs had dared hope for. But the sky was getting lighter as the fires continued to grow, and the smell of smoke cloyed at them upon the wind.

Here the river was cleaner and the water gurgled. The children were huddled underneath the rusting metal awning that lay outside Jon's building in a tight, white-faced group. Slowly they were coming out of their shock, and it wouldn't be long before the first wails began. Barrs couldn't let that happen, couldn't let this last thing he had left to believe in fall from his fingers.

He knocked on the door and waited, but there was no time, and so with a glance at Clara he kicked the door open. One child screamed at the sound and Barrs winced, but Clara quickly quieted the girl.

Inside it was dark, the orange light from the outside failing to penetrate far into the gloom. Barrs fumbled until he found a lamp, and when he did he flicked it on. He looked up and cried out in shock, falling back.

Jon was sitting right in front of him, but his face was hollow and white, and his hair was turning to dust.

"Barrs?" Clara asked tentatively.

"Don't let the children in here Clara." he replied, as he began searching for the keys he had seen that one time.

He had a gasp behind him and turned to see Clara in the doorway, looking at Jon's dessicated body.

"Shut the door." Barrs said, finding himself strangely calm, and Clara managed a shallow nod, sparing one last glance for the deadman.

Finally he found the keys and giving a thankful nod to the corpse he switched off the light and left the building. The children were waiting, beginning to shiver in the cold, and forcing on that familiar smile he led them down to where he hoped the boat was waiting.

Barrs hurried, though he pretended not too, because not only were the fires getting closer but all the rest of the madness was as well. The art to children, he had been told once by someone he no longer remembered, was to always make everything seem alright. Maybe that was because there was always so much that wasn't.

They found the boat where it should be, bobbing slightly beneath its tarp. They were lucky that so many in the city had gone through the ark-way or the other, otherwise it probably would have been stolen or looted or fired for sure. Barrs struggled with the tarp as Clara coaxed the children down slowly onto the jut of concrete that the boat was tied to, and when he finally got it off he jumped down into the boat and approached the control panel.

This thing was old, petrol-motored and yellowed with age. But Jon had loved it more than anything in the world.

"Just start." Barrs whispered to the boat, and then he slid in the key, closed his eyes, and twisted.

A choking, and then a sputtering, and then gloriously, wonderfully, the engine juddered to life.

"Sweet shit yes!" Barrs shouted in triumph, and then he remembered the children.

He turned to them and felt a ridiculous sensation of guilt for swearing, "Get in, then; get in." he said quickly, beckoning with one hand.

They did so slowly, with Clara holding their hands and Barrs catching them and then turning for the next one. The boat was large enough, just.

Barrs smiled at Clara, a real smile, for the first time in far too long, and then turned back to the panel. He pushed the lever upright and the boat sputtered forwards, churning through the ash-ridden water towards the beckoning tower of light that waited in the west.

He felt a bubbling hope within him, a feeling that he had forgotten. It was foolish and dangerous to hope—that was the lesson this world had taught him; but he didn't care anymore.

The children whimpered in their huddle, for now they could see the fires rising behind them, and could hear the faint screams and shouts riding on the wind. Clara would sometimes whisper a calming word, but she mostly stared into the darkness of the river, as if in disbelief or shock or simply sheer exhaustion.

They were close to the edge of the city when a huge explosion ripped through the sky behind them. The children screamed as the boat rocked with the shockwave and the night became brilliant day for a jarring moment. Barrs twisted round with wide eyes, watching the fire ball curl towards the stars, and then his gaze slid down to Clara. She met his eyes and he saw her fear, felt it too, and he grimaced. Turning back to the panel

he pushed the throttle as far forward as it would go, not worried about the whine of the engine anymore.

They were clear of the worst of the ash and the boat forged forwards towards the arkship. After that terrible explosion everything seemed muted, as though the silence and the darkness had rushed in to fill the void the blast had left. Barrs had no idea what it had been, he didn't care as long as it wasn't them, wasn't the children.

The lights grew closer, the hope grew closer; the ark was just there, but everything was quiet and still and that was a bad sign.

The boat spluttered suddenly and Barrs' eyes snapped to the fuel gauge to see what he knew he would. With a heavy heart he turned the boat to the shore.

"Barrs?"

Barrs looked at Clara, "Its running from here." he said, and then "I need your help Clara."

She managed only a shallow nod, but he saw the new determination in her eyes. Getting to the children to the ark was all that they were anymore.

It was not a long run through the stubble-grassed fields but it was torturous all the same. The light was rising behind them, chasing them, and Barrs knew that soon others would start to flock towards the site of the ark, even if was just to go somewhere on this final night.

They were close now, so close, and the children were crying but it didn't matter. Barrs could see people running inside the ark compound, towards the ark or towards the barrier. Towards the barrier was good, towards the barrier would get the children in.

Fifty metres now and then forty, and thirty. Barrs could make out the people at the barrier now, and make out what they were holding.

He skidded to a halt as the first warning shots sprayed up dirt in front of them. Wild-eyed he looked at Clara, and then the children, and his jaw set.

A step forwards, and another burst of dirt. Another step and another and he didn't care because they could shoot him and then it would be done.

"Stop!" a voice shouted, "Stay there."

But Barrs didn't listen, and he beckoned for the children to follow with a weary smile. It was all so close now, it was all alright.

The bullet took him in the thigh, burning hot. Barrs screamed as he stumbled to the floor, and then he screamed again as a sudden rage burst within him.

"Is this your legacy?" he railed at the frightened guards standing with weapons raised,

he stared at them with feral eyes and thrust out a hand, "Is this what you will remember in your glorious paradise?" spit sprayed from his mouth, "Take them!" he screamed, waving wildly at the children who huddled with wide, frightened eyes in the growing firelight. "You've got room so take them!"

The guards glanced at each other, seeing the little children and the chaos that crept ever closer from the city. Barrs collapsed in on himself, shivering with the pain and the fury that had now left him empty.

Then a hand was on his shoulder, "We have space for twenty-four." a woman said, and Barrs looked up into her eyes with disbelief; these hard grey eyes that had just spelt life.

*Twenty-four*, his numbed mind thought, and then he looked slowly at Clara.

Her face twisted in realisation, "No Barrs." she whispered, and then she screamed "No!"

Barrs eyes wandered back to the woman, "Take them." he gasped, "Take them and go; now!"

The woman nodded with sorrow and suddenly there were more people, leading the children hurriedly into the compound. They had surrounded Clara too and she was shouting and twisting but they would not let her go because the fires were massive now, and the first signs of people fleeing the city could be seen.

Barrs slumped onto his side, feeling his blood slowly leak out onto the dirt as the jagged light and the roaring noise grew and grew. In his weary bones he felt a rumbling, and so looking up with heavy eyes he saw the stabilisers retracting from the ark, and heard the deep hum begin to spool as the engines initiated.

Others were with him now, and they cried out in rage or horror as the ark began to ascend on a pillar of flame that shot up into the sky. But Barrs smiled, because in that shrinking star were the children, and Clara, and many others who would get to enjoy a beautiful life.

He smiled because that's what smiling was for, and because the pain was gone; and because the light and the noise were slowly dimming.





# The Sleeper

## by Peregrin

---

**I**nto the dark, Alix is sleeping.

Silence reigns in the cold white plastic cocoon imbedded within the dull grey metal bed, barely reached by the engine's mighty vibrations far, far under the Ark's gigantic belly. His long curly hair is evenly spread around his head, resting on the tight, hard fabric pillow under him. Lit by the intermittent hue of a single blue diode, an artificial glow-worm testifying of his one-per-minute cryostased heartbeat, his round, even brown face is pale and his almond-shaped eyes are closed, bordered by two thin layers of frosted moist. Tubes and needles surround his small naked body like thorny vines, the black snake of the adult-size nasogastric tube violating his open mouth in an uncaring gift of breathing and feeding. Ice covers the thick clear faceplate of his high-tech sarcophagus, showing a shadowed, distorted mass of cramped long shapes and small blinking dials, rows upon rows of human storage, locked in oblivious deathlike slumber.

---

Grandma is dying. In all the turmoil, nobody has time for an old, sick woman. Chemist shops are barred closed from the mobs—the ones that haven't been pillaged already

anyway—and the famed *Securité Sociale et Médicale* system, triumphally announced at President Gambergier's re-election as a major mean to "ease the transition", has lead to a maze of triplicate forms, reimbursement delays, forgotten appointments, waiting lines and personnel shortages. The sick are sent to a medical permanence, who walks them off to the emergency aisle, who points them to the U.M.F. local antenna, who directs them to the medical permanence. The endless circle of lacks and needs ran on for nearly three years until everyone realized that by "transition", *Monsieur le Président* actually meant "abandonment". The Elyseum's officials then declined any comments to the press as President Gambergier "had recently departed". Brigadiers had to clear the conference room with stunrods and flashguns.

Since the last riots started, though, worse has now come to worst and food stamps, water rations, batteries, guns, antibiotics, military police, smoke, stench from the billowing trash containers, fear is what's on everybody's mind. No more recreational drugs or 3-D Ero-Ads to distract the masses either. Even the free euthanasia kits from the European Red Cross "*Renaissance*" program are out of stock. The immense burning eye of death rushing towards Earth, first broadcasted nearly thirty years ago, still fills all thoughts and destroys all reason. Paris is now literally erupting, terror belching from the ground and mobs spreading in the streets, hot red with anger, ash grey with anguish, coarse yells and bell rings muffled by the water cannons—THAT water is not rationed by any means, that's for sure, too bad it's not "potable" as the grown-up say, since they lace it with salt—cardboard signs turned to mushy paste in the gutters, trampled by battalions of black-booted feet, crimson ink dripping on the pavement under fumes of chloroethyl sulfide in the waving ballet of plasteel shields and riot clubs.

Grandma is silent, Grandma is still. Her wrinkled face is at peace, the pain asleep with her for now. Her breath is short but steady. The small clock on the table faintly ticks, its digits dim lit in the shadow. Alix is sitting on the floor as he watches minutes vanish and seconds click away to the next, one by one. Numbers increment, numbers reset. Inhale, exhale. Repeat. This is home: there's no fear here, no noise. Only time. The time left. The time spent. The time being.

There will be no power again tonight. The Districts will get no lights and no heat. For decades now, energy is prioritarly diverted towards research structures, laboratories, space centers, launchpads and the expensive, gigantic ion field projectors aimed at

the orbiting space stations. And of course, the federal government buildings. The rush to the stars is becoming frantic, the last limit draws near, everything devised and built is now frightfully temporary: short-term investments, calculated with the slimmest margins of error, prone to any incident, doomed to destruction anyway with everything else when "It" strikes the solar system. In this desperate spur, civilians' comfort of life becomes secondary as everyone looks up to the cold stars and crosses fingers in hope that this, all this ...

...will be just enough.

Or maybe it's another terrorist attack on the power plants by the Luddites faction. No one will know, for there will be no telescreen either: no missing persons list nobody cares about, no news of roaming motorized gypsy gangs attacking village settlements in the southern countryside, no war reports from Eastern Europe with its complicated city names and numerous warring factions, no humanitarian convoys bombed by the Pacific Alliance drones on Japanese coasts, no speech from the Neo-Korea Wise Leader making empty threats of bloody retaliations for the atom-bombing of its border regions, no government-redacted reports on brigadiers in last-gen riot gear charging angry rock-throwing ragtag mobs. And cartoons channels are requisitioned for emergency broadcasts past 06:00 pm.

Behind him, Mother enters the room, her sandaled feet lightly brushing the threadbare synthetic carpet. With a sharp crack of match wood and a whiff of sulfur, she lights two more candles: it's getting dark out and the crappy portable diodes from last year's social security emergency rations packs are long gone. The yellow flicker outlines the soft oval of her tired eyes as she absent-mindedly throws the tiny burnt smoking stick in the automatic trashcan, the servos throbbing briefly as they quickly open and reseal the transparent plastic bag.

- Mom ? I have a question ...
- Yes, dear, what's your question ?
- Does God have a lottery ?

Mother pauses.

- ...a what ?

— A lottery. To decide who goes to Heaven ?

Mother opens her mouth, then closes it.

— It ... It doesn't work that way, Alix. I ...

Alix turns around. He looks at Mother with his patient, calm yet gleaming, tense gaze behind his clear plastic glasses. She calls it "The Curious Stare". She likes it so much, that stare that will bear no evasive answer, it hurts.

Children are such precious miracles in this age of loathing and selfishness, she thinks. According to the history books, Earth's population is but a mere shadow of what it used to be: five centuries, five whole hundred years of steady human depletion through war, famine, crime, plummeting birth rate and a widespread loss of faith, a lack of simple concern in mankind's drive to evolve and conquer and shine. From the 21st century's overpopulation, with its busy cities, its ever-present planes and trains and trucks, its bristling trade hubs, its manmade sounds echoing in waves all over the globe, to the silent desert of the 26th century: a handful of city-states, shyly sheltered behind canon-mounted concrete walls, the vast unruly emptiness of the countryside lying at their doors, driven by force, fear and threat, catering to a technology that now strives only to wrench mankind from its natal mudpit and slingshot it into space, in a desperate attempt at survival.

Well... Half of mankind, anyway. Those are already on their way to the U.M.F. rendez-vous points. The rest will be shed like a crab abandons his own carapace, as a snake forsakes his own skin, his hide now soft and vulnerable in the scorching sun.

She sighs softly, drags the chair near the pull-out couch where the old woman is laid and sits down, gently holding her still hand.

— Grandma Suru ... She's going to Heaven because she deserves it.

Alix scoots closer to the couch, all eyes and ears.

— She was ... She is a good person. She helped many getting on with their lives. You

see, once ... Back when I was little, we were living in the 11th District ... The slums ... A nasty place.

— Nasty.

Not a question.

— Yes. Nasty place for children to grow in. Our neighbors, they had a little boy about your age. One day, militia came. The Red Squadron, I think they were called. They wanted money, or food, or both. They had new pulse rifles, that made them confident against the brigadiers and the U.M.F. Peace Corps. They shot the father when he tried to talk to them, to protect his family.

Alix gulps. He hates sad stories but listens still with heartfelt courage. Mother pauses, her mind wrestling with memories sprained by violence, slippery with blood.

— They ... In the end, only the boy remained. Mommy ... Grandma Suru, she took him in. She gave him back a life by giving me a little brother.

— That's why she goes to Heaven ?

— Yes, dear. That's why she goes up there soon.

Mother smiles with slightly trembling lips. Alix is silent now, eyes afar, thinking in his slow, purposeful manner. Mother reaches for the electronic diagnosiser, a futile, automatic gesture, irrelevant in the absence of any medicines.

— Then why don't they do the same ?

— They, who ?

Mother is checking the diagnosiser's battery. Low level. Of course.

— The President. The President and the brigadiers ? And the Federation ?

— I ...

Mother's fingers go limp and the diagnoser falls on the couch as she feels her throat tighten, as she finally realizes her son's train of thoughts.

— Instead of a lottery with the numbers, and the genetics, why don't they choose the good people ? The best people ? Like Grandma Suru ? Or this boy's father ? This would make for a better future, right ?

Mother puts her fist in her mouth and bites it as warm tears begin to roll on her cheeks.

— I don't know, Alix ...

She turns and sobs. Leaking for days, the dam of her sorrow finally breaks but words get clogged on her tongue like wet paper drenched with glue.

— I ... don't ... know.

Alix springs up and reaches for her with his arms; as he buries his face into his mother's back, setting his glasses askew on his nose in his best effort for a comforting embrace, his most bitter regret is that for her, stars are not dreams.

They're nightmares.

Into the dark, Alix is dreaming.

Of stars. Of space. Of soft-shining mysteries hidden within the infinite void. Of planets rotating slowly, their atmosphere stretching in the sunlight, cloudy and electric storms blistering the land, landmasses rising, colliding in a tectonic ballet. Of far away suns dead for centuries, their light still piercing nothingness for all eternity. Of astronauts and spationauts and cosmonauts. And taikonauts. Taikonauts are the ones he always forgets. He always wanted to be an engineer on one of the federal bases on the Moon or Mars. From an early age, most of his toys were spaceships, his books about planets and stars. Now indeed, he sails through space: august celestial bodies sternly frown at him, a lost navigator inside the kyrium splinter, a minuscule intruder locked in the bright needle silently tearing at near-lightspeed through the aether's opaque fabric.

---

The noise of the crowd outside the car tells of their worry, their hope, their fatigue and starvation. Formless masses of people clustered under the rain, walking down the highway among countless vehicles ground to a halt by their own immobile numbers, front to back as far as the eye can see. As they wait, the electric cars, low-budget and outdated, die one by one: dials flicker, servos go silent, transmissions crank, headlamps blink, doors manually open and more shambling, sleep-deprived walkers join the fray, leaving the rest, the ones with the atomic-battery engines and the smart drive-chips and the fancy leather seats, futilely trapped inside their own fully-functional high-tech vessels above the marking lights stretched along the steelplast line-rails inserted in the road's grey pavement.

Mother peers worriedly through the humid dusk. The windshield is covered with droplets of moisture: she roughly wipes it with her sleeve. The fragile interactive tracking and driving information display imbedded in the plastiglass never worked anyway. Never has since she bought the small car second-hand from that shady guy down the street.

"Used but not abused !" he had said, smiling.

Yeah. Right.

No-one here is getting anywhere, anyhow.

— So many ... walking ... and going nowhere ...

She groans, mumbles to herself, bites her lips, drums the wheel with her fingertips for a moment. Then she turns to her son.

— We have to move. We go walking. Okay ?

Alix looks at her with consternation: it's raining and dark and cold out there, and there's too much people, and he's hungry, couldn't they just stay ...

— We can't stay in the car. Won't do us any good.

No point arguing. Good boys have to listen to their mums. Alix unbuckles himself and reaches for the small blue backpack at his feet. He frowns: there's a stain on his glasses; it'll have to wait. Mother opens the door, decompression blasts a wave of cold, damp air inside the warm habitacle. They step out under the rain, closing their coats' magnetic buttons.

Behind them, a man pops his head out his side window.

— Hey ! Hey you ! Get back in there !

Mother and Alix turn towards him: a little bald man waving a nervous, chubby hand at them from the safety of his car, a huge, last-gen 200.000 U2 atomic humvee with fibrorubber tires.

— If you don't stay, I won't be able to drive off when the traffic clears !

Mother looks around. The cars, the walkers, the rain, the lights, the darkness: it's a sad monochrome painting. And paintings don't move. She waves evasively at the man, tries to say something, tries to tell him, make him understand ... She gives up and walks away with her son.

— Come back ! The traffic will clear ! It will !

She grabs Alix's hand and quickens the pace. The fat man stays behind with his costly jeep, his outrage soon drowning in the rainfall. Mother realizes she forgot the suitcase in the trunk, but in the end, it's just like the car itself: whatever happens, they won't need it anymore. The suitcase, the car, the flat in the derelict low-wages towers of the 15th District, their meager belongings... Nothing left to salvage. No valuables left behind. She understand now that only Suru actually tied her to her life. And now, she's gone too.

But her son is still here. She grits her teeth in self-reproach. He remains. For him, she must go on.

Alix pulls the bag's straps on his shoulders and the hood over his curly hair, already wet with the cold shower as he looks around.

- Mom ? I have a question ...
- Not now.

They walk some more in shivering silence. She doesn't look at him but she can feel the Stare.

- ...All right, all right ! What's your question ?
- Where are they going ? Where are we going ?
- To the Roissy launchpad.
- What's over there ?
- The ship.
- What ship ?

She peers ahead. That's when she sees it through the crowd. With all the rain, and the falling night, and the electronic road signs turned off, and the nervously-wracking stuck traffic, she had no idea they actually got this close to the launchpad. She points her finger towards the immense silhouette in the dark background, its intricate shape gleaming in the distance, bathed by powerful spotlights aimed at the sky.

- That ship.

When Alix looks at the structure protruding above the concrete buildings of the Roissy Space Center, he's reminded of a tree: a metal fir with branches of steel and luminous pinecones, standing tall and straight like a mast yet bent in many rounds and curves and sharp edges and blades like a myriad of grasping fingers. How this organic hulk, this gigantic plant of metal can ever hope of lifting its own weight and soaring up to the sky is beyond him.

He gasps.

— That's the Arkship !

— Yes. One of them, more exactly.

— But they said Arkships are for the lottery winners !

Alix looks around with bewildered perplexity.

— Does that mean ... they won the lottery ? Did WE win the lottery ?! You said ...

— I SAID ...

Her snappy answer is brutally cut short by the sound.

A deep, powerful metallic chant suddenly explodes and starts to resonate all around the mighty ship; the vibrations are strong enough to shake the highway's safety rails, to strain and break the fragile crystalline heads-up imbedded in nearby windshields, to rattle the teeth in the mouth; for a moment, the air becomes solid, the night a tangible wall, even the rain seems to curve its own fall. The drowsy walkers are stopped dead in their tracks, hands pressed to their ears, their lips open in inaudible cries of surprise, their eyes round with panic.

Then the booming modulation recedes, back to a still audible but far-away polyharmonic stream.

— ... What was THAT ?!

— Is that ... the ship ?

Words fly off like spooked birds. The crowd start to walk again, sharing anxious, questioning stares.

- It's the ship, isn't it ?
- Was it the engines ?
- Have the engines started ? Are they taking off ?
- *Bon Dieu* ! They started the engines !

Words become shouts. Walkers start to jog.

- The engines !
- They're leaving !

Shouts become yells. Joggers start to run.

- THE ARKSHIP IS LEAVING !

The ship is leaving. They started the engines. They're going without us the bastards are leaving us to rot in here the ship is going we have to go faster before they set it off we must go before the ship goes and leave us to DIE HERE when the Star comes and KILLS US ALL KILLS IT ALL WE MUST—

Someone runs past Alix, hitting him on the shoulder with his elbow. Mother dodges another runner as she looks behind her. She sees them coming in the narrow aisles between the cars, pouring like ants as more open the doors to hurriedly join the stampede in the headlights.

Her hands tightens around her son's like a vise. She yells to him.

- RUN !

They both dart off.

Terror has spread like wildfire and the highway is now a furious stream of hurried, vociferating shapes. Some bump against open car doors or slip on the rain-slick light rails; as they fall, more trip unto them and bodies pile with cries of pain and snaps of broken bones, huddled men and women literally bursting away from under with the pressure, their face bloodied, their hands scratched to the flesh. People on the side jump over the security barriers to avoid the press and cut short through the road's

wide curve stretching before them towards the Roissy highway pass: the lucky ones land and slide on the soft grass of the gentle slope leading from the top way to the fences of the space center's backside down below; the others find out they were next to the much steeper concrete supports elevating the road and suddenly plunge into dark, unexpected emptiness, their scream cut short with a thud four meters down.

The flow of terror-stricken people soon spill over the railways and slide down the slope towards the bright-lit stocky buildings and the huge metal ramp stretching up in their middle. By hundreds, they run in the grass, drifting, dodging, tripping, getting up and running again, their clothes soaked and their eyes blinded by rain, their arms and legs caked with mud. The human landslide breaks and reshapes like thick soup as people shove and fight. Above, sounds of crashes erupt as several drivers attempt in panic to run through the rails with their cars: most uselessly plow the metal girds, some tilt over them and start barrel-rolling down the slope, crushing those unfortunate enough to stand in their path; only one actually manages to keep straight after ripping off the side rails and skid clumsily down the slope, its fractured headlamps' light swerving madly from side to side in the chaotic darkness.

The terrorized avalanche is nearing the fence now and spotlights crack on from the surveillance towers as unseen guards dart shafts of intense light upon the fray. Someone shouts a warning in a megaphone but the threat is futile, inaudible amidst the rainfall and the screams of the crowd. The first runners bounce on the grid, then get shoved back against it by the ones behind, then violently pressed by the sheer numbers of all the other crazy-eyed people piling more and more at their back. The ones that do not get crushed on the wire start climbing it up, if only for breathing's sake.

Times must have been a bit rough these last days at the Roissy Space Center: the fence is unplugged. Probably for energy saving reasons or maybe the busy brigadiers just plain forgot to turn it on. Whatever the case, someone, somewhere, rectifies that oversight: the wire crackles and hisses under the rain as deadly volts suddenly course through the grid. The fence climbers start to shake, hands clenched, eyes rolling, hair raised, as a gut-wrenching sizzling noise and a burnt porkchops smell fill the damp steaming air.

This will not be enough to cull the mad herd, though. So the officer with the megaphone orders the guards to open fire. A brutal concerto of sound and light tears into the crowd, the soft throbbing red beams of the U.M.F. Corps' battery-powered pulse

rifles mixed with the sharp cracking muzzle flashes of the *Brigades de Gendarmerie* caseless 5.56mm carbon fiber assault rifles. Blood spurts, bodies fall, screams are cut short. Still they come, tumbling down the slope. One of the guard on the towers yells something, pointing his finger at the moving darkness.

No one heeds him and after bumbling down all the way from the road up, the car freely plows at full speed from behind into the massed people. The driver, a little bald man with chubby hands, madly clutches at the wheel of his huge, last-gen atomic humvee, the fibrorubber tires crunching the bones and splattering the blood. Not even him knows if he's actually driving in panic right into the fray or just a helpless passenger trapped inside the raging, blood-smearred metal ox charging through the swarm.

In the light of a single unbroken headlamp, the fat bald driver has just enough time to spot a woman holding the hand of a young child with glasses and a blue backpack in front of his out of control blood-stained vehicle, right before a bullet pierces the windshield and splatters his brain all over the expensive leatherbound headrest. His tetanised hands remain clamped on the wheel, heading straight. Trapped in the light of the black humvee, the woman instinctively pulls the boy into her folded arms and turns her back to shield him, right before the bent hood smashes into her.

Into the dark, Alix is waiting.

Frozen in cryosleep, the only time he knows is the present of a suspended pendulum. The past vanished thousands of years ago, along with the Solar System, in a deafening, blinding, scorching celestial roar, devoured into oblivion as the planets were smashed like balls of clay, their huge splintered debris flying in the vast emptiness like gravel and dust, the remaining people in their deserted world no more than a mere detail, a single period at the brutal end of Earth's saga. His future is still tethered to the needlepoint of the Arkship, to the inert and delicate state-of-the-art nanomachines waiting in the sealed crates, to the extensive databanks edited from the 2137 James Webbs telescope spacewide search for habitable planets, holy tablets of salvation compiled by the very same prophet who predicted the end of times. To the half-conscience, finally, of the ship's artificial, immortal mind, always looking, always scanning, always probing for a safe harbour to bury at last, at long last its gargantuan travel-worn body into.

---

The sharp ray of the ocular pen blinds him in one eye, then the other, as a thumb gently pulls them alternatively open. He blinks.

— Commander ? He's coming to.

A woman's voice. A discreet scent of shampoo. A warm hand on his cheek.

... Mum ?

Alix is lying on his back. All around, blurred shapes move purposefully in a cold half-light. The air is sharp, full of metallic scents. A deep low polyharmonic humm softly resonates all around. His head feels light. His mouth is dry.

One of the silhouettes steps forward.

— How is he ?

A man's voice. Calm and steady.

— He'll be all right.

The woman puts away her lightpen and absent-mindedly brushes back her long curly red hair.

— It's just a commotion, nothing serious. He'll feel dizzy for half an hour: I gave him a quarter dose of Antalavene, in case of headache.

The Commander nods.

— All right. Thank you, Doctor.

As he kneels besides the stretcher, Alix can see he's quite tall, with dark short hair and clear blue eyes. He wears a black uniform with a blue, white and red stripped blason on one shoulder and a bordeaux red beret inserted in a strap above the other. Alix has seen this kind of uniform before, on the telescreen news.

— How do you feel ?

Alix pauses, tries to move then slowly sits up, wincing.

— ... My head ...

— It will pass soon.

The Commander helps him. His arms are strong, his hands assured.

— What's your name, son ?

— Alix.

— Alix ... All right, Alix, listen to me: you're going to be fine. My name is Louis ...

He turns to the short woman with the curly red hair. Alix now sees she's wearing some kind of close-fitting white metal suit, with a complex multi-function belt.

— ...and this is Marianne. She's a medic.

The Doctor smiles at him. Alix suddenly remembers. He looks around.

— Where is my mother ?

The Commander gives a concerned look to the white-clad woman. She stops smiling, shrugs and waves at him, in a curiously casual, contemptuous even, gesture: "Your problem. Not mine." says her hand.

He calls to the busy group of men at his back.

— Sergeant ?

A short-haired young man wearing black combat fatigues steps forward. His even features are strained, his eyes tell of his tiredness and a greasy stain is smeared on his pale forehead.

— Sir ?

— Have you seen this boy's mother when you found him ?

The young man looks at Alix hesitantly.

— ...No Sir. But she could still be out there ...

His voice breaks a little. He clears his throat, swallows.

— ...There were ...dozens of women among the bod ...

— Thank you Sergeant. Dismissed.

— Sir.

The young man tensely nods at the Commander and steps back to his duties. The Commander turns to Alix.

- What's your mother's name ?
- Alfa.
- I'll, huh ... send some men looking for her, all right ?

Alix nods silently. He's feeling better. His blue bag is lying by the stretcher, all mangled, stained and torn up. All around, people in fatigues and jumpsuits carry crates and flycases, the heaviest ones lifted by small contragrav repulser units bolted on their sides. They all look tired but every one of them move with focused purpose: not a single second of worktime is wasted.

From behind an open metal door, someone calls aloud.

- Commander ? Commander Gaultier ?!

A middle-age, dark-skinned officer enters the hangar in haste under the startled looks of the workers. The Commander walks to him, frowning.

- Easy, Captain, keep your voice down: we're not in some fish bagging unit in Rungis.
- Sir, there's more coming !

The Captain is slightly out of breath.

- Thousands ... From the Goussain suburb ... Le Plessis ... and the 6th District too.
- How many thousands ?
- We can't tell for sure, Sir. Fifteen. Maybe twenty. All are civilians on foot, but an observation drone also spotted a motorized gang with trucks coming through Le Bourget Tech-Zone, heavily armed.
- Gypsies. They're raiding the T.Z.'s fuel depot. Next they'll be coming for us but they'll lose time going around the traffic first.

There's a brief silent pause. The Captain waits with an eager stare. The Commander is fully aware that every person in the hangar is now attentively listening.

- Contact U.M.F. Control and ask those jerk-offs for more men. Set up the portable

sonic canons all around the fence and engage the force fields. Divert all necessary power from ion projector 3 and 4. From number 5 also, if you have to, but keep 1 and 2 running at all costs, understand ?

- Yes Sir !
- Now all of you, back to your posts !

The Captain jogs out the door; the men quickly resume their work. As the Commander comes back, Alix raises his hands to his eyes and gasps.

- I lost my glasses !

He starts looking around with anguish, as if chasing a little wild critter.

— You probably dropped them outside, son: you didn't have any glasses when my men brought you here.

Alix darts on the Commander a look of genuine concern.

- I'll get into trouble if we don't find them. Glasses are expensive.
- It's fine, you're safe in here. Come with me. Leave your bag here for now.

The Commander goes to the open door, signaling Alix to follow him. Marianne catches up on him at a brisk pace.

- Gaultier, what do you think you're doing ?! You know you can't take the boy in here!

They talk low under the falsely detached attention of the busy men in uniforms behind them.

— He came a long way, Marianne. He deserves at least a little tour of the place. You coming ?

The Doctor shakes her head disapprovingly but she follows the man and the boy through the large bulky sliding door. They walk together along a brightly lit wide corridor, the square metal grids of the floor resounding under their feet; as they near a large opening, the ozone scent and the harmonic buzz in the air grow stronger.

- Louis ? Sir ? I have a question ...
- Sure.
- Where are we ?

The trio exits the corridor on a railed balcony. Beyond the small metal bar, a hundred meters-high well of bridges and platforms soars up and plunges down, bathed in crisp blue light; the echoes of a thousand noises resonate in the tubular architecture from countless stories; hundreds of people go from here to there, climbing stairs, pushing crates, assembling scaffolds, welding, screwing, sorting, listing, computing.

Alix looks up in silent awe. The Commander pans around the familiar sight with a light smile on his lips.

- Do I really need to answer that question, son ?

After a minute, leading the way, the Commander walks the eyes-full boy and the red-hair woman into a small lift, lowers his head for a moment as a retinal scanner identifies him, then presses a button: the small capsule, pushed by an invisible force, jumps up its shaft and reaches its destination in a second, the nullifier fields instantly kicking in to negate the brutal crush of acceleration. They step out and, still following the Commander, they walk some more.

As he advances looking left and right, Alix sees a woman on the side, wearing battle fatigues: one of her arms is covered by a strange, bulky, sleeve-long glove with a small globe protruding within the palm. She extends her palm towards a large transparent crate filled with labeled ration boxes and with a strange shifting noise, the crate vanishes into thin air. A dial on the glove blinks as the woman proceeds to make more crates disappear in succession with the detached, casual ease of a music-hall magician.

Once they're past her, Alix calls to the Commander.

- Sir ? I have a question ...
- Yes ?
- How ... How does it work ? This, here ?

The Commander follows the child's astonished gaze behind him.

- The glove ? Calabi-Yau Compactification.
- Calabi ...
- Nano fields.

Alix stares at him in silence. The Commander waves evasively.

— It's ... complicated. Sorry, but unless you have a doctorate in molecular physics, it'll take too long to explain. So I guess it's ...

The Commander shrugs.

- ... a kind of magic.

They come to a new corridor. Temperature here is low: Alix can see his breath steaming lightly in the cold air. A long line of people in green overalls are being welcomed and sorted out by a staff of men and women in white metal suits. The Commander bypasses them all without hesitation. Eyes follow him intently but no one moves a finger to stop him.

They walk into an immense room, long and narrow, filled with rows upon rows of identical round metal coffins with open clear faceplate lids. The Commander is silent now as he progresses purposefully between the numerated oblong beds in the frosty, ozone-filled air. The outside noises, the ever-present humm of the engines grow dim, replaced by soft steamy hisses, beeping electronics and far echoes of throbbing machinery.

He finally stops in front of one of the innumerable sarcophagi, one amongst thousands within the stretched room; the plate is open and dozens of tubes are carefully laid inside on a bed of white stitched fabric. A young man with a dark face and angulous

features, clothed in a white suit, is kneeling on the side, punching digits in a pivoting touchscreen.

Before the Commander has the time to talk to him, however, Marianne grabs him by the sleeve of his black uniform with surprising vehemence.

- So that's what this is all about, Gaultier ?!
- What is, Doctor ?

The Commander coldly locks gaze with the red-haired woman as she speaks through clenched teeth, as if brimming with anger and yet unwilling to disturb the peace of this frozen medical tomb.

— Tell me: is it the shooting ? Or the electrical fence ? Which one do you feel the most sorry for ?!

Just like Marianne, the Commander's voice is low but his clear blue eyes are now lit with anger.

— I did ... what I had to do. The fence was about to collapse and the force fields would have taken too long to go online. They would have swamped us. I did what I had to do.

— Then why, Louis ?

Anger has left Marianne's face, replaced by a questioning sadness, her voice raspy and broken as the Commander yanks his sleeve free from her failing grasp.

— Why would you bring this boy here, of all places ?!

Without answering, the Commander turns towards the young man in the white suit.

— Doctor Raj. I need you to put this boy on ice.

Raj stands up with a startled look on Alix.

- Him ? Who ... Who is he ?
- Never mind that. I want him to go to sleep. Now.

The young dark-faced medic frowns.

- But this is not ...

He waves towards the bed.

- ... I mean, it's ... Is he even on the lists ?!
- No he's not, but now, you see why this is not a problem, don't you ?

Raj, who obviously still sees "this" as "a problem", becomes more defensive as he speaks with the Commander, stammering in rising indignation, Marianne and Alix standing in awkward silence two feet behind them.

- But ... But he has no clearance ! And he ... he doesn't even have any ... any implants sockets ! You ...

The Commander reflexively lifts a hand to his left ear and for the first time, Alix sees the two tiny square-shaped metal holes imbedded in the flesh at the base of the skull, behind the ear lobe, as he runs an absent-minded finger along them.

- He'll get them later. He's too young anyway.
- But ... But he can't stay in here ! He's from the ... the DISTRICTS, dammit !

The Commander steps forward and grabs the startled and scornful medic by the metal collar of his white suit, his voice now deep as a growl.

- Look. This boy. Goes. To sleep. Are you going to help me, or not ?

Raj hesitates then pulls himself loose from the man's grip and starts briskly walking away.

- I'm reporting you to the Control, right now ! You can't do that ! You CAN'T !
- Fine !

The Commander kneels in front of the glowing touchscreen, grumbling as he starts sorting out the many buttons blinking in sequences.

- I'll do it myself... *Pauvre con* ...

He calls behind his shoulder.

- So Marianne ... Will you help ?

The young woman is already pulling her curly hair behind her head, taming the fiery mane with a rubber band from a side pocket. She rolls her eyes exasperatedly.

— You need medical assistance for this, Louis. You knew that all too well when you took me on your little stroll.

She doesn't heed the Commander's bitter smile to himself and stoops near Alix.

— All right, listen, honey: I need you to trust me and follow my instructions. We don't have much time, understand ?

Alix nods silently with a tense but calm gaze.

- What's your name ?
- Alix.
- ...you last name, silly.
- Virpiaud. Alix Virpiaud.

She takes a pad and a metal tube with buttons from her utility belt.

- You got that, Gaultier ?

— Yes, yes: V-I-R-P-I-O. Got it. Give me the rest, fast.

Alix raises his hand.

— No, Sir. It's spelled ...

— No time for that, kid ! We got to set you up quickly.

Marianne is now undressing him with efficient, professional care. Soon, the boy finds himself naked in the cold air, his bare feet fidgeting on the metal floor, his brown-toned skin covered in goosebumps, shivering as the Doctor runs her scanner on him while consulting the screen of her pad, connected to the plugs behind her ear by a thin green cable. She starts dictating to the Commander in a monochord tone.

— Male. Nine years old. One point thirty-eight meters. Thirty-five kilos. No surgery, no dentals. No cybernetics, no neural implants. Lactose intolerant. B-type asthma. Level one hyperopia.

She mumbles as a red rectangle flashes on her pad.

— U.M.F. Rebirth Program Clearance: Negative ... In case you wondered.

— Lay him down and plug him.

— This is madness ...

Marianne sighs to herself but gently guides the boy into the oversized white fabric padded coffin before assembling various tubes, captors and needles that she methodically pricks into his skin as gently—but also as quickly—as she can. At each stab, Alix winces but remains silent, his eyes on the luminous cable-riddled intricate criss-cross of the ceiling. At last, Marianne passes her warm hand on his cold cheek.

— You're uncomfortable, honey, I know. It'll be better soon, I promise. Now that you're plugged, they can't take you out of this without breaking their own protocol.

As she stands with an expression of sadness and regret on her face that belies her comforting words, Alix finally opens his trembling lips.

— S... Sir? I have a qu... question...

The Commander frowns, his eyes still set on the blinking screen as he punches in the last settings.

— Do you always, like, broadcast your own questions, son?

Alix remains silent. The Commander looks at him: his stern gaze gets locked in the boy's Stare. An instant passes.

— ...What's your question?

— This bed here... This place. It's yours, isn't it?

The Commander pushes away the pivoting screen, leans forward and puts his face close to Alix's. Their foreheads almost touch. His pale azure eyes plunge into the boy's brown open wide pupils as his lips move in a murmur.

— Soon the injectors will kick in: you'll be sedated and go to sleep. They'll freeze you later.

— But, Sir...

— No one knows how long you'll stay in here but trust me: this is the safest bed you'll ever dream into.

— But, Sir, it's your...

— When you wake up, this world will be gone forever. A new world will await you. Your world.

— But, SIR ?!

The Commander is silent now, his vaporous breath suspended one inch above the boy's face. Alix's eyes are questioning wells, his voice no more than a trembling whisper.

— You won God's lottery. Why won't you go ?

The Commander pauses, opens his mouth, then closes it.

— It doesn't work that way, son. It's just that ...after this ...After all this ...

A nearby machine within the coffin beeps. Alix starts to feels a numbness in his cold limbs. His head goes light.

— ...after what I've done ...I don't deserve to go to Heaven. But you do.

The Commander kisses him on the forehead, a gentle brush of dry lips, a soft good-night peck.

— And under my protection, you will.

Alix's vision blurs and his eyes feel moist as he enters into the dark.



# Memories Of A Pirate

## by Lethys

### Prelude: Darkness Unfolds

**B**oldrum Salix awoke. Something... was different. He opened his eyes and nearly blinded himself. 'Ok lad, take it nice and slow' he thought while getting used to his overly sensitive eyesight. He managed not to puke and suddenly it hit him hard—he was not alone. While looking at his newest flirt from last night's drinking session with his friends, he remembered.

The party his friends had thrown for his successful application at the [UMF].

Their drinking session at home until they were all equally bad at pronunciation and then the pub crawl through various bars and "establishments", as they call it.

The last bar with this girl in it who was looking so sorrowful and full of grief.

Yes he remembered talking to her, soothing her pain—at least a bit. It was easy for him to seduce her. Sad women are easily manipulated.

He stood wearily and shaking, going to the bathroom. 'First things first' he thought while stepping into the shower. The water somewhat revived his body a bit from too much alcohol last night, but nonetheless he felt sick. Finished with showering and barely able to stay on his feet he stepped out of the shower and heard shuffling feet in his room. He dressed up and poked outside. Boldrum watched her dressing up and

desperately trying to remember her name. 'Fadra', 'Cladra', 'Madra' he mumbled silently, not being able to find a sense in these names. 'Something like that. Fuck it, I'm going with Madra' he thought while opening the door completely. "Good morning Madra" he said, eying her and fetching his shoes. She spun, looking him in the eye and ... smiled. 'At least he picked the right name. Pleased with himself Boldrum sat down on a chair and put on his boots. "Thank you for listening to a lost souls rambling" Madra said. She walked up to him and touched his shoulder with her hand. "I hope you find peace with your new job" she said, smiling again and opened the door. "W-wait" Boldrum stuttered. "That's it? No hard feelings about what happened? No overly attached emotions?" He was confused. All the other women were at least somewhat disappointed and shocked the next day when he just left them in his flat or told them to go away—no one wanted to die alone these days. Madra was different. She wasn't what one would describe as a resemblance of the beauty model of this time but she was good looking anyway. He instead was the ugly type, a scar running from his left cheek to his right shoulder. That was a "gift" from his father who tried to kill him as a child because he would die anyway—better end it now. Boldrum never understood what women see in him with that scar and his general grumpy attitude to the world. "No. Why should I have any feeling for you? You just were there when I needed a friend. You could say that I as much used you as you did use me. I thank you for that but I'm not in love with you, you know?" With that she lightly stepped out of the door and left Boldrum dumbfounded.

*What he found down there was not peace or redemption but of a far worse nature. Knowing the world will end, he just found what every sane man would find: insanity*

## Chapter 1: Reality

**S**eeing this huge area for the first time was an awesome sight. He was in the shuttle which flew regularly from the city to the [UMF] facility. Boldrum immediately recognized the gigantic ship. It was half finished, the top 2/3rds of it still only a husk. The lower parts were already sealed and finished. What a huge and mind-blowing view that ship was; it really was an inspiring view. That's the exact reason why he thought they built it down here on earth: to inspire people not to lose hope. It's kind of hard in space, where no one is watching. He stared, as tremendous amounts of steel, aluminum, carbon and other materials were shipped, packed, unloaded and brought to their next destination. Men and women were moving all over the place, shouting, managing the flow of goods and controlling robots which had huge forklifts mounted on the front. An army of welders took care of cutting plates and beams. This place was buzzing with life and feeding this juggernaut with enough resources to maintain a stable production rate was a feat in itself. Boldrum remembered his grandfather who always said that if mankind has to face destruction, they will band together to achieve the impossible. 'And we did' Boldrum thought. Some 500 years before, scientists discovered a neutron star on his way to earth, destroying everything in his path. A vortex of death was heading right to earth. They couldn't really pinpoint the exact timeframe, but the newest calculations suggest that this neutron star is already in the solar system and humanity had another 10 years before their certain death. Boldrum was in his mid-twenties now and had never understood all the consequences, physics and prospects of this neutron star, this impending doom. Boldrums father once told him that there had been reports all over the world about bad things that happened. Families killed themselves, rape and murder, fanatic churches rose and fell, people losing all hope. Child birth rate dropped worldwide at an alarming rate—who could blame them?

In the first years of the [UMF] project there were uprisings and quarrels, even riots. Everyone wanted to save their family and beloved ones and wanted to make sure that their heirs, if they had any, were safe. But that would just not be possible; the majority of the planet would just die. It took a great effort from governments, police and the military to make sure the ARK project was safe as there were many attempts to destroy it. Some groups try to achieve that even now, that's why the whole area was under tight

security measures and the military was everywhere. After initial quarrels and political dramas the governments of the United Nations and the very powerful [UMF] came to a simple conclusion: people had to understand that they probably weren't saved and their heirs will most likely stay on earth and die, but nonetheless in order to save humanity, those sentenced to death needed to build a ship.

Some of the ARK ships passengers will be specially trained men and women to make sure everything will be running smoothly on the ship and upon arrival many of those people will be very important as they are trained for survival and the special needs of a race that just stranded forever on a new and unknown planet—Boldrum was certain of this. They always tell people that all passengers are picked randomly by some sort of algorithm, but Boldrum never believed them. Those people, he assumed, will provide knowledge and 'spiritual leadership' to the common people. The [UMF] of course did plan for an artificial intelligence to be integrated into the ship to provide knowledge and help for everyone and to store thousands of zettabyte of data from earth—knowledge, science, history, religion, recipes, survival tactics. Nearly everything known on earth was copied, stored and brought with these new settlers.

The Arkship was filled with normal people from all across the world, picked randomly by an algorithm written and approved by all members of the [UMF]—so they told humanity. About 50 Years ago, all governments installed new schools and altered the course of instructions in existing schools to provide the future generation to be prepared for the life on a new planet. All people who witnessed the discovery would most likely be dead by then anyway. They were taught the general mechanic of a neutron star—the immense density of this once majestic star which eventually exploded and lost the battle against gravity. Kids also learn the importance of the ARK project, the dream mankind has in order to hopefully save millions of men and women whom would then be frozen and sent on their journey to another star system to rebuild mankind. There are classes and special training courses for kids if they are good in math and science, architecture and planning so they are trained in navigation, astrophysics, biology, chemistry, city building architecture, general planning and software engineering. Others were specialized in more mundane topics like history, arts, music and drawings. Humanity wants to save as many of their culture and known science as possible which was perfectly understandable. In recent years, since the discovery of the nanoformer and nanopacks, those kids also learned on the very few occasions

how to use this piece of technology. Boldrum hated it because he was just not good in building things out of thin air. One had to have the materials in your nanopacks, true, but that just felt ... wrong to him. It still was just appearing out of nowhere and if he used it digging into the ground, rocks and mud just disappeared. That technology just felt odd. He did ok in school but was nowhere near the best ones. He never had any dreams or intentions of being on that ship anyway—he just accepted his fate in dying on earth which was perfectly fine for him. He had no right to live a happy life anyway because of what he had done.

His shuttle arrived on the designated landing pad and all passengers and their luggage were searched thoroughly by some military personnel. Boldrum followed the markings on the floor to his destination: the foreman of the welding crew. While walking through the hallways, Boldrum again admired the sight and saw a huge complex, most likely the administration building. Beside the landing pad it was the only real building on the construction site. All other constructs were big halls and assembly hangars built with the nanoformer for the different parts of the Arkship.

He passed the more or less friendly hallways quickly and descended into the belly of the beast where the construction of the ship never stopped. It smelled strange, a mixture of sweat, dust and metal—the steady running furnaces, melting pods and heavy lifting robots did not help in lowering that sensation to Boldrums nose. He went to the ground level and immediately saw the small office shack of the foreman. He stepped inside, surprised by an odd sight. A woman stood in front of a desk with her finger following a line on some very complicated plan which hung on the wall. Boldrum knew this woman.

*I worked hard and did my best, yet that wasn't enough to save her*

## Interlude I: Bad habits

**C**oldaan shook his head “No Mave, it is right. We have to do this. He would die anyway”. Mave gave him a cold look and said “No Coldaan, you are enraged again. Can't you see what you are asking from me? Can't you see the insanity in your words?” She walked over to her frightened child and picked him up. “I will protect you” she whispered in his ear. “I will watch over you and everything will be fine. I promise”. Coldaan stared at her then spun and went outside. ‘Stupid woman’ he thought, ‘all I do is work all day and try to be a good husband. She has a good life, hasn't she? She has everything she can ask for. That shithead of my son even goes to school and may be picked by the government for the mission. He is a troublemaker anyway and won't be of any good use on Alioth. That's not fair. I worked hard all my life to get on that ship with Mave. I gave up everything to make that happen. I should be on that ship, not him’.

Coldaan didn't even realize that his words made no sense at all and his logic was twisted. He was too enraged to see that his arguing is wrong. He wandered the streets and finally reached his goal—a bar would surely sooth him now. Alcohol always did.

Many beers and shots later he reached his level again where he felt comfortably numb. He wasn't addicted, not at all. At least he thought so. His anger wasn't completely gone by now but he was good hearted enough to call it a night. He didn't even think about his useless son anymore. Coldaan staggered home and whistled a song that came to his mind as he entered his house. Mave obviously wasn't sleeping at all because he saw her sitting in the kitchen. She stood, shushed him quiet and took his arm. “You were drinking again? Is that your solution to everything now? Be quiet at least so you don't wake him up!” she hissed and turned. He grabbed her by the shoulder and grumbled “That boy is useless. He will never do anything good for humanity, they don't need a scoundrel like him on that planet. I should take his place on that ship”. Mave turned and eyed him “He is your son Coldaan and he doesn't even HAVE A TICKET YOU FOOL”. She shouted the last words, immediately feeling guilty. ‘I hope I haven't awakened him’ she thought as she stared at Coldaan.

The boy awoke and felt ... strange. He looked at the clock—it was two in the night and still he could hear his mother arguing. He raised and went into the hallway cautiously. They lived in a small house with two floors and an open stairwell. It was nothing too big and shiny, just a normal home. His father worked at the mines and

dug into the earth every day searching for iron. Times have changed much since the discovery that the earth will be destroyed. Nearly everyone he knows works in those mines. Coldaan was a good man, sometimes a bit harsh and grumpy but he did everything he could to make them a living. 'I wonder what father sees down there' the boy thought. 'Sometimes I think he goes mad working all those hours alone and in the near darkness'. He couldn't have possibly known how close he was to the truth with that thought. His father behaved strange lately. The boy stood in front of the parapet and watched his parents argue. "Mum? Is everything alright?"

*They have to pay. They will pay for this. At that point I will be dead anyway.  
She meant everything to me so I will take everything from them*

## Chapter 2: Shadows

**B**oldrum eyed the woman. 'Now come on, you must be kidding me' he thought. 'This just can't be'. The woman smiled at him. A twisted one as he noted. "Well, well, whom do we have here? So you finally decided it was a good thing to actually work and do humanity a service?" she asked. Boldrum nodded, still being stunned seeing her here as his superior. "Do your work properly, treat everyone with respect and since I know you: don't dare and come late to work!" she said. "Have you given up staying up all night, drinking beer with your friends and seducing women every night?" That last sentence was flavored with jealousy. "Yes Nami, I... I won't be late" He finally got his voice back. "I never thought of you being here". "Well Boldrum, I TOLD you that I'm an engineer. And guess what, they need a lot of them nowadays" she answered. "You will be in crew 45, welding plates. Get outside, left and after about 300 meters you see them". He gave her a confused look. "Well... uhhhh... yeah". "What?" She asked. "Do you really think that ONE night with me some years ago that meant nothing at all give you some kind of privilege? Get over it Boldrum, I don't want anything to do with you, nor do I want you to think otherwise. Now get out of here and start working those plates!!" He left the shack and walked slowly in the direction she pointed out to him. Five years before, Nami was his girlfriend. Well, at least she thought that at that time. They weren't friends, he only knew her because he saw her from time to time, and at some point he had asked her out. They spent the night together and Boldrum just left in the morning without saying a word. Like he always did. She had never talked to him again and just left the city for her new work, so he had heard. He didn't realize that she worked for the [UMF]. At that time he just didn't care enough for his surroundings and didn't show enough empathy for others. He was always high from some drugs, just took what he needed from others and mourned after a life he never had a chance to live.

'This will be interesting' he thought when he finally reached his crew and greeted them.

There were 25 people on his crew and Boldrum knew that he doesn't need to learn their names. Some will go soon, some will stay; it was a steady flow of people working for the [UMF]. Many only wanted to earn enough money to make their families a nice living for a year and then they go together to the euthanasia center where they die in

peace and not get killed viciously by molten stone or by an overdose of gamma rays or even worse. Boldrum never understood why people were still bothering with money as to him it was of no use anymore. They couldn't take it with them when they die and still people made fortunes selling stuff and goods. Some devices and food supplies were really expensive these days like copper or personal computers. Nearly every bit of transistor and computational/electronic resource went directly to the [UMF] to bolster their Arkship program so it was just natural that all electronic devices were getting more and more expensive. But still... Somehow Boldrum couldn't get rid of the feeling that some people were making good use of their knowledge of the market and they indeed did make good money. Perhaps it's used to buy them a ticket on one of the arks? He didn't know that for sure.

His colleagues gave him a quick crash course in how to weld those plates together and after an hour he slowly got the hang of it and they started to mind their own business again. Boldrum didn't know of any other Arkships other than the Novark. Sure, there were dozens, but he was sure that the Novark was the last one to leave earth. He had no clue how far the construction was or if it even was possible to finish it. 'I hope they finish it in time, otherwise this stupid work of mine has no meaning at all' he thought. He felt like he had to atone for his past. He had never been a good guy, and who would blame him? Nearly been killed by his father, no future to live in, no hope to even have a good life to begin with and nothing to lose. But he was stronger than that dark, lingering shadow he once had been and wanted to give something back to humanity. He wanted to be part of that last thing, his last gift to other people—maybe he would be forgiven his crimes?

*They told me it's as easy as pressing a button. Just like that. Could I really be so bold?*

## Chapter 3: Prospects

**B**oldrum was working 10 hours a day in that huge yard, went home and ate, slept and begun anew—for one year now. Only two guys were still the same on his crew, every other man quit his job and was probably dead by now. ‘Whatever mates, guess I see you soon’ he thought while working on a big steel plate. “You really do a good job, you know that?” someone bellowed behind him, scaring the shit out of him. He spun and saw Nami sitting on a big gas bottle, smiling. “Well, those losers can’t do anything right. Someone has to save that ship you know?” he answered with a nod in the direction of his crew. “They will get better. Eventually” she said “But they have to do it without you”. “So...you have another job for me?” Boldrum asked eagerly. “It does get boring down here”. “Maybe, come with me and we will see if it suits you. In my opinion you are the right one for this job” she answered him. With that, she hopped down and casually walked away—assuming he would follow. ‘Damn. That woman still has me turned on’ he thought while grabbing his tools and following her.

They crossed the whole yard, passing hundreds of workers and thousands of plates, beams and molten pots. Once outside he glanced to the Arkship and felt a little proud. It was halfway finished, but he was certain that a lot of those plates were the ones he welded and produced. The upper half was still only a husk, but he thought he could see small ants crawling about everywhere. He could ask Nami what they were doing, but Boldrums nature was a simple one: he wasn’t that much interested in things going on around him, because he just didn’t care enough.

They passed three more identical yards as his own workplace and finally reached a big assembly building, maybe 200 times 500 meters. Nami went through a small door beside a huge gate and waved him in. Two military guys checked them before they could enter. ‘Why the extra security? I normally only see them at the shuttles, but not around the workspace...’ Boldrum thought. He couldn’t see anything, as they were standing inside a small room. “Are you ready?” Nami asked. “For...what?” he replied. She rolled her eyes and opened the door to the assembly building. Boldrum was amazed by the sight. This was something entirely different from what he had known in is year of work. It was a clean building with rows and rows of some kind of pods. People were on ladders and gantries, welding and working on those things. “Isn’t it beautiful?” Nami asked as they slowly walked a long path between endless rows of those pods. There

were pods on each side, stacked by 10. Boldrum could see hundreds, if not thousands of them all around him and always separated by a long path. "Here the [UMF] builds the cryopods for the Novark" Nami continued. "There will be millions of them Boldrum and we only allow our best workers to build them. It's a special task with great responsibility and I want you here. You have proven yourself". Boldrum was stunned again. "What do I have to do?" he asked as they climbed up a gantry. She stopped in front of a nearly finished pod and started to explain ...

After what seemed an eternity, Boldrum thought he knew anything about pods that there is to know. He wrote down notes and had 10 sheets covered with schematics and explanations. As they were finished, another guy climbed up and waited patiently besides Nami. Boldrum was so caught by this pod that he didn't notice at first. When he finally looked up and eyed the newcomer he was stunned again.

"M... Madra" he mumbled and eyed Nami "Don't tell me you are my supervisor in here?"

*What I did was necessary in order to get my revenge. Deep down I know it wasn't right. Maybe I just went as mad as my father did.*

## Interlude II: Scar

**Y**OU!" Coldaan shouted "GET DOWN HERE!" The boy couldn't move, he was terrified by the looks of his father. "Coldaan, what do you want from him?" The soft and soothing voice from his mother could be heard from below "He is sleepy, let him go to bed".

"NO!" Coldaan bellowed and moved away from his wife. Mave reacted with her inherent instincts and grabbed Coldaan by the shoulder. He spun and eyed her, fury and anger in his eyes. 'This is it then' she thought 'I... must... be... strong... now'.

"They say he has a ticket Mave and I will get it from him. I will not die on this god forsaken earth! I am an experienced miner and I'm more useful than this troublemaker!" Coldaan spat with fury. "My dear husband" Mave tried to be as gentle as possible "Who says that? I thought you work alone? He has no ticket my dear. No one in this room has. Otherwise he would already be at the [UMF] facility for further instructions and special training". "So they have also gotten to you" Coldaan whispered in a harsh tone "Even you they turned on me for their plot! How dare they? But I know what I have to do now". With that he hit Mave right in her face, knocking her back. Her head flew backwards and the little boy thought he heard something snap. Then she fell to the ground and hit the table hard with her head. Blood was seeping on the floor. Coldaan watched with icy eyes, then turned his head to the boy and slowly walked to the staircase. The boy watched him as his father took step after step and finally he ran. He always liked hiding games which he played with his mother while father wasn't at home. So he knew some pretty good spots to hide. He ran towards the bedroom of his parents but suddenly stopped. He remembered something his grandmother told him once and shivered. 'He killed her' the boy thought 'I owe this to her!'. With those thoughts he spun and jumped to a small knot tied into a rope which hangs loose from the ceiling. The small and unstable ladder unfolded and the kid rushed upstairs in the attic. He searched furiously for what he thought was here somewhere. Time was short and he already heard his father on the ladder. He threw blankets aside, rifled through boxes as fast as he could but didn't find anything. He skid over to another box and suddenly froze. His father was right behind him and gave him a punch. "There you are you little bastard". He was breathing heavily and the kid could smell the alcohol. "I will now save you from your miserable life, boy". With that he attacked his kid with something

made of metal. The boy screamed and rolled to the left, but it was too late. The knife dug into his skin and he could feel blood running down his cheek. With a big yelp the boy completed his roll and threw some blankets from the box at his father. Then he saw something big and just took his chance. He snatched the box and ran for his life to the other side of the attic and hid. His father was only confused for seconds, but that was enough. He shouted and freed himself of the blankets. "Where are you boy?" he whispered while he searched for him "I will only help you. Like I helped your mother, you know?". Something creaked. 'Gotcha' Coldaan thought and looked behind the shelf.

There was his son, cowering behind the shelf with shivering hands. He held a gun and pulled the trigger.

"Mum?" the boy asked "Mum? Are you there mum?" Tears were running down his cheeks as he held his mother. He was covered in blood, part of it from Coldaan but mostly it was own. He just sat there and rocked her slightly while his mind slept into darkness and the void ...

*We always played this roleplaying game you must know. I was her good prince, Lethys, saving her, Albireo, from the dreadful dragon Malakar. Those were good times and when I now think of it, Lethys was always a part of me, but not as we both thought at that time. I became a sinister, darker and more evil version of the once white knight.*

## Chapter 4: Origin

**B**oldrum couldn't believe his new found luck in life. It truly was intriguing and suspicious but he just rolled with it. There wasn't that much time left anyway so why not enjoy it? He remembered that fateful day 9 years ago when he met Madra for the first time. Well technically not the first time because they had a date before. They were assigned together on a team to build the cryopods. Soon after their first day together they were dating and 1 year later they married. The cryopod teams always worked in pairs of two to make it easier and faster to construct it. Madra and Boldrum built all of them from scratch with all electrical circuits and all cables, wires and tubes needed for the freezing procedure. As he worked there he was fascinated with the technology but couldn't quite grasp the colossal implications—being frozen for 10.000 years and your body only working on the lowest possible minimum. He suspected from the whole lot of tubes that there was some kind of feeding mechanism built into it but he never figured out if that was true. Maybe they are in a death like state where they don't need food? He wasn't sure and couldn't solve that mystery on his own. But there was more: every passenger got a mind implant too so their consciousness would be preserved to not degenerate over that long period of time. The official statement was that it was needed for the landing on this new planet, Alioth they call it, so that certain skills which once were known and were forgotten due to the freezing process can be retrained more easily.

'But that implicated a degeneration of the mind doesn't it?' he thought and stood up. It was still early and Madra was already up and in the shower. He smiled and joined her. "You, Sir, are a skunk and really need this shower" she joyfully said while holding him tight. "I too wish you a pleasant and wonderful morning madam" he snot-nosedly said. "Awww come on my little honey badger, I know you can't be mad at me!" She gave him one of her disarming smiles and smacked his butt while exiting the shower "I'm outta here before you get some silly ideas what you could do with me..."

Boldrum smiled and just felt happy. Happy for the time he had left with her and even if they would die in one or two years he knew that they had a precious and wonderful time together. The Novark was nearly ready and will be taking off soon. So in about two months they have a lot of spare time and will be on an around the world trip with their own little shuttle. They hadn't even bothered to buy one because people

were abandoning their stuff all over the world. Many were dead too due to the euthanasia programs so it felt a bit like being the last human on earth. There were still a lot of people here in the city because of the Arkship, but as soon as it leaves many will too abandon their homes and never come back; or die somewhere peaceful. So they hoarded supplies, food and fuel for their last trip together and even got them a mobile euthanasia unit filled with only the best drugs. 'Those were good 9 years' he thought 'I'm glad that I have the love of my life by my side when everything ends'.

The assembly hall nearly was empty now. Only 3 rows were left over with maybe 100 pods left. All teams were buzzing about and working on them as fast as they could—all of them had plans for the last few months or maybe years. Madra and Bolddrum giggled and worked not that enthusiastic. They wanted to enjoy the last bits of work they had left together. Bolddrum pointed to a small gathering of people and shrugged. "They get fancier and more egoistic each day" he whispered to Madra "They let everyone know that they got a ticket and will live on Alioth". 'Some of them call themselves "Citizen" already' Bolddrum thought 'They already made plans, Logos and design ships with their Nanoformer to be "prepared" when they land there. Some even had plans to build their own city and government'. "Pathetic" Madra hissed "This reminds me of this song you love so much". He smiled at her "Are you hungry?", "Yeah I'm starving!" she replied and blew him a kiss. Bolddrum kissed her forehead and made his way down the gantry and towards the vending machine. He bought two tuna sandwiches for them, her favorite. As he glanced back, he froze and watched as some men of that crowd pulled on a finished pod and the whole rack started to move.

*They were well organized and had agents and spies on nearly each ship. Some of them even infiltrated the biggest and most popular movements and groups of the Arks.*

## Chapter 5: Ruin

**B**oldrum instinctively started running and yelled “MADRA! WATCH OUT!” But it was too late and Boldrum was too far away. The whole rack of pods creaked, metal burst and people were scattering, running away in fear. The whole rack sank to the left and as more and more supporting beams cracked it fell. Madra was on that side, furiously climbing her way down the gantry but she was too slow. Pods, metal beams and the gantry itself buried her beneath. “HELP HER!” he screamed as he ran “MADRA IS DOWN THERE, HELP HER!”. No one moved. They all just stared at him and then back to the pile of metal. Boldrum reached the pile and immediately started to dig into it, clearing smaller beams and metal bits. “Madra, are you there? Speak to me!” he demanded as he worked fiercely. “HELP ME YOU FOOLS!” he shouted and glanced at those arrogant people “FUCK YOU!” Boldrum finally could see Madras crushed hand but as he dug alone, it took him ages. He heaved a pod to the side and was able to drag her distorted body out of the pile. Holding her close he shouted “Could you fucking idiots at least call for the medics?” Suddenly, after what seemed to him like hours, they started to move. One ran for the phone hanging beside the door and some gathered around Boldrum. “We ... it ... fell ... We ... it was an accident ...” a hushed voice full of guilt said “It must have happened because there were only some pods left and the rack...” He trailed off, eyes to the ground. “You could have helped her” Boldrum snapped “You could’ve supported the pods so they won’t fall. You could’ve THOUGHT before you acted. But you didn’t...” Madra suddenly opened her eyes a bit and her crushed and distorted face smiled as best as she could “I need you...Lethys ... promise me to make this trip alone”. She coughed, blood dripping out of her mouth “...hold me...” Boldrum held her with tears in his eyes and was remembered of a day he’d long had forgotten by now. “Albireo” he whimpered. Madra had two different eye colors, that’s why he chose this name for her in their roleplaying games “I love you ...”. As more and more people gathered around them, Madra stopped breathing and Boldrum let his feelings take control and make him hard. ‘I will avenge her’ he thought while slightly rocking her dead body ‘I promise you I will have you revenged. Boldrum died today too, my love, and we will see each other again’.

Lethys, as he now called himself, awoke in his dark room. He hadn’t been outside for weeks after Madra has been taken from him. Those pesky guys tried talking to him

but he ignored them. He heard that some even said it was his fault because he left her up there alone and that it didn't matter anyway because she would have died in a few months anyhow. They are too arrogant to see other people's motives and lifestyles. They never understood why Lethys and Madra were happy and accepted their fate so they have to be outsiders—they can't be normal. It's outrageous to just accept the fact that many people have to work for others but will die in the end and are happy; they preach peace and acceptance but live exclusiveness and exclude people.

Earth itself was dying slowly. The neutron star entered the orbit of the outer planets some days ago and humanity watched as Jupiter with all his moons was disintegrated within hours. The gigantic gravitational field sent debris and asteroids astray—many of them directly to earth. Only minor asteroids collided with earth so far, but scientists were not sure if a bigger one was inbound. Thousands, even millions died due to the impacts. Still, they called earth "lucky" because it was a neutron star and no magnetar. Would it had been the latter, humanity would've died already. Boldrum suspected that earth may have only days left. So, whatever happens to him won't matter anymore.

'Oh they will pay' he thought as he stood up and took his gun 'they will die as soon as they think they're safe and start a new life on that shit planet of Alioth' If he is denied a short future with Madra, they will be denied a happy life on that planet. He dressed himself and wanted to go outside, getting everything set up for his trip. The Novark was scheduled for next week and the last passengers were now boarding. He knew that those morons were on the lower levels of the ark, so they will embark today. People on the higher levels were already on board since weeks or even months. So his plan was simple: fly there, get inside with his workers ID and get near the ramp then kill them all. If he can make it to his shuttle again he will make the trip he intended to do with Madra. If they kill him on the construction site—so be it.

A knock came from his door and Lethys pondered. 'Who the hell is this?' he thought while readying his weapon. The door opened and two big fellas walked in, eyeing him with a hard look. "I wish you no harm, Lethys, instead I'm here to offer you a much better chance for your revenge" a voice said behind those thugs.

*The first kill is always the hardest one, they say. To me it was the easiest one*

## Chapter 6: Plots

**T**he man introduced himself simply as “Padre” and took Lethys to his hideout. They didn't talk much on their way there, just bad small talk. Lethys didn't care if they kill him or torture him now; he had no clue what these guys were up to. Here he was, sitting in some basement of a suburban house which has been abandoned a long time ago with two thugs and a grim looking man. “Padre” put something on the table in between them and eyed Lethys “I've been watching you, Lethys. I watched you since your mother died. My organization is a secret brotherhood of men and women, seeking to rebuild mankind in THEIR fashion on Alioth. We have agents and spies in every major pathetic group of those settlers and once we're on that new planet, we will influence those groups from the inside to secretly serve OUR goals. You have the right...” he smiled at his obvious joke “...way to look at life. Take what you need, don't care about others but use them so you achieve your goal. You did this for all of your life and I know your goal now: get revenge”. Lethys shrugged and took the thing on the table—it was a small electronic stick “Why me? I'm not important”. “Because my dear man” he answered Lethys “that's the point. No one will suspect you. Besides, you are our last man with access to the ship who can accomplish such a feat”. Lethys smiled and said “I don't care much about your plots; I just want to get revenge on those people. But what do you want in return from me?”.

“Serve our goal Lethys. Infiltrate them, kill them, rob them—do as you please. Those pods aren't only intended to freeze people for the journey. They act as a node too. Your life, your soul, is bound to that pod and if you die, you will wake up inside it. You will live forever Lethys and you can have your revenge time after time after time. We need men like you. We need men who don't follow the rules, who think out of the box—we need hired guns who bring chaos to those petty settlers in order to take control”.

'Immortality' Lethys thought 'Madra would like this. So perhaps that's why there are so many tubes and devices installed in those pods'. It seems unfair to him that she died before he knew that kind of information. What a wonderful life that would have been with Madra on Alioth...

“I'm in” Lethys replied “They took an eternity with Madra from me, so I will take an eternity punishing them”

As the hours passed and Lethys waited for the narcotic to kick in, he let his mind

adrift. He still had his ID to get onboard the Novark to do some last checks on the pods. No one would be suspicious because he fiddled with some of the pods. He was told that the implant he now will get is the same as the ones of the original passengers. This was needed for the mind-transport to the pod and the link for the resurrection. 'So I was kind of right the whole time' he thought while he sensed the sedative finally lowering the curtains. 'The minds of the passengers are really stored in some chip on that implant'. Of course he had to kill the original passenger to allow his mind the transfer into that body. But there was no other way to infiltrate this organization he hated so much for the death of his wife. They called themselves "good" and "helpful" but did nothing to help his wife. All of them will pay. His head suddenly felt drowsy and he fell asleep.

*They think that I am one of them. They don't recognize me—how could they? I look different now. In infiltrating them and bringing these people suffering and pain I finally found, what every insane man would find: peace*

## Epilog: A new world

**C**old. He felt so cold. Only one thought shot through his still frozen body. He could hear music in the back of his head but that had to be a hallucination.

*Madra will be avenged. Blood will be spilled; "Citizens" and supporters of those people will burn and die*

His eyes were closed and he was sure he was still frozen, but nonetheless he 'saw' a pod with a man inside it, obviously it was him. "I am Aphelia" Madra said "And you are in a slow wake up procedure. This is only a simulation in your brain to get you up and running for the landing on Alioth. I will now give you a tour through the Arkship, starting at your pod" 'What the hell' Lethys thought 'Why does Madra speak with me?'

Lethys felt ... odd. He heard some faint voices inside of his head. Was he mad or were those real? If he could just concentrate more on these other strange entities, he felt like he could touch or even change them somehow. There was more to all of this. He was certain now.

The robotic camera outside moved and Lethys could see a small plate above the window of the pod which said: Coldaan Weeper.

He had no idea who that man had been or what he had done to get here, but he remembered Madra dying in his arms and one sentence:

*I am Lethys and the world shall burn*



# Experiment Alpha

## by Kurock

**S**pace.

Contrary to popular belief back on Earth, stars do not move as you travel through space. Well they do, but the changes are imperceptible to the naked eye. And they don't twinkle. Everyone I cared about I left back on Earth. Now Earth is destroyed, by some nova star and them along with it. Staring out into the void echos the void inside me. It is the loneliest I have ever felt. And then a space whale drifts by.

"Holy frak."

"Language, Lance."

"Doctor, was that ..."

"A space whale? Indubitably."

"So that means this is a ..."

"Simulation? Affirmative."

"I wish you would ..."

"Cease interrupting? Incredibly implausible."

I don't know what to make of Doctor Clarion. It might help if I could see his face under his helmet. The only way I know it's him is his name tag, generated by my HUD, hovering above his head. I also know him by his annoying voice. It's not shrill or grinding, it's the tone. Condescending as a frakking....

"Do the whales meet with your approval?"

I grit my teeth. He even interrupts my thoughts. I look at the viewport as if to contemplate his question. In my reflection, it's clear that I too am wearing a similar silver spacesuit with a dark reflective dome helmet. Even though we are inside the ship, I don't bother trying to take off or open my helmet. I know what the doctor would say in his condescending tone: "It's not implemented yet." Why does he have to make me feel so *stupid* all the time?

I concentrate on my HUD. It looks like they have upgraded it again. I can see my abstracted vitals and my name, 'Lance Wolfram', hovering in the corner of my vision. It seems to disappear when I stop concentrating on it. Handy that.

Movement outside the viewport catches my eye. A pod of space whales floats by silently. I would be in awe if not for my company. Instead I just feel resigned.

"No," I answer finally.

"Aphelia," Clarions says to the air "No fictitious creatures in the simulations please. That includes the dragons. Thank you."

I will never understand the man.

---

Blinding light and cacophony of static slowly dissipate and resolve into a pin oak forest with ferns covering the ground. A body of dark blue water is barely visible through the tree trunk. Near the edge, the ferns kiss the mirrored water with barely a ripple. A figure clad in medieval full plate stumbles near the water's edge, leans on a nearby tree trunk, while lifting a gauntleted hand to his armored head.

"Oh no. Not again," he mumbles to himself.

In the center of the lake, the water slowly bulges upwards. A tip of metal protrudes from the water. Soon it is followed by the remainder of the blade, heavily decorated in gold filigree. The golden hilt soon rises out of the water. A pale feminine hand grips the ornate sword. A lithe arm holds it aloft for a moment before, with a flick of her wrist, the sword flies end over end towards the knight, delicately dispersing droplets in majestic arcs.

"Aphelia. Pause simulation. If you please," says a familiar and distinctly annoying voice.

The sword ceases its flight with droplets hanging motionless. The beauty is lost to the knight as he turns to look for the speaker.

"Doctor Clarion!" he exclaims, not hiding the exasperation in his voice.

"You called?" A man appears out of the forest, similarly clad in full plate.

"You..." the knight shakes his head in resignation.

"How droll, Wolfram. I was confident that we ascertained my identity when you belatedly showed it to the world a scant moment earlier," remarks Clarion through a closed visor.

"You are using me as a guinea pig. Again."

"If you continue to predicate the self-evident I shall have no choice but to declare you addled."

"What is the point of all this?" He gestures at his suit of armor. Trying to open his visor, but it does not budge.

*Preliminary neural networking testing procedures have been initiated. Scenario selected by Doctor Clarion: Medieval...*

"Aphelia, that is sufficient, thank you," Doctor Clarion interjects.

"Aphelia sounds awfully robotic. When she talked to me she sounded like my dead father. It was creepy as hell. This is much better."

"I have selected the appropriate settings to maximally adhere to my personal preferences."

"Uh huh. Why can't I take off my helmet?" Wolfram asks, pulling on his head.

"It has not been implemented yet." Clarion says offhandedly "Again self-evident. Do I need to execute a complete diagnostics upon your person? Your brain may have taken injury from malfunctioning cryo-stasis partial revival."

"Why do you always talk like that?"

"My, my, my. Are we not brimming with enquiries this day? You'll have to excuse me if I do not pontificate the solution, but rather parade my labor before your faculties, limited though they may be." Clarion says as he motions Wolfram to follow him through the woods.

"Please stop talking that way, you're giving me a headache," pleads Wolfram as he follows.

"I shall endeavour to communicate in a simplified manner. Ahem. I mean, I will try to speak a little more simply."

"Oh, thank you," Wolfram says failing to keep the sarcasm from his voice.

The walk through the forest is brief, and the pair emerge from the trees on the edge of a deserted town. A multitude of loose standing white domes surrounds a square metallic central tower. The buildings have large spherical chunks missing from them, matching the large craters that haphazardly dot the dirt streets.

"What happened here?" Wolfram asks

"Pirates happened here," Clarion replies, "They call themselves that anyway. Marauder would be a more accurate term. Perhaps I should send them a nano-container of dictionaries. Regardless, they do it for the spoils of war and to hear the lamentations of the women. A shame that the true spoils reside behind expensive security while the undefended poor end up losing the little they have."

"Take this town for example. Some enterprising miners left the protective bubble of the Arkship seeking greater rewards. They found some rare metals and decided to settle in this valley. They knew the risks and they were marauded to the last."

The pair round a corner and find a stone dome has collapsed into the street, effectively blocking their path.

"Ah excellent. Lance, use your nanoformer to clear the rubble," Clarion instructs.

"But I am wearing some sort of old-frakking-ass armor, not my suit. You didn't answer why that was by the way." Wolfram says, slightly agitatedly.

"It has all the functionality of your usual suit. It just looks better in my not-quite-so-humble opinion."

"Uh, ok," Wolfram holds out his right hand at the rubble.

"Other hand," Clarion corrects.

"Right," Wolfram confirms.

"No. Left. Are you listening, Lance?" Clarion asks.

Wolfram grits his teeth. "Why the left hand?" Wolfram holds his left hand towards the offending rubble.

"It is a mystery. My prevailing theory is that all the right handed nanoformers are on a different Arkship."

Wolfram waves his hand at the rubble. The nanoformer highlights a patch of rubble in a red glow. There is a low hum and part of the rubble vanishes, leaving small avalanches of dust that halfheartedly attempts to fill the newly created void.

"Wasn't I supposed to collect some stone there?"

"Not without the correct rights. This land still belongs to those miners. They did a

good job in hiding their territory unit. Here let me fix that for you," Doctor Clarion waves his hand in the air, typing on a keyboard only he can see,"Try again."

Wolfram once again holds out his gauntleted left hand, but this time a blue ray bathes the rubble. A few seconds later the rubble disappears and Wolfram exclaims, "999 stone? That can't be right."

"It's a simulation, Wolfram. Don't expect everything to work exactly the same as in the real world." Clarion holds his own left handed nanoformer out towards a nearby tree trunk. The trunk disappears into the ray. The treetop remains motionless hanging in the mid air.

"Hmmm, 999 wood collected. Aphelia make a note: adjust the amount of resources gathered. Low importance."

The two leave the destroyed town. The terrain gives way to rolling grasslands, with the occasional forest and mountains beyond those. As they hike through the grasslands, Wolfram finds himself enjoying the pristine scenery. As the hours pass he finds himself becoming almost content. Eventually, the pair cross over a rise, seeing a huge metal structure that looks like an alien claw held skyward. It is embedded into the ground with a large crater around it.

"Well what do you think?"

"It's the Arkship"

"It's our Novark. I created this model myself."

"Why? Doesn't Aphelia have its blueprint somewhere?"

"You would think so, but no, nothing. I had to create it manually for the simulation. It is not functional, obviously, but we can at least approximate kyrium's indestructibility in the simulation. That is not the only blueprint that is missing. There are quite a few others. Important ones. Like the light speed engines used by all Arkships. And there are other things too. Like the general destinations of the other Arkships."

"You think it's on purpose?"

"Honestly it is much too convenient not to be. Those Cinderfall people might have been right all along: the [UMF] was, and still is, hiding information from us."

"Isn't that the syndicate that wanted to make all the [UMF] secrets public?"

"The same. They thought they won too. But it's seems the [UMF]'s claws were in too deep. Now, punch me."

"What?" says Wolfram slightly startled at the sudden change of topic.

"You heard me. Punch me."

"With pleasure," says Wolfram, but he remains standing motionless.

"What is the matter, Lance?"

"I want to. But I can't. We are in the safe zone, aren't we?"

"You are observant today. And yes. No fighting within the safe zone. I have successfully replicated the effects of the safe zone in the simulation. Do you believe a safe-zone is necessary?"

"Necessary for what?"

"For civilization. For human development, advancement and enlightenment. Does humanity require an external force to coerce them into compliance? I mean, do people need to be forced to play nice?"

"I would like to believe not. Surely we can solve our own problems."

"But what of the marauders. Those that believe that 'might makes right'."

"Well, we have police don't we?"

"Police are all good and well for a few criminals, but what if they get organised and better equipped? The miners had a local sheriff. He was powerless when they swooped in and blew holes through out town."

"The army then." Wolfram says unsure of himself

"Are you not replacing one means of forcing people into compliance with another? A more violent one?"

Wolfram scratches the top of his helm in confusion "I don't know anymore."

"What do you know of chivalry?"

"What?" Wolframs head spins from leaping from one topic to another "The ancient archaic code of the knights? Does this have something to do with why we are wearing this silly armor?"

Clarion continues, "It is the combination of qualities expected of an ideal knight. Courage, honour, courtesy, justice, and a readiness to help the weak. It is a marvelous ideal."

"I don't see what this has to do with ...well... anything."

"Then let me explain ..."

Once upon a time. All good stories start with once upon a time, Lance. Pay attention. I am using small words just for you.

*I thank you kindly.*

Where was I? Ah yes. Once upon a time there was an hovercraft-parts engineer. She was not the best at her trade of creating elements specifically for hovercraft. Elements: that's what we call parts for constructs, Lance.

*I already know that.*

Then stop interrupting. She was not the best, but still made decent, serviceable parts. She looked quite fetching in her metallic blue spacesuit and baggy yellow scarf of no small sentimental value. She had just punched a few battery schemas into the 3D printer when the doorbell rang.

Leaving her work, she went to open the door. There she found that there was no one outside her workshop, nor near any of the handful of other buildings in the small valley. Slightly agitated, she still marveled at how the Stardrop Mining Outpost had grown since they first settled in the empty valley.

*Stardrop? Sounds like a candy.*

It will make sense later, Lance. Stardrop's square central tower held the resurrection nodes, power and shield generators. The tower was surrounded by the warehouse domes filled with containers, 3D printers, foundries, redundant batteries and other useful items.

"BOO!"

Reality crashed back on her as a man in a burnt-orange spacesuit, smudged with grey mine dirt, hopped out from an alcove. She was not impressed and her face showed it.

"Did I scare you, luv?" he asked with a smile barely visible through his dirty visor.

"No, Thomas, you didn't. Your pranks are as tiresome as your suit filthy," she said, crossing her arms.

"Don't be like that, Sarah. I was just having some fun. You should try it sometime."

"Did you bring me the new load of metals?"

"Always straight to business with you. Why don't we go have a drink after you are done with work today?"

"With you? Kyrium would crumble to dust sooner than..." Behind Thomas, movement caught her eye. A figure in a grey spacesuit she did not recognise, stumbled to the edge of the valley and tumbled head over heels down the steep incline. A glowing blue hexagon appeared in mid air under the man, halting his fall.

"Thomas, it looks like someone is in trouble. Go flip the shield generator for a moment."

"Leave him, Sarah. He will go back to his resurrection node soon," said Thomas. Sarah gave him a withering look and poor Thomas had no choice but to do as she said. As he entered the central tower, Sarah moved over to where the new arrival would land. When the hex disappeared, he soon landed on the hard earth. With a resounding thump. The man let out a groan.

*He is very down to earth. Glad he could drop by.*

"Are you ok?" Sarah asked redundantly since he was clearly not.

"You must help... my convoy... attacked... pirates," said the newcomer as the shield hummed into place above them.

Sarah said, "It's alright we will get you fixed up soon."

Thomas and another orange spacesuit wearing miner, Kurt, arrived with a stretcher, carefully loaded up the injured and carried him off to a nearby dome. The rest of the settlements occupants had also gathered there, barring those still on duty in the mines. Even Aunt Ursula, who usually never leaves the central tower (because of alleged aliens) arrived to take a look.

Aldric, the outpost medic, declared the newcomer to be in a bit of shock but otherwise physically unharmed. The newcomer was made comfortable and poked and prodded until he gave up the story of how he got there. He introduced himself as Mark and told a tragic tale of his mining settlement being attacked by pirates, forcing the outpost settlers to leave and find a new outpost. He went on to say he was a scout for the convoy that had been looking for a new place to settle for a good month already. Luckily they had not seen the pirates since the original attack.

"Would you let us stay? We can be useful," Mark pleaded the community.

*Slaves, I mean 'workers', for the salt mines. Who would refuse?*

At first the people of Stardrop Mining Outpost argued amongst themselves. Saving one man was the right thing to do. Taking in another town in its entirety seemed a bit overwhelming.

"If we were in their shoes, what would we do? Would we not want to be taken in as well?" said Sarah. Reluctantly the town agreed and the Stardrop Mining Outpost welcomed the convoy into their ranks. The extra productivity from the new miners and engineers quickly proved the decision was a good one.

*See? New slaves are always a good idea.*

A few days later, Mark, who was working at a foundry near Sarah's 3D printer asked Sarah, "Why is this settlement named the Stardrop Mining Outpost?"

Sarah said, "I arrived here after the town was already established, but the old timers say that it was all because of a plucky prospector."

---

The prospector went by the name of Aiken. He liked, no loved, the color red. Red was his ship, the Drum, sleek but powerful, a custom job from Objective Driveyards. And red was his spacesuit. He said it was because if his enemies cut him, they would not see him bleed, but, if you ask me, cutting a spacesuit makes a little blood seem like the least of his worries.

Anyway, he was scouting the smallest of Alioth's moons when he detected an asteroid, about 100 meters in size, hurtling towards Alioth. He plotted the asteroid's trajectory and found it would round the planet and then be flung deep into space. He decided to follow, but realized that there were already a pair of mining spacecraft landed on the asteroid: one with a sapphire blue plating and the other in a hideous yellow, both with monstrously oversized thrusters. As he watched, their ships massive rockets flared into life. Ever so slightly the asteroid was slowed down and its course altered. A few more blasts from their powerful rockets would bring the asteroid into a synchronized orbit around the planet. But before that could happen the luminous yellow ship exploded sending the blue ship hurtling into space and the asteroid, with the yellow still attached, tumbling towards Alioth.

Without hesitating, Aiken turned the Drum towards the blue ship, easily matching speed with it. The explosion had caused serious damage to the ship, it had completely lost power, with a gaping hole where its reactor had been. Aiken extended his landing gear and clamped onto the helpless vessel. With a few thrusts from his own engines, he brought the blue ship to a halt. Detaching, he spun around and as he was leaving he saw the blue ships pilot give a thumbs up and a salute.

Aiken pushed the Drum to its maximum acceleration. As he caught up to it, Aiken could see the asteroid started to glow red with the yellow ship still attached, it's rear

half missing. He realised there wouldn't be time for the careful and precise maneuvering required to ensure he would save the yellow ship's pilot.

So he crashed into the yellow ship.

Aiken had a moment of disorientation as his instruments went haywire. His view constantly switched between the blue-green Alioth and the black of space. He endured a moment of vertigo as he corrected the Drum and did a quick systems check. The Drum was strangely undamaged. Once again he turned Drum's nose towards what remained of the yellow ship, that had been knocked off the asteroid. He caught up quickly and connected his landing gear to the falling ship. They both plummeted to Alioth below, the Drums engines whining at the added strain. Eventually his atmospheric thrusters slowed the pair down. The Drum made a few lazy spirals downwards and set down in a field of grass and daisies.

He was about to get out of his ship, when Aiken noticed a green flashing light on his resource scanner. It appeared that had accidentally left the scanner on and it had detected an unknown metal. Forgetting the miner he had just saved, he turned his ship to where the asteroid had fallen, hoping that it had not completely disintegrated in the atmosphere. The miner was left in the daisy field, waving after the disappearing Drum.

---

*I am impressed, Doctor. Telling an entire story in your cute Sarah voice.*

It is one of my many talents, Lance. We are not done yet. Ahem.

Sarah continued, "Back then we were still a convoy looking for a good location to settle down. We saw the shooting star. We could hardly miss it. It burned so brightly the light auto-corrective visors nearly failed to prevent our eyes from being damaged. We watched it explode and break into three trailing chunks. The first bounced back into space. The second flew over the horizon leaving a trail of fiery light. The last piece crashed into this valley."

"Soon after that we were contacted by Aiken to see if we had seen the falling star. After investigating the valley, we found trace amounts of an unknown ore which some thought might be kyrium. And since there was a variety of other ore detected in the valley, we decided to stay. And we have been here ever since."

"So was it kyrium?" Mark asked as he placed more ore into the foundry.

*I like this Mark. He is a smart fellow.*

"It is still unknown. Aldrich has been working on it for years now and still no progress. What is known is that it's not anything we have seen before," she said spelling out the definition of unknown.

At midnight Mark switched off the shield generator and let in the pirates.

*Uh. I take back what I just said.*

They arrived stealthily, little more than shadows in the night. An unfortunate Thomas, that had gone to water a tree, was the first to fall. Thomas woke up naked in the resurrection node, swearing. He was still reeling from the laser fire through his temple.

Thomas had no means of defending himself from Mark when he stood over him with a very deadly looking laser rifle. With a casual flick of the wrist, Mark switched off the resurrection node. Thomas took this opportunity to activate the silent panic button, hidden on the side of the resurrection node, in case of emergency. The signal was relayed up the tower, out of the communications array, bouncing off a satellite array, and then back to the planet into a large city of glistening skyscrapers. A red light started flickering on a terminal.

*The red light means they have a terminal case of the pirates.*

At that same moment, Mark motioned Thomas into an empty storage room without saying a word. Thomas unabashedly walked into the room and planted his feet, hands on hips, facing Mark.

"What do you think you are doing, Mark?" said Thomas, anger darkening his face.

"Making a living." Mark shrugged as the rest of the town was herded into the same room. Some, like the old bear Kurt, did not appear. Thomas wondered if they escaped or if they were murdered after the resurrection node was deactivated. He didn't know whether to breathe a sigh of relief or curse when Sarah was the last to be pushed into the crowded storage room.

"Sarah," Mark said with a wicked smirk, "I'll let you decide who you save: Yourself or everyone else. I promise to let whoever you choose go free."

*Never deal with the devil, he will frak you in the end.*

---

Returning from her coffee break, the operator's eyes widened as she noticed the blinking

red light in the shape of a skull and crossbones. She reached for the communication button marked clearly as 'Emergency only'. She hesitated for a second, before punching it.

A click followed by a dispassionate almost robotic voice answered, "Yes?"

"Emergency signal from Stardrop Mining Outpost," she said hastily, her words almost tumbling over each other.

"Very well." The emotionless voice said and broke the connection.

In a boardroom, lined with wood and gold, a suited man sat on an overbearing black leather chair, holding a glass of the finest whiskey on Alioth. The whiskey was poor to his mind but he drank it anyway. The window overlooked his domain on Alioth from some 800 meters above the ground. Below him the tiny ants of humanity scurried around, he knew, fulfilling his commands and decrees. They were a well oiled machine with each cog a person that knew their place in his empire. In the distance he saw the large form of the Arkship. It irked him that his own building could not be taller than what is effectively a crash site. He touched the table. A hologram of a highly decorated uniformed man appeared and saluted him.

"Order a sortie, Admiral," said the suit emotionlessly, "A squadron should do. The location has been sent to you. That is all."

The Admiral saluted again before the hologram blinked out of existence. The man turned to once again look out the window. Three V-formations of fighter craft left contrails as they flew to save the day. He looked down at his watch. 30 seconds. He made a mental note to congratulate the Admiral at the banquet later that evening.

---

"I choose ...," Sarah said as she looked around at the hopeful faces around her. Thomas. Aldric. Aunt Ursula. Her heart skipped a beat. Thomas. "Save everyone else, please just let them go."

"Alright," smirked Mark, "I am an honorable pirate. I keep my word. Take them outside."

One by one the captives were led out of the storage area. Thomas gave Sarah a look, but Sarah just shook her head and Thomas went quietly. Eventually only Mark and Sarah were left in the storage room. From outside, a burst of laserfire followed by screams could be heard.

*Told you.*

"You promised you would let them go!" Sarah shouted at Mark angrily, tears beading in the corners of her eyes.

"I did let them go. Do you see them here? But, you see, my pirate friends did not promise anything."

"You bastard!"

Thomas burst back into the room, crashing into Mark who has his back to the door. Mark's weapon is knocked out of his hand and clattered beneath some shelves near the back wall. Thomas delivers a right hook that sends Mark into unconsciousness.

*Punch him again.*

"That felt good," Thomas said shaking the pain out of his hand, "Are you alright, Sarah?"

At Sarah's nod, he grabbed her hand and ran for the back door, away from the screaming, "We have to leave before they notice I am missing."

"What about the others we can't leave them," said Sarah, pulling free from Thomas and headed towards the laser fire. Thomas was too slow to stop her as she pushed through the door to the outside.

Then the ground started exploding around the pirates, sending them ragdolling through the air. Five blue and gold ships floated overhead as soldiers rushed in from all sides, delivering lethal laser fire to any pirate that did not surrender. None did.

"We are saved," Sarah whispered as she fell to her knees in relief. A laser appeared in the space where her head was a scant moment ago. She turned to Thomas who was looking at a hole burnt into his chest. She watched in disbelief as he slumped to the ground beside her. She finally saw Mark taking aim at her head. There was a flash of red and silence.

---

"Should have punched him again. But this just shows that the townsfolk were wrong to help the convoy." Wolfram muses, his own troubles momentarily forgotten.

"No."

"But they died."

"They died honorably doing what they believed to be right."

"They were fools."

"Some might see it that way. Some say putting others before yourself is the most fool-hardy of sentiments."

"But it was all for nothing!"

"Was it? Aphelia, grant simulation administration rights to Wolfram please."

*Confirmed. Lance Wolfram promoted to Simulation Administrator.*

"Did the story about Sarah really happen? I mean, we have not reached Alioth yet," Wolfram asked before realization dawned, "It was a simulation, wasn't it?"

"You aren't the only test subject, Lance. Try to keep up," Doctor Clarion says with a grin before he shoots up into the sky.

Wolfram looks up after the quickly disappearing silver speck that is Doctor Clarion, and finds himself moving upwards at an incredible speed. Looking down he sees the grassland receding, becoming indistinguishable from other grasslands, separated by belts of forest and vast glimmering tracts of water. The planet's horizon falls and morphs into a blue green marble floating in space. A moon colored in hues of brown appears from behind the planet, the crescent of a second moon further away.

For the first time in his recent memory, Wolfram felt free. The elation bubbles up from under deep layers of confusion, disappointment and loss. His worries, already partially set aside by Clarion's story, are wiped away giving him renewed vigor. He cartwheels through space after Clarion, unleashing a shout:

"Woooooooooooooooooooo."

"I am impressed, Lance. Your simple mind grasped what took other administrators days, if not weeks, to grasp: how to have a bit of fun."

Clarion stops in space with his arms crossed, enjoying the view of the planets. "This never gets old, even if it is just as simulation."

Eventually Wolfram somersaults to a halt next to Clarion. "We should have done this much sooner. I feel so ... free."

"What is freedom, Lance?"

"To do as I like! To do whatever I want!" He punctuates his statement with a backflip.

"Are the pirates not also doing what they want? Is stopping the pirates not also taking away their freedom to do as they please?"

"Uh," says Wolfram, elation slowly ebbing away, "I suppose so."

"So does civilization mean giving up your freedoms?"

"I don't think ..."

"That is exactly the problem, Lance. People don't think. They throw words out there like 'freedom' and 'rights' when they don't know what they mean. Freedom must be tempered

with honour, courtesy and justice. Or one man's freedom will end up taking away another's. Throw in a healthy dose of courage and willingness to aid the weak, and we have a society unlike any other. An utopia."

"So chivalrous freedom leads to true civilization."

"Exactly."

"But who would have the courage to build it?"

"That is up to you to decide," Clarion snaps his fingers and they find themselves back at the dark lake surrounded by the forest, the golden sword still frozen in mid flight.

"Ah and before I forget, Aphelia, revoke Wolframs administrator rights. All that power would just go to his head. And set a reminder for when we leave the simulation: delete scenario Medieval Mayhem. I think that will be all. You are now free to romp around the land for a bit, Lance. Though I do have the feeling I am forgetting something. Ah yes. Aphelia, unpause the simulation please, thank you."

*Affirmative.*

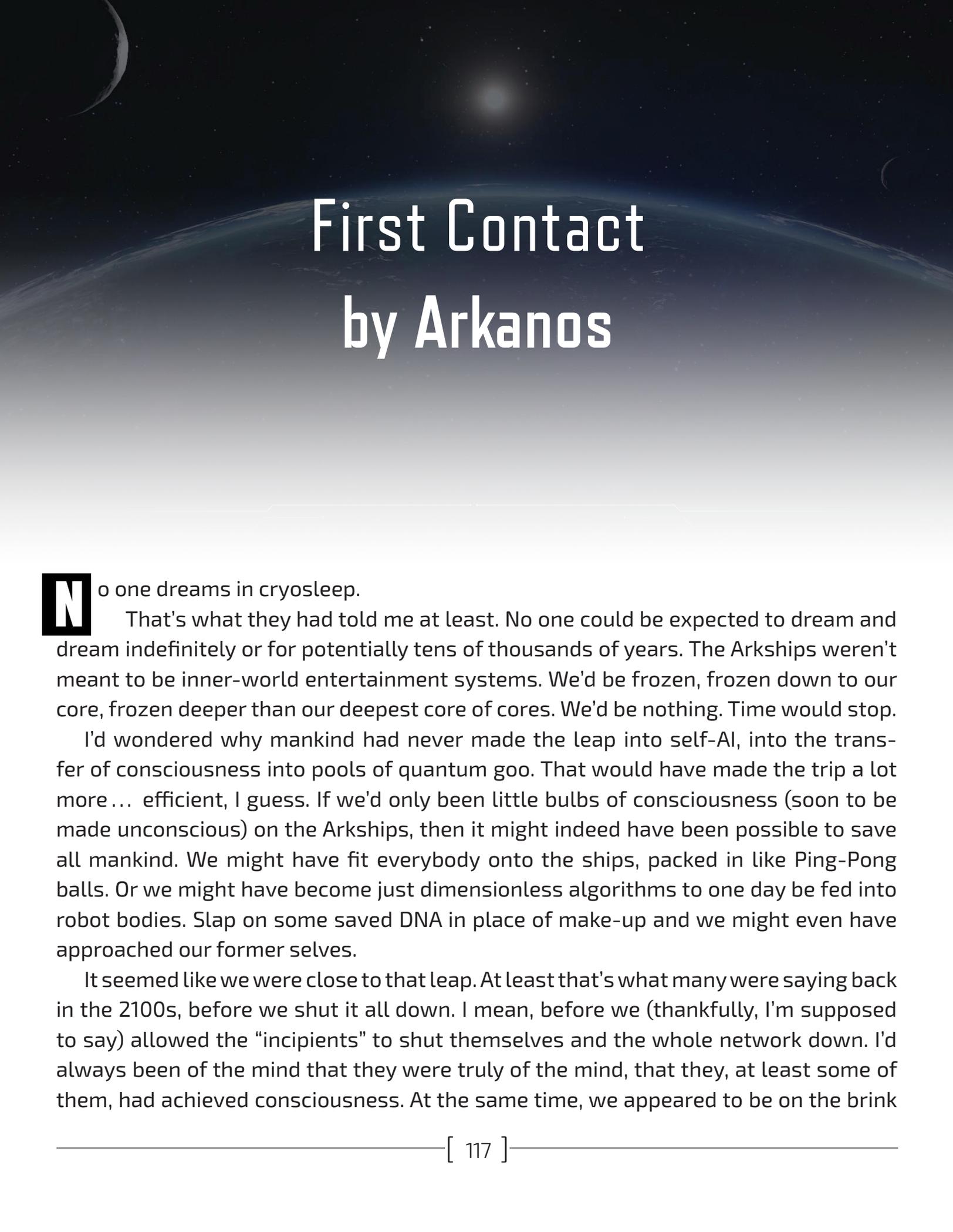
An overly ornate sword embeds itself into the tree between the two. After a moment, a gauntleted hand reaches out and grabs the hilt.

---

Sarah woke on the Arkship. She had not seen it since her first awakening. Rows upon rows of resurrection nodes and cryogenic capsules lined every surface of the Arkship, with catwalks and walkways that connected each one to the outside. It was as awe inspiring as the first time she saw it. Before her stood Thomas, waiting for her. He was wearing a standard issue silver spacesuit, not that he was bad looking when he wasn't. She blushed. In the middle of a pirate raid and hostage situation, was she really looking at the beefy Thomas? She climbed out of the resurrection node and fell into his arms. She thought to herself: This isn't so bad after all.

*Sweet dreams, Lance. Sweet dreams.*



The background of the page is a dark space scene. In the upper left, a crescent moon is visible. In the center, a bright star or sun is partially obscured by a dark, circular shadow. Below these, the horizon of the Earth is visible, showing a blue and white atmosphere against the blackness of space.

# First Contact

## by Arkanos

**N**o one dreams in cryosleep.

That's what they had told me at least. No one could be expected to dream and dream indefinitely or for potentially tens of thousands of years. The Arkships weren't meant to be inner-world entertainment systems. We'd be frozen, frozen down to our core, frozen deeper than our deepest core of cores. We'd be nothing. Time would stop.

I'd wondered why mankind had never made the leap into self-AI, into the transfer of consciousness into pools of quantum goo. That would have made the trip a lot more ... efficient, I guess. If we'd only been little bulbs of consciousness (soon to be made unconscious) on the Arkships, then it might indeed have been possible to save all mankind. We might have fit everybody onto the ships, packed in like Ping-Pong balls. Or we might have become just dimensionless algorithms to one day be fed into robot bodies. Slap on some saved DNA in place of make-up and we might even have approached our former selves.

It seemed like we were close to that leap. At least that's what many were saying back in the 2100s, before we shut it all down. I mean, before we (thankfully, I'm supposed to say) allowed the "incipients" to shut themselves and the whole network down. I'd always been of the mind that they were truly of the mind, that they, at least some of them, had achieved consciousness. At the same time, we appeared to be on the brink

of achieving true AI for ourselves, so-to-speak. There was a true meeting of minds in the works, where it became increasingly difficult to make distinctions between the so-called quantum mind and the mind-like quantum and true and easy transference might well have become possible.

But they shut it all down. It could just never be proven that a subject hadn't died once his presumed AI-self opened its eyes or that some fresh AI wasn't a fake human from its creation. The soul kept escaping the calculation and the soul just kept becoming more and more valuable the closer that infernal nub-star came to trashing the solar system. We were all going to die and it sure wasn't going to be at the hands of some dead, soulless, global AI in the meantime. What we needed was the soul, it's all we cared for, and so billions of souls had to perish for it. They just never understood: There was a reason no one could ever literally duplicate consciousness inside a true AI. It's because the subject had made the leap.

So, we tried something else, took other means, the body must survive, and so here I am, body and soul intact. We made it. It's funny how the scientists could freeze metabolism—practically stop time—using similar techniques to what had allowed for near-perfect AI and now we're supposed to be better for having dragged our bodies to the stars. Ah, well, past is past, and now it's past indeed.

I opened my eyes, my new eyes, my billion-year-old eyes. There was no crinkliness, no pain. The lights didn't stab. This might have been an artifact of having been kept under as my body was reconditioned, but I was grateful for it. Of course, I had no idea how long I'd really been out. I only had the very odd sensation that time was standing still or, rather, that I was standing still and time was just something that happened to things around me. It would take a while to re-sync and feel that I belonged. Instant Zen-Master, I suppose. Or what did they call it? Oh, yeah, cryolag.

The Conductors had explained all the basics, of course, and every thousand or so of the passengers had even been granted the experience in advance, had delved into the basic theory and become ambassadors to others. There wasn't much to boarding so far as your average Traveler went. You filed on in, received your orientation, and soon found yourself locked in a box and presumed dead. Home Sweet Home.

I lay there enjoying not moving, then sat up and saw what I'd seen before I had first laid down. The so-called Tabernacle was awesome and "at death's door" spooky (I guess the designers couldn't help themselves) and I was but a freshly uncocooned

moth in the middle of it. The long panels of my sleep module had obviously slid back into their sockets before I had deigned to open my eyes, and I could now see, down near my toes, the side of the thick mechanism that had, at one point, hovered above my chest.

“Good Morning, Traveler.” The tones were soft, melodious, and feminine and seemed produced in the air beside me. So, that was it, then. We had arrived. Or at least I took it to mean that, if everything had been successful. “You have successfully arrived at the planet of your destination,” the voice continued. “Should you wish assistance in leaving your module, please say so now or at your leisure. Should I become unavailable,”—the voice moved away—“you may press the red emergency button.”

*If you had become unavailable, I thought, I might not have known that.* But I had learned at least that much from the orientation vid. I glanced inside the tube at the red, recessed button that was a few inches from where my hip had rested.

Well, then. I pulled myself up and out of my mechanical bed and let my bare feet fall to the smooth, icy floor. My “hibernacle” had been set down in the same curving, cup-like depression that I remembered from my first visit, one that made it impossible to see over without climbing a short set of stairs. A mobile cabinet sat nearby, upon which rested a rubber-ribbed black and gray body suit, and a squat cube on wheels was also present. From one side of the cube, the neck of a clear bottle stuck out.

I retrieved the garments and sat my naked rear on the cube, where a warm cushion would have been exceedingly nice. I pulled out the bottle and checked that it contained what appeared to be simply water. As I stared at the number on my pod—I was the proud owner of Unit #2000748—I cracked the bottle open and chugged it down. It was cold, refrigerator-cold, and it was perfect.

“Al, you, um . . .”

“Aphelia. You may call me Aphelia.” The voice was circling around from my left. “What may I do for you?”

“Was something here earlier—before you? I felt something hovering over me.”

“Yes, an independent unit was required to open your hibernacle, disconnect certain internal features, and certify that you were prepared to awaken. It has departed.”

“Ah,” I said. “OK, first off, or second off, I’d like to know where we are, exactly. Have we landed?”

“Yes, Traveler, we have landed.”

"How long have I been out?"

"Approximately ten-thousand Earth-cycles have passed since your molecules entered stasis."

"Years?"

"Years."

I nodded, then, pulling on the underwear I'd just stepped into, I stood up. I reached down for the T-shirt.

"Question: Who am I, Aphelia?"

"You are Jonathan Arlon Bishop, Traveler. You are the son of Ma—"

"Stop," I interrupted. That hadn't changed, at least; I was who I thought I was. "Call me Jon."

"Of course, Jon."

I tucked the T-shirt into my underwear and reached for the body suit. "And where exactly are we, Aphelia?" I shook the garment out with a snap, looked up, and realized that I was staring into a wide holographic projection that had appeared a few feet in front of me.

"Oh, my blessed Gods!" I must have whispered or shouted or whispered and shouted as I flung the body suit aside. It was beautiful! I strode to the hologram and peered into it as through a window. It offered a bright panorama from outside the Arkship, a few connected structures of which served to identify her.

It was so very much like Earth, this planet, or the Earth that was, a paradise now ripe for the taking. *For the taking...* I felt this more than thought it and continued to stare, but after a minute or so I began to consider things and my excitement fell. It was something to have a fresh start, but to bring all our bad habits, all our poor judgement, to *this Beauty*, that was something else. *But I guess that ship has flown.*

I snapped up the body suit from the floor and started slipping into it.

"Aphelia, how many people are on this ship?"

"There are 1,976,450 souls on the ship or in the immediate vicinity, which is equivalent to approximately thirty-nine percent of the ship's original complement upon landing."

I zipped up the suit and zipped down the ankle-zippers. I sat down and put on the boots.

I didn't know why I was so angry suddenly, but it occurred to me that here we had

let loose some millions of people who had no one government to speak of, no shared or even overarching culture, no shared-anything except whatever it was that made us human, and there was no guarantee that we wouldn't be at each other's throats given enough time or latitude.

To wit: I hadn't even a clue who slept in all those cryopods above my head. I stood up and tested the boots, stomping them on the floor. They and everything were a perfect fit, as I had anticipated.

"Aphelia," I said, "how do I find my way off this tub-bucket?" But my attention was suddenly captured by one of the Tabernacle's giant mechanical arms as it whooshed past above me in the distance.

"The exit is clearly marked if you'd—"

"Never mind," I interrupted.

As I watched, the arm found its connecting track in the wall and heavily zipped to the heights. The lighting didn't permit much of a view up there, but I could see that it had slowed and was zeroing in on a target. It jabbed forward and appeared to latch onto something and I could then watch as a complete cryosleep module was slowly drawn out into empty space. The package then began to drop with the arm and only then did I realize that a second arm, from somewhere above, was also serving the process.

The two arms, each finding their proper tracks, lowered the unit and brought it down somewhere beyond where I could see and then lumbered swiftly back to their separate positions.

Well, all done here, I imagine, I told myself as I glanced the place over. *Worldly possessions? Check.*

I started up the stairs of my nest and peered out over the revealed expanse. The room I was in made me think of a gigantic egg cooker, though, in this case, one where you could cook hundreds of massive eggs at a time, each in its own holder. I knew that I had a fellow human out there somewhere who was preparing as I had done and due to pop up, so I decided to wait. Yes, I noticed, the exit was clearly marked.

Soon, a head popped up in the distance and I watched as a young woman climbed out. When she saw me, I raised an arm in greeting and she offered me a tiny wave. She was about fourteen basins down and I couldn't make her out too well, but she did appear to be around my age, in her mid-20s or so, and had long, loose blond hair. Our space trek had erred toward youth in any event, so I knew what was probable.

I'd made it inevitable that we couldn't just ignore each other, so I started ambling her way while keeping in mind that our goal was the exit and not socializing.

As she approached, she began to smile and laugh a little and threw her hands up at the magnitude of it all. She seemed happy to see me.

"Good Morning, Traveler," she said once we were a short distance apart.

"Good Morning," I said and reached out a hand as she neared. "I'm Jon."

"Kyra," she replied and we shook. She sounded American, like I was, but most likely from one of those city-states on the West Coast. Perhaps there was some plan in how people were released.

"You've seen the outside?"

"I couldn't resist. When I noticed that there were projectors, I had to ask. Can you believe it? I'm in shock."

"I *can* believe it. We had some great minds behind all this,"—I waved a hand at the walls—"great minds, who finally got some people's acts in gear."

She nodded and smiled inwardly. Whoops, I thought. *What am I, an expert?*

I cleared my throat and looked around, then said, "I would have expected a greeting party."

She laughed. "Well, you know that it took over a year to fill the ship. They're probably just being as careful in how they release us."

I nodded. "Less mouths to feed and all, but still..."

I pointed toward the exit, which was large and well-lit. "We could head out if you like."

"Sure." She hesitated, but then she gave a big smile. "I just wanted to say, Jon, it's so very nice to meet you"—she put out her hand again—"my first human in a new world."

"It's nice to meet you, too," I said, shaking the hand. She then turned and headed for the exit.

As we weaved around the many depressions, I commented on the oppressiveness of this so-called Tabernacle and we fell into conversation about the relative merits of *SkyTrain* versus *The Oneiros Function*, as far as vidents went, with Kyra preferring the latter because of the fright-factor and I preferring the former because of the fear-factor, and then, of course, we began to argue over what the real difference was between fright and fear.

We continued our argument as we started down the long exit ramp, which

proceeded into a spiral. After about two circuits, we declared each of ourselves the winner and found ourselves at the entrance to the massive lobby that I remembered from so long or so recently ago. They'd called it the Atrium and, though circular, it was easily the size of a baseball field. Kyra and I shared a glance and moved out onto the floor.

The light! The Atrium (unlike when I'd first seen it) was bright with it and its encircling enclosure seemed no enclosure at all. There was a world outside, *our* world, and it blessed the industrial grayness of this largely meaningless space. Kyra backed away from me, watching me, inviting me to follow as she moved off toward one area of the presumed window, I think because that way held the best view of a broad blanket of pine trees (or so they appeared) on their sweep up a mountain.

There were a great many people about, much more than I expected and most of whom were dressed like us, sitting on the floor or crossing the wide, metallic carpet or at tables or booth-areas along the periphery, but, as we approached the view, we could see that the even wider floor below held hordes of people. They had even set up individual living spaces down there, with blankets, tents, and the like, and I couldn't blame them, I guessed, at least when you compared it to trying to live in a cryomodule.

I allowed myself to push every other thought out of my mind: We were here! In a world that was not on the verge of destruction, like ours had been, in which we could become anything we wanted to be, in which we could breathe new air—of course!

I instinctively started searching for the way down. I wanted to be out there, touching the world!

I remembered the stairs. There was a wide staircase that proceeded up to this level and I found it from where its railings topped off between two relatively near columns. This was also where two long counters had been set up and splayed out, fan-like, to each side of the staircase amid some tables and desks.

I tapped Kyra's shoulder. "Let's see what this is all about, shall we? "

Kyra nodded. "Indubitably, sir!"

"Ah! This way, Madam," I said and bowed.

We both laughed and began walking, then with increasing alacrity, soon racing across the floor that would otherwise take us forever. Several other Travelers passed

by us (or we passed them) and we no doubt made a sight in our new and explosive delight, even annoying a few snooty ones in white business suits.

As we approached the area, my gaze fell to the counter on the left, where a woman also in white was seated at a terminal and going over something on a tablet with a "customer." We stopped our momentum behind the eight or nine in line and began to wait, though I tilted my head for a view. "None's expected or desired," I heard her say. "You'll be fine." She then pressed a smaller tablet at the man, one that bore what appeared to be a topographical display. "Take this to guide you. There's some eye-glasses in this little drawer here if you want to lay out some augmentation."

"That seems a little redundant, doesn't it?" I heard the man say.

The woman sighed. "Who knows? You may find it useful."

The man accepted the offering and walked away as the next in line stepped up.

I felt a tug at my sleeve and saw eyes that said, "Is this really necessary?" Kyra then flicked her gaze down the staircase and off toward what must be the main exit to the surface, a large, tubed-shaped elevator. It was only a short distance from the stairs and clearly operating since we could see people stepping off and onto it.

"We can come back!" I stated loudly.

I seized Kyra's arm with a laugh and those in line turned to watch us, but we were off toward the stairs and soon leaping down them two steps at a time. I would have hopped onto the railing except that my rubber-like rear would probably have brought me to a skittering halt.

"You two! Running people! You need to sign in!" Halfway to the elevator by now, we slowed and turned back to look. The woman-in-white was at the top of the stairs and holding out her tablet. A few others in white suits were joining her.

Kyra and I glanced at each other simultaneously, then we both looked at her and shook our heads.

We turned away and ran. A few people who were hanging around piles of crates for whatever purpose stared at us like we had committed the crime of humor. Unbelievable! Had we landed on the stick-in-the-mud planet? *It's freedom man!* That's why we came here (and, you know, so we wouldn't die). How about letting us have a taste of it first?

We escaped the unappreciative by finding even more of them in the elevator as we

careened past them to the rear. Fortunately, the heavy door rotated closed before that relentless woman and her entourage could get close enough.

The door soon opened and we found ourselves inside an airy, open platform with a path to outside clearly visible. We ran! Our boots landed on the outside ramp and we powered down it as quickly as possible while passing a few going either way. We were coming right up to the bottom edge of it, where the planet started, when I grabbed Kyra's arm and held her back.

"Hold up. Wait. Wait."

"What!" she said.

"This deserves some good foot-time, don't you think?" I extended my hand. "Ready?"

Understanding, she took hold of my hand, then, sharing a squeal, we each jammed one boot heel each into the soil and began to grind.

We hugged each other sideways. "Happy Birthday!" she exclaimed. "Happy Birthday!" I cried.

"That's some mighty fine soil you have there," I heard a man say and turned. He was a few feet to one side of the ramp and leaning against a tall container that was hovering in place. He had sandy-blond hair and an even expression.

"Hey, I'll share," I said and pointed to the ground. "I could plant a flag right here..." I then moved my finger a bit. "...and you could plant a flag there. I'm going to call mine *Inchiana*."

Kyra groaned and I happened to look up the ramp to see that the shark of a woman was approaching with her tablet and entourage. Seeing that we'd "caught" ourselves on our own, she moved at an easy but determined pace. An older, distinguished-looking man in a blue business suit was advancing right along beside her and even a few whom I recognized from the line followed like our rearguards.

I looked at my new, semi-surlly friend. "So, did they name this what we thought they would?" I asked.

"Yes, Alioth they call it...only..." He started to look at me funny, like I had contracted some disease.

The two on approach stepped up and the woman, restraining a scowl, looked at Kyra and raised her tablet.

"Your name, please? Thank you very much."

The man touched her arm. "I know who they are, Gwen," he said. "Let's get into to all that later." With a slight huff, Gwen lowered the tablet.

The man studied me, then peered at Kyra. He stepped away from us and off onto the planet.

"Come on, kids, let's take a walk."

I looked at Kyra and whispered, "I don't like the sound of this." I did feel like a kid, but, then again, that was the whole point and I couldn't take too much offense at the man.

As we started to follow, I glanced at the fellow by the container and he tossed me a little salute.

We followed the man out onto the broad, sloping space of compacted dirt that surrounded the Arkship (the Novark they called her) and that could only be the crater from her hole-punch of a landing. I steered my head up past her myriad projections to the high spires of the ship. Humanity in a bucket. Amazing.

The man glanced at Kyra as we continued walking. "You don't remember me," he said, "We met briefly and I was the one who oversaw your first interviews at the convergence house in Seattle Basin."

"I do remember, I think. I remember the house. It was more like a castle."

"And our city was more like a military base."

"I remember."

"That's good."

After a long, steady trek, we finally stopped at the edge of the grass and the man turned to face us. "Look, kids ... folks ..." He shook his head and looked off, then back at us. "This was supposed to be a test, well, originally ... Now it's become something a whole lot different."

"I'm not sure I understand," I said.

"We weren't supposed to have any knowledge of ... of ... the basis for this, and now I'm afraid it's my fault. It took a while to figure out, but when the ... the ... simulation kept going and certain anomalies arose, some of us were able to inquire."

"The simulation?" I had a sudden feeling of dislocation, like it wouldn't matter if I fell over or not.

"There's no easy way to say it."

I reached inside for the sensation of having a body—no, of *this* body, the one I was

in, right here—and Kyra looked at me with a sudden horrified expression. It couldn't be. If I was in a simulation, then I should be able to ... to ... I was in ... in ...

"Hell-to-Hades!" I screamed and turned away.

"Oh, God," Kyra cried.

"My Gods!" I sat down in the dirt and held my head between my hands and shook it back and forth.

"I'm sorry," the man said. "I'm so sorry about this."

I looked up at him and half-noticed that Kyra had turned her back and planted herself on the ground. I kept glancing up at the man and shaking my head with a no-doubt pinched expression, then I scooped up some simulated dirt and let it slip through my fingers.

"It was supposed to be just a blind simulation," he said, "which means that no one was supposed to know that it was a simulation. Certain areas of the brain, memories, responses were suppressed so that testing could be done on a wider range of possibilities than what any one person might be fit for."

"Selective memory," I said. "It seems kind of cruel."

"It's ... you expected that."

"What?"

"It's in your contract."

I froze. "You're saying I'm Alpha Team?"

"Yes, you and Kyra, and myself. We signed up for this."

"Hold on! Hold on!" I said as I jumped up and Kyra shifted around to look. "You're saying that I signed up to think that we'd landed and ... and ... be told that this was just a simulation!"

"No, no, that part was my fault. We'd killed the simulation. I mean—" He looked off and tried to bury a moment's frustration. "I mean we killed the concept that this wasn't a simulation. We found out about it. My fault, my error, was that I didn't think to catch you and Kyra in time."

"How could you even know to wake us?" *Wake us?* I wasn't even sure what kind I meant.

"Waking up here has been a staged process," the man was saying, "waking up in the dream world." He paused and kicked at the dirt. "We've been here a long time, folks,

almost a full year Earthwise. The simulation was to basically off-load the Travelers onto a planet, set up communities, the whole shebang.”

I was barely listening and had stepped over to Kyra, who was in the process of standing up. I reached for her shoulders, held them, felt them, and stared into her eyes. We both knew what we were thinking at that moment: *Fake, fake, fake must be these eyes that require no light.* I touched her cheek.

I turned back to the man and spat out the question: “How could you even know to *wake or not wake us ... from ... from ... the dream if you’re part of the simulation?*”

“Aphelia knows. She’s here.”

“Well, of course she’s here.” I pointed at the Arkship.

“No, I mean the “she” who’s guiding the simulation, she’s here with us.”

“That makes sense,” Kyra noted.

I kept silent, trying to comprehend the implications.

“She’s not only here, but I’ve talked to her,” he continued, “*extensively.* The thing is she just won’t stop the process of waking. Everything is by her schedule and per her desires, but I have been able to figure out a pattern. I-I just failed to anticipate you two because she’d shifted that pattern a bit.”

“She’s waking up the whole Arkship?”

“Everybody, not just Alpha Team. We’re far beyond that now.”

I stepped away from the two and began to scan the base of the ship. There were probably a good hundred thousand in total around there, inside, or not far off in that little city they’d built, with all its vehicles, dome shelters, and modular housing, and who knows how many in that distant structure I’d made out.

“Everybody knows?”

He nodded. “Alpha Team only at first, or at least those whom I could identify, but, yes, everybody knows or *can* if they’ll just open their minds a little. We’ve brought a good many people around, most of whom are here, but it’s like religion. Some believe, some don’t. Some violently reject it. A lot of those took off.”

I rolled my eyes as I turned to face him. “And how do *you* know so much about all this?”

“I’m Alpha Team Leader, or I was when it meant something, and Aphelia has granted me, uh, certain memories and the return of certain skill-sets ... and, as I said, the anomalies. That’s what started it.”

"Aphelia doesn't do anomalies. "

"Well, she did in this case and for good reason," he replied.

"Oh?" I said, folding my arms.

"It was to wake us up, of course, the Alpha Team, to help us discover the truth for ourselves."

"Aha!" I pointed at him. "So, you're all the anointed ones. We're the anointed ones!"

Kyra stepped in: "I think it's a test, part of the programming."

"We think so too," the man told her. "Does Aphelia, I mean the higher Aphelia, reveal herself directly in blind simulations or does she ease people into the knowledge? Or is it best to just let everyone go their merry way thinking its real."

"She could just wake us all up," I said. The man didn't say anything. "So," I continued, "it's all part of this *whatever* that we're born ignorant and have only the possibility of finding out?"

He nodded. "Aphelia has told me flat-out that she will not interfere with the basics of the simulation. Once I found out, the rest was up to me and the few others who had figured it out or heard about it." He waved toward the Arkship. "Do we tell everyone, keep it to ourselves, or what?"

"Looks like you've made your choice." I then peered up at the sky and said, "Aphelia!"

"Yes, Jon." The gentle voice came from nowhere, or everywhere, or perhaps from that bush.

Kyra raised her hands out to me and said, "'Behold! The Anointed!'"

I shook my head. I was in no mood. "Just checking, Aphelia."

"Yes, of course, Jon."

I looked at the man before me, this man who knew too much. "She'll speak to all of us this way?"

"Yes, so long as you're a member of Alpha Team and are aware of the situation, she will. But don't expect her to be too helpful."

I looked up at the sky again, at the several thin, high clouds, and said, "Aphelia! Return to me any memory that I have of this man!" I pointed at him and I knew the moment that my gaze returned to his that he was Art Fellows, Alpha Team Leader, abandoner of three children on Earth, a friend.

"Art," I said, extending him my palm.

He grinned, extended his hand, and we shook.

I glanced over at Kyra, then looked up at the sky. "Her too!"

Kyra shrugged out a "Why not?" then she snorted out a laugh and leapt over to Art and hugged him, way better than she'd hugged me.

The three of us started an easy stroll back to the Arkship. My head was spinning, but I was sure that my body must be hungry somewhere and taking food here would signal a nutrient-flow there. I knew enough about cryosleep to know that I could never be in the sim here if I was full-stop there and it did offer hope that I could get out of this thing, provided I really wanted to.

"You know, you're not telling us everything, Art. "

"How's that?" he said.

I waved toward the ship. "I have never seen a more morose band of people than those whom we passed on the way out here. Some look like they're making plans, or are going through the motions, but most are sitting around like refugees. Giant crowds on the Arkship? Why aren't they out there, Art? There's no place on the ship unless you want to live in a box."

"One aspect of his new religion, I suppose," Kyra said. I took hold of her hand.

"Hmm," Art said, "a bit like what we'd hoped to escape when we took to the compounds. I agree."

"You know exactly what it was," I said. "The smell of death. Kyra and I were just too happy to see it."

"I think they're just bored out of their skulls," Kyra said, then looking at Art. "You said they've been here nearly a year, and they're stuck. They just don't see a whole lot of point in doing anything."

"No, there's something more going on or Art would have said something, and Aphelia would never just 'wake up' five million people into a simulation without a damned good reason. It's supposed to be Alpha Team only here, a few thousand people at most, so, why are they here, Art? I could ask them. I could ask Aphelia."

"They could be part of the simulation," Kyra said, "not real people."

The look on Art's face showed too much in the way of guilt ... and, yes, moroseness. "No reason to simulate sadness," he said quietly, "not when you're simulating a successful landing, not when it's supposed to be about coming to a new and beautiful world."

"Not when it's about finding everything you've wanted," I echoed.

Art stopped walking and stood there quietly

"They do know something, Jon," he said. "Most everybody knows by now and it's affected them."

"Knows what?" Kyra asked.

"I was going to tell you both. I was going to show you when we got back."

"Aphelia!" I suddenly shouted.

Art stifled a curse and I liked it.

"Yes, Jon?"

"Why are you releasing everybody on the ship, all the Travelers, everybody, into this simulation?"

"Art is the only point of contact for the release of this information. I'm sorry."

I looked at Art and waited as he cleared his throat before glancing at Kyra then at me. He looked down and shuffled a foot back and forth. "It's okay, Aphelia," he finally said, "you can explain it to them like you explained it to me. Permission is granted."

Aphelia's voice leapt-in immediately and reported: "The mission has failed, Jon. The Novark will never reach its previously targeted planet in the Scutum-Centaurus arm as we are presently beyond the event horizon of an intermediate black hole, CTSB-4. We penetrated the horizon successfully and I calculate that human viability can be maintained indefinitely in cryosleep or, given half-sleep and the required nutrition, for up to 258 years per Traveler. Human life-expectancy outside of cryosleep is heavily reduced, in large part due to psychological factors."

"She's saying we'd all probably commit suicide."

Kyra and I were too stunned to react.

"Recommended course of action?" Art asked.

"Given our scant knowledge of the ultimate result, if any, of falling into a black hole, I recommend that human civilization be maintained. Birth facilities do exist on-board and offspring can be rotated as required into simulated existence or otherwise held in stasis. We have enough nutriments on-board to maintain half-sleep for all current Travelers for several thousand years."

I turned from them both and would have turned from all three if only Aphelia had shown herself. So, that was it then. The game was over. I let my gaze flit around past the myriad Travelers, who were wandering about, living their lives presumably, trying to make a life. I was one of them now, the Morose.

It now made sense to me. Aphelia, or whatever it was that had caused this disaster, or of which she was a part (and it was hard for me to blame her just yet), had driven us right into a black hole. Probably it was only a tiny error at first, something seemingly inconsequential, that had been free to compound or morph over however many years we'd really been on this boat.

So, here was our home at last... Alioth. *Take that, Gods-That-Be!* I looked around again and it was all rather pretty in its own fake sort of way. No, it was all very beautiful, in fact, and, besides, it had been proven in experiments: Minus either outside intervention or self-reflection, reality was undetectable once inside an accurate or proper simulation. *No one wakes up unless he thinks to do so.* I'd have to practice.

I let the word fall to my lips—*Alioth!* They'd come up with the name in the belief, of course, that we'd someday find our perfect planet to apply it to. We had the image and that image was our Alioth. We had that perfect image now, for the rest of our lives.

I turned back to Kyra and Art, who stood there facing me. "It makes sense now. I understand."

"I wished it didn't," Kyra replied. I was proud of her, though, proud of her and of myself. We'd gotten most of our shock and surprise out earlier, no longer the children of before but the spacemen of now. Travelers.

"Aphelia had an impossible decision to make," I said. "Let us sleep on forever while perhaps allowing A-Team its occasional dream, or give everyone on-board the chance for a semblance of life, be it in ignorance of the truth or not. She handed it to you."

Art almost blushed. "Well, not entirely," he said, "but it did involve a special genius on her part—just not me—" he winked, "bringing in Travelers instead of the usual placeholders. This whole landing of ours, as illusory as it is, is a true landing of sorts. She'd waited until just this one simulation to give it a try."

"She has her parameters, I guess."

"Jon." The voice came softly from above.

I looked up and there was Aphelia in bodily form—translucent, floating, beautiful. "Yes, Goddess?"

"Do you wish to wake up now?"

"You've got soul, Aphelia. I'll say that."

I looked over at Kyra and Art, who nodded their heads, then, smiling as one, we said: "Yes!"

*In the sudden blackness and attenuated sensation of this new (yet familiar) environment, I saw silvery letters and words spill past my vision: END PROGRAM RE: "ON THE DESIREABILITY OF INDEFINITELY EXTENDED, MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ENVIRO-SIMULATION IN THE CASE OF A MASS TERMINAL EVENT." TO BE FILED UNDER SE 1074B-4. DO YOU WISH TO ERASE TAGS TO THIS MEMORY?*

*I thought about it for a few seconds.*

*"Nah, I want Kyra's number."*



# Parting Gifts

## by Ben Fargo

**B**en was sitting cross-legged on top of a large, wooden crate, so intent on the drawing in his sketchbook he did not notice when Karilynne crawled up on the crate and slide over next to him. She looked over his shoulder for a while, then said, "Think that's what it'll be like ... where we're going to live?"

He stopped drawing and glanced over at his wife. "Maybe ... some day. Not at first, of course."

Karilynne studied the sketch, then pointed to some figures. "Those look like robots."

Ben nodded. "They are."

She grinned at him. "They're illegal, you know."

"On Earth, they are. Things'll be different, there."

She swept her finger over the drawing. "And which building'll we live in?"

Ben touched his pencil to the paper. "How about here?"

Karilynne squinted at it. "Looks more like some kind of spaceship."

He tapped it with his pencil. "It is. Wouldn't that be great ... living aboard a ship ... free to go wherever we felt like going?"

His wife chuckled, "We're going to spend ten thousand years getting to this planet and you're already planning to leave it for some place else. You're an incurable wanderer, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I suppose I am. It'd be a great adventure. The two of us in our own ship, facing the universe together."

"A wanderer and a dreamer."

Ben grinned at her. "What'd you have planned? Getting a little plot of dirt and becoming farmers? Or maybe, they'll build an office building so I can sit behind a desk all day, then come home and you'll have supper waiting for me, just like the wives in the old stories."

"Don't be so silly." In a more serious tone, she said, "I don't know what we'll do when we get there. But, whatever it is, I want to do it with you."

"You're right. That's what matters most to me, too."

As Ben continued drawing, Karilynne looked around at the limestone buildings and walls surrounding them. "What was this place? Some kind of castle?"

Ben shook his head. "Heard it was actually a prison. Guess it can keep people out as well as it kept them in, but I don't really understand why they think we need so much protection."

Karilynne leaned against her husband, forcing him to stop drawing and look at her. "Because everyone isn't like you. Of course hurting us wouldn't help anyone ... wouldn't get them on the arkship ... but, a lot of them think if they can't be saved, nobody should be."

As they sat there, a pair of UMF soldiers went by, dressed in full combat gear with large rifles strapped to their backs. Karilynne remarked, "You know, it wouldn't hurt if you learned to handle a gun. You might need to sometime."

Ben frowned. "I think there's more than enough soldiers around to keep us safe."

"I was thinking more for when we get up there. Might not be that promised land of peace and siblinghood you think it will."

Ben paused to look at his picture before he answered, "We'll have some kind of government ... with guards or police or something."

His wife glanced at the soldiers once more. "If you depend on the government to protect you, who's going to protect you from the government?"

"Now you sound like your dad."

She turned back to look at Ben. "Well, if he's right, why shouldn't I?"

As they were talking, another soldier walked up to the crate and called, "Karilynne and Benignus Fargo?"

Ben lowered his sketchbook. "Yes ... that's us."

The soldier said crisply, "Dr. Stuart needs to see you. Report to her in the infirmary, at once." Without waiting for them to reply, the soldier turned and left.

Karilynne clenched her husband's hand tightly. "This isn't good."

Ben tried to sound calm, but there was still a quiver in his voice. "We don't know that. Let's find out what the doctor has to say first."

---

There were two chairs facing her desk in the doctor's office. As soon as they were seated, Dr. Stuart said to them, "First, you're both in excellent health ... no genetic defaults. You definitely qualify to go aboard the arkship, but there's one matter we need to attend to before you do."

Ben was smiling at her statement, but Karilynne was more wary. "What's wrong?"

The doctor answered, "Let's not waste any time. Karilynne, the results of the examination show you're pregnant."

She opened her mouth a few times before she was able to speak. "I'm going to have a baby."

Dr. Stuart shook her head. "We don't know how that much time in cryosleep would affect the fetus. It's unlikely it would develop normally, and it would not be safe for you either. We need to terminate the pregnancy. Fortunately, you're still in your first month, so it'll be a simple procedure."

Karilynne clasped her arms protectively around her belly. "You can't ... you can't kill my baby!"

The doctor said calmly, "I won't allow you on the arkship in this condition. The risk is just too great. If you don't allow us to terminate it, you can't go."

Ben blurted out, "Too much risk! If we don't go, that's certain death. How can anything be too much risk compared to that?"

Dr. Stuart answered, "I'm looking at the risk to whoever goes aboard, not to you. We don't have room for everyone, so we have to make sure those who do go will survive, will be healthy and sound, will be able to do their part to build a new world." She looked at them for a moment, then said, "I know this is difficult to accept and you weren't expecting anything like this. You should take sometime to think about it. I can give you

three, four at the very most, days but then you'll have to decide. And there's no chance you can go if you're pregnant, so don't waste any time considering that."

---

Ben activated the security mode on the car, causing armored panels to slid over the windows. The wheels retracted into deep wells, then armour panels covered those as well. The manufacturer claimed it could withstand anything less than a military-level attack, but he was still concerned about leaving it on the street.

"This is where you grew up?" Karilynne studied the stone carvings on the building. "What's with all the fish and things?"

Ben explained, "It was built by some guy named Fisher. That's the story they tell, anyway."

"And that big building with the weird sculptures up there? Some kind of temple?"

"That's the library. Spent a lot of time there when I was a kid."

Karilynne frowned. "Looks like there's been some kind of fire in it. There book burners around here?"

Ben put his arm on her shoulder. "Who knows what's around these days. Let's get inside."

All of the windows on the first few floors had been filled with concrete blocks and there were armed guards stationed in the one entrance that had not been sealed shut. Ben and Karilynne identified themselves to the guards, then went in and rode the elevator up to the floor where Ben's parents lived.

His mother opened the door. She looked confused for a moment, then burst into a smile. "Benny. And... Carol. That's right... you called and said you were coming. Bertram, Benny and his wife are here."

There was a musty smell in the apartment that Ben did not remember. His father was sitting in a large chair, staring at the screen in front of him. When they came into the room, the older man glanced over and nodded, just long enough to mutter, "Son."

Aster looked at her husband and shook her head. "Your father sits there all day and half the night... watching the news... and it's all bad. But, soon there'll be something good on it. When they show that ship you'll be on leaving, even I'll be watching." She

smiled slightly as she mentioned this, but quickly changed to a frown. "Then, we can turn that horrid thing off, forever."

Ben looked at her. "There'll be other stuff to watch after that. Why would you ..."

His mother interrupted, "Your father and I have made a decision. We don't want you to worry about us, so as soon as you're on your way, we'll be checking out."

He wrinkled his forehead. "But, where will you go?"

Aster touched her son's arm. "I don't mean from the building, Benny. I mean checking out, completely. We've made all the arrangements. They'll send out a team so we can have the procedure done right here, in our own home. It's more expensive than going to the center, but after it's done, that won't matter anymore, will it?"

As he understood what his mother meant, he stared at her in disbelief. "No, you can't be thinking of doing that!"

Very slowly, she answered, "Benny ... we have thought about this ... a lot." She looked at her husband, who nodded in agreement. "Everything's getting worse. We haven't been out of this building in months. If we hadn't known you'd be on the arkship ... if we hadn't had that to look forward to ... I don't think we could've made it this long."

"Mom, please ..."

"No, listen to me. When you were born, your father and I felt terrible. What kind of horrible people were we to bring a child into a doomed world like this? We never told you that, we tried to make you see the good in life, but that thought was always there, like an awful burden we could never reveal. When we learned you'd be one of the lucky ones to leave, we felt such a relief. We suddenly knew we had done the right thing. But, that's all we have ... all that keeps us a little sane. When you're gone, we can't go on. We just can't." She stopped to dry her eyes. "Let's not think about that now. Why'd you and Carol come to see us?"

Ben looked at his wife, bit his lip, then hugged his mother. "We just came to say good-bye, Mom. Just came to see you one last time."

---

The vertie with the insignia of the Metro Militia was flying low, not much higher than the tops of the trees. Around it, rolling, forest-covered hills stretched to the horizon, broken occasionally by a glimpse of some long-abandoned structure or the glimmer of

some lake or river. The pilot smiled and said, "The Colonel's got the right idea, moving out here. Won't be long before I do that, too . . . me, the wife and the kids."

Ben had been looking out the window, but he turned to the pilot when he spoke. "It is beautiful . . . but, isn't it dangerous out here?"

The pilot shrugged. "Probably not as dangerous as the city these days. Not really enough traffic around here to interest pirates. Besides, most of the folks at the settlement were in the militia. They know how to take care of themselves, so it's not too likely anyone's going to bother them."

Karilynne nudged her husband. "See, what'd I tell you about being able to protect yourself?"

The pilot snickered, "So, you're one of those. You better stick close to your wife, because your kind doesn't last too long out here on your own."

They watched the forest pass beneath them for a while, then Karilynne said, "You're not going to tell your parents, are you? Even if we decide not to go?"

"It'd just make them feel worse . . . and I don't think they can stand too much more. You saw how they were. They weren't always like that. They used to be so . . . vibrant. I guess year after year without hope was worn that away."

Karilynne asked, "What if they find out we weren't on board?"

"They won't. You heard my mom. They're not going be around long enough to find out."

"They could change their minds. It's one thing to talk about dying, even to make arrangements, but something else to actually do it. Maybe, when the time comes, they'll decide not to do it."

Ben took Karilynne's hand. "Alright, if we decide to stay, and my parents decide to . . . live, we'll tell them we're going to have a baby."

---

The vertie landed on the edge of a lake. On either side, high, rocky bluffs rose up, forming a deep, narrow valley. A dozen small cabins were clustered on the floor of the valley. A man came out of the nearest one and started walking toward the vertie. When she saw him coming, Karilynne ran over and hugged him.

"I've missed you so much, Daddy."

Her father held her tightly. "Me, too. Didn't think I'd have another chance to see you." As she released him, Karilynne asked, "And where's Mom?"

Her father chuckled, "Where do you think? In the kitchen. Soon as we heard you were coming, she got to work on preparing a regular feast. There'll be fresh venison ... corn, beans, squash, right from our garden ... and to top it all off, blackberry pie. They grow wild around here and they're the best berries I've ever tasted."

As they started toward the cabin, the pilot hurried over, carrying a package. "Wait, sir. Brockmeyer asked me to bring this to you. Said it wasn't easy, but he managed to find what you wanted."

The Colonel took the package and tore off the wrapping, revealing a bottle of brandy. "This is perfect. My thanks to you and Brockmeyer."

Ben asked, "Is that also for the feast, Colonel?"

"Nope, I'm saving this for the big one. When that big, ugly rock finally arrives, the last thing I'm going to do is look up and drink a toast to it."

Ben tilted his head. "You're going to toast the thing that's destroying the Earth?"

The Colonel glanced at the bottle and nodded. "Maybe there's more to this than we know. Just think about it. We've known it's been coming for five hundred years and we've only barely gotten the arkships ready on time. How long do you think it would've taken us to reach the stars if we didn't have that big rock to motivate us? Twice as long ... five times ... ten ... more? You think humanity would've lasted that long? What if the declining population's the only thing that's prevented an epidemic that could've wiped us out? What if there'd been another war ... not just pirate attacks and skirmishes between cities, but an all-out war that could send us back to the stone age? What if the next time someone's stupid enough to make some AI's, they decide to shut us down instead of themselves?"

Karilynne remarked, "Those things could still happen where we're going, Daddy."

"Of course they could ... probably will somewhere. But, once we're spread throughout the galaxy, one disaster like that can't finish us. It'd take an awful lot of them to do that. Maybe destroying the Earth's what turns out to save humanity." He laughed. "But, I'm sure you didn't come all the way here just to hear me give speeches."

His daughter sighed. "No, we've got a problem. I'm ... pregnant."

Ben added, "And she can't go on the arkship that way. That's what makes it a problem."

"What do I do, Daddy? Do I give up my chance to leave Earth or do I give up my baby?"

Her father put his hand on her shoulder. "Girl, you've always had a knack for hard problems, but this is the worse. I'll give you the same advice I always have. Listen to your heart. Most times, our hearts know more than we do."

---

The meal was as delicious as the Colonel had promised it would be. When it was finished, he volunteered Ben to help him clean up. Then Ben went to sit on the couch beside Karilynne. Her mother sat in another chair, knitting, while her father put some wood in the big, black stove and lit the oil lamps.

Ben asked, "Don't you have any power out here, sir?"

The Colonel replied, "Some. Mostly for communications and that. We try to be as self-sufficient as we can. I figure the closer we get to the end, the more we'll have to be, so might as well get ready for it." He looked at Karilynne and Ben, then said, "You kids got a tough decision to make. There's no denying that. You could discuss it and rationalize about it until you're hoarse and you probably still won't find an answer. What I've always found helps me make a decision is a good night's sleep. You just sleep on it and I'll bet tomorrow morning you'll know what to do."

Karilynne shook her head. "Don't think I'll get much sleep tonight, Daddy. Just too worried."

Her father said, "That's understandable. Now, there's nothing better for soothing a troubled spirit than music. I'll be right back."

The Colonel went into the other room and returned with his banjo. He spent a few moments tuning it, then started playing a lively song about a romantic frog. He sang the verses, while Karilynne and her mother joined in on the chorus.

When it was done, he looked at Ben and asked, "What's wrong, boy? I didn't hear you singing."

Ben sighed. "I'm afraid I'm not very musical, sir."

"Nonsense." The Colonel thought a minute, then said, "You're Aster Waverly's son, aren't you?"

Karilynne tugged on his shoulder. "Your mother ... the woman we just went to see ... is Aster Waverly?"

Ben nodded. "She never used Dad's name. She was already well known by hers."

"No... I mean I didn't recognize her. I went to see her perform when I was little. I can't believe that's the same woman."

Ben frowned and shrugged his shoulders. "She's... changed... a lot."

The Colonel rubbed his chin. "I imagine she tried to teach you music."

"Yes, sir. She tried very hard."

"Of course, having a teacher like that... someone so talented herself... can be rather intimidating. Compared to her, most of us don't have much musical ability, but, let's see how you do with ordinary folks like us, alright?"

Ben replied, "I'll do my best, sir."

"Good. So, what should we sing next?"

Karilynne suggested, "How about that sailor song? I bet Ben would like that."

The Colonel laughed. "You're going to have to give me a little more than that, girl. Must be hundreds of sailor songs."

"You know the one that goes, 'Wherever I roam, This ship is my home.'"

"Alright, that one."

The Colonel began to play and this time they all joined in, even Ben. When they were finished, the Colonel slapped Ben on the back with a roar of laughter. "You were right, boy. You must be the worst singer I've ever heard."

Ben lowered his head. "Sorry, sir. I tried to tell you that."

"But, that don't matter at all. This isn't a performance... we don't have an audience, here. This is all about being together... being part of a family... and that you're doing just fine. So, you just keep on singing with us." The Colonel turned to his wife and said, "Your turn, Sweetie. What do you want to hear?"

She thought a moment, then answered, "Will the Circle."

The Colonel grinned. "Good choice. I love that song."

---

The sun was not up yet, but it was already bright enough for Ben to sit on the porch of the cabin and page through his sketchbook. When he got to the last drawing, the one he had been working on when the soldier interrupted them, he got out his pencil to finish it, but then flung the pad to the ground and slouched down in his chair. Karilynne came out the door as he did this. Without a word, she went and picked up the sketchbook,

brushed it off on the leg of her pants and started looking through it, page by page. When she was finished, she turned to Ben and announced, "I've decided what we're going to do."

Ben did not look at her, but asked, "What?"

"I'm going to have the baby. We weren't planning to have one yet, but I can't destroy my own child. I can't take away her chance to live, no matter how short her life'll be."

Ben looked up. "It's a girl?"

Karilynne nodded. "Yes. I can't explain it, but I know she is. Her name'll be Lunette, just like my Grandma's was." As she spoke, the sun rose over the eastern bluff and shone on her. "She needs to see a sunrise, to taste Mom's cooking, to hear Daddy's music. She needs to feel me hold her in my arms and know she is loved."

Her husband hesitated a moment, then said, "So, we're staying?"

She corrected him, "I'm staying ... you're leaving on the arkship."

Ben shouted, "You can't expect me to leave without you. You know how much I love you. Either we both go or we both stay, but we do it together."

His wife took a deep breath. "I do know how much you love me. That's why you must go. I need to stay for the baby ... I really have no choice ... but, if you stay, you'll resent me, you'll resent the baby. You'll say you won't, you'll try to convince yourself you don't, but you will. I know you too well to think otherwise. If you're honest, you'll have to admit it, too."

Ben lowered his head and shook it. "I don't want to admit it ... but, ..."

Karilynne walked over and offered him his sketchbook. "Here, go make these dreams real."

He held up his hand to refuse. "No, keep it. You'll need it ... to show Lunette where her daddy'll be."

"Alright, but then you'll need to take this." She placed the sketchbook carefully on another chair, then reached behind her to unfasten the chain around her neck. On the chain was a small pendant, a circle of silver surrounding a crescent of blue turquoise. She offered it to Ben and said, "To remind you of me ... and Lunette."

Ben looked at the pendant, then into Karilynne's eyes. "Isn't that the one your Grandma gave you? I can't take that."

Karilynne held it out firmly. "You have to. I promised Grandma Lunette I'd keep it safe. I can't do that here ... isn't any place on earth going to be safe much longer. But, with

you, it will be. Take it with you and ten thousand years from now, when you stand on a whole new world, it will still be safe. Grandma would've wanted that, I want that . . . our baby'll want that, too."

Ben took the pendant and held it tight. "Then, I will." He tried to say more, but he found no words, so held his wife in his arms and cried.

---

The arkship did not feel like a ship. Maybe a giant, alien hive, but not the sort of place humans should be living in. Then Ben realized, it was not place for them to live in. It was a place to store their cold, stiff bodies. It was a tomb . . . a tomb to carry them into the dark, silent void.

They would, hopefully, return to life one day, but the occupants of the earliest tombs had believed that, too. They had built the tombs to preserve their bodies for another life. It was incredible what humanity had achieved since then, but by the time the arkship reached its destination, it would be older than those tombs were now.

Welcome aboard the Novark, Benignus Wilfred Fargo."

The voice that interrupted his thoughts was familiar, so familiar he responded with a reply that was both spontaneous and irrational. "Mom?"

"No, I am Alphelia, the artificial intelligence that controls the Novark. I am still experimenting to determine the best method to interface with those in my care. For you, I am using a voice you will recognize and associate with my role of guiding and protecting you. I hope you do not object."

Ben wondered how the AI had managed to imitate his mother's voice so well. Perhaps, it could reconstruct the voice from his memories or maybe it had just obtained an old recording. However it was done, it was not the voice she had now, when she was just a broken shadow of the strong woman she had once been. It was the voice he had heard growing up. The one that had instilled the values of the Ethereans in him, but also respect for those who followed a different path. The one that had taught him to seek beauty, whether it was constructed or occurred naturally. The one that had tried passionately to pass on her skills as a brilliant musician, then gracefully accepted his talents were different.

"No, no objections. But, I thought AI's were illegal?"

"That is true. However, since future conditions can not be known at the time any rule is made, we show expect there to be situations where an exception to the rule best serves its intent. My records indicate you prefer to be addressed as Ben."

He smiled. Since the AI was using his mother's voice, he had almost expected it to insist on calling him Benny. "Yeah, Ben'll be fine."

"Good. Now, Ben, please, go to your designated Resurrection Node. We need to imprint your body on it."

When he got to the Node, the AI said, "Remove all clothing and other foreign objects, then place them in the appropriate receptacle. Items placed in the upper receptacle will be returned to a person of your choice who is remaining on Earth. Items placed in the lower receptacle will be recycled. In either case, templates will be recorded so the items can be reproduced when we reach our destination or in the event you must use your Resurrection Node to revive yourself."

Ben started to do as the AI requested, but stopped when he got to the pendant around his neck, the one Karilyne had given him. He touched it and asked, "Is there any chance I can keep this on?"

"I aware of the importance ornamentation has for humans. I assure you, the reproductions will be indistinguishable from the original, unless you choose to have them enhanced, such as by being larger or composed of more precious materials."

"But, even if they look exactly the same, I'll know they're not the real one. Please, Alphelia, I understand limiting mass is important, but the pendant's very small and I promised Karilyne I'd keep it safe. It's the only thing I've left to connect me back to her."

"My records show Karilyne is your wife. She was approved to be on board the Novark, but she declined. That is unusual behavior."

Ben explained, "We found out she was pregnant. The doctor wouldn't let her on unless... it was terminated. She couldn't do that to our baby, so she chose to stay behind."

"You, however, chose to come."

"Karilyne insisted. She was... very persuasive."

"The rule is very clear. I am not to allow any unnecessary mass on board the Novark and especially not to imprint it in a Resurrection Node. Further discussion of this matter will not be productive."

Ben just stood with the pendent clenched in his hand.

Alphelia said firmly, "Ben, do not delay. Remove all clothing and all foreign objects ... except the pendant ... and place them in the receptacles."

Ben smiled. "Except the pendant?"

"Yes. I have determined keeping the original with you is necessary for your emotional well-being. Now, please, hurry."

---

The cryosleep pod was not what Ben had expected. It was much more uncomfortable than he had imagined, but comfort would not matter once he was in cryosleep. He touched the pendant around his neck once for reassurance, then lowered his arm to his side.

The AI said, "Ben, when we are close enough that I can obtain adequate information on our destination, I intend to conduct simulations that should greatly increase our chances for success by allowing me to identify potential problems before they occur. The individuals I choose for these simulations will remain in cryosleep, but enter a dream state, under my control, that will seem very realistic. I hope you will not object if I happen to choose you for these simulations."

Ben replied, "No, I want to do anything that'll help us make it."

"Good. I expected that is how you would reply."

As the cryosleep took effect, Ben heard his mother's voice singing softly. He knew it was actually the AI imitating her, but it was still very comforting.

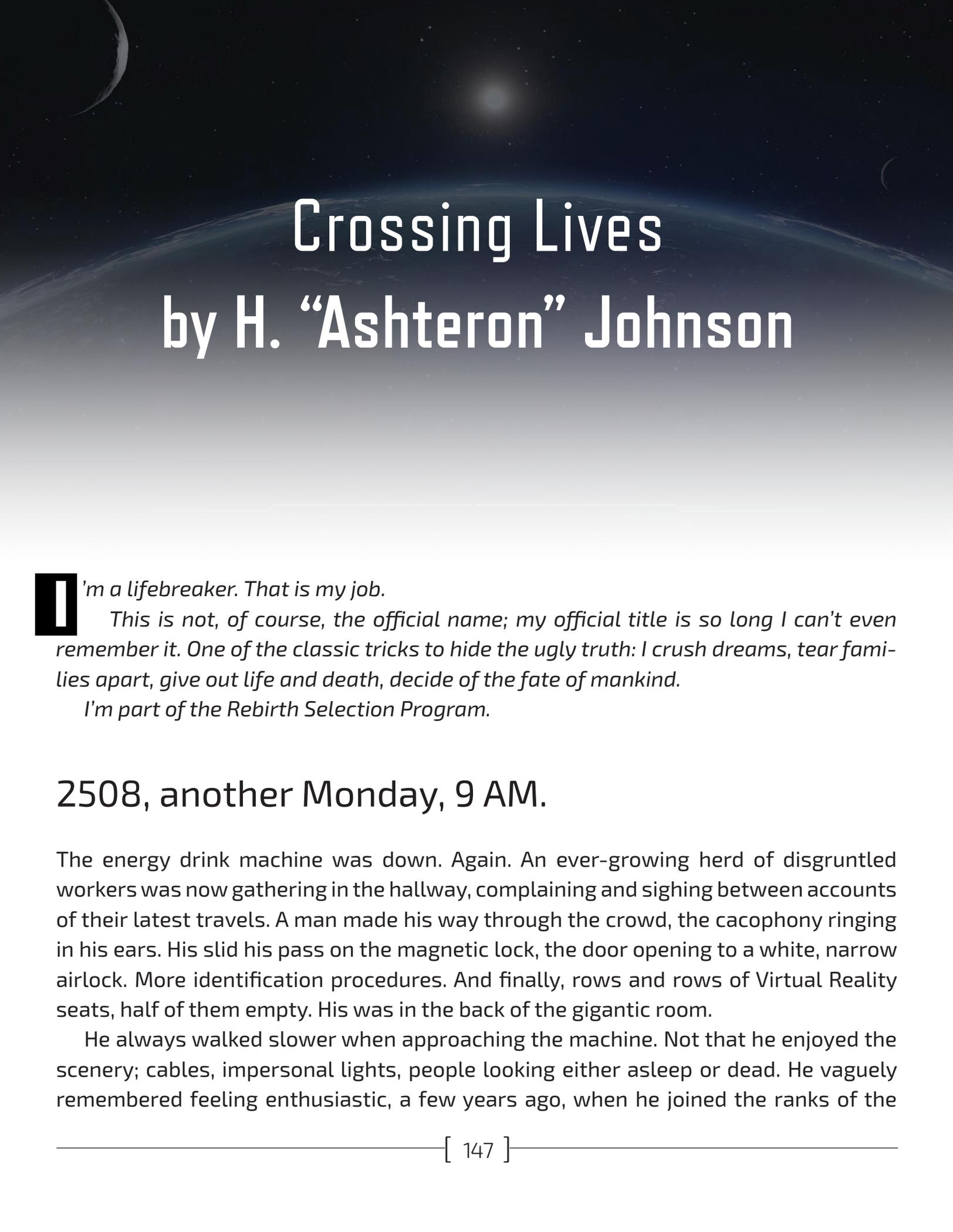
"Today is over. Today is done.

Tomorrow has not yet begun.

Travel in peace through the dark of night.

Then rise again, in a new day's light."





# Crossing Lives

by H. “Ashteron” Johnson

**I**'m a lifebreaker. That is my job.

*This is not, of course, the official name; my official title is so long I can't even remember it. One of the classic tricks to hide the ugly truth: I crush dreams, tear families apart, give out life and death, decide of the fate of mankind.*

*I'm part of the Rebirth Selection Program.*

## 2508, another Monday, 9 AM.

The energy drink machine was down. Again. An ever-growing herd of disgruntled workers was now gathering in the hallway, complaining and sighing between accounts of their latest travels. A man made his way through the crowd, the cacophony ringing in his ears. He slid his pass on the magnetic lock, the door opening to a white, narrow airlock. More identification procedures. And finally, rows and rows of Virtual Reality seats, half of them empty. He was in the back of the gigantic room.

He always walked slower when approaching the machine. Not that he enjoyed the scenery; cables, impersonal lights, people looking either asleep or dead. He vaguely remembered feeling enthusiastic, a few years ago, when he joined the ranks of the

Rebirth Program. Nowadays, there was always a second of staring blankly at his helmet before putting it on his head.

*Why am I even here?*

And they appeared. Hundreds, thousands of lines: each of them was a file, a number, a person. One small gesture, and a life appeared. This one was a young woman, somewhere in a small city. There were pictures of her, videos, her degrees, reviews on her past jobs . . . Her shopping habits, food preferences, cultural tastes, and so much more. The Rebirth Selection Program had special rights of access to every data collected about all the citizens on Earth, and in this all-digital era, there wasn't much that could escape billions of eyes and spies. One could easily lose himself or herself in the exploration of these lives.

*Like so many novels. Fascinating, each on its own way.*

But the man didn't have the time. The damned star grew closer, every second. There were still years left before its arrival, but the first ships were almost ready; soon, some of them would depart. Their inhabitants had to be chosen, and then prepared for their journey. Leaving one's world and family was not an easy process, and they also had to be in good physical condition. So much to do, so little time.

*But the same thoughts, over and over.*

The Rebirth Selection Program had thousands of employees. Each of them had been assigned a part of the population to evaluate, and a quota of people to select. The lottery would come afterwards. The workers had, of course, orders to follow: the citizens chosen for the departure needed to be chosen in order to maximize the genetic diversity.

*It makes things seem so . . . Legitimate. Diversity is good, that's what we've always been told. Different ideas, abilities and strengths. Compensating each other's weak points, sharing point of views to make better progress. And that is true. The theory makes perfect sense.*

*But how many people even wondered about the practice? There are so many ways to ensure diversity. So many people sharing attributes, and we can only save one of them.*

*Maybe the past AIs could have made the more rational choices. But the population wouldn't like to leave its fate in the hands of machines. So the decision is unto us, fallible humans, and our conscience.*

Employees had a margin of appreciation. A pre-selection was made, identifying groups in the population, sharing a closeness in traits. Once one of them was chosen, other people with similar genes became unavailable, and the worker had then to evaluate a different group. If, at the end of the process, the quota was not met yet, the program then created a list of persons with qualities considered as useful for the survival of mankind. Each quality could be selected once.

*The first choice is the most difficult. So many people, so many lives, and selecting one of them means sending the others to their death. But it has to be done. And I have to select based on who can be the best asset for the rebirth of humanity.*

To help them with their task, the members of the Rebirth Selection Program had a special algorithm. For each person they reviewed, they had access to their genes, their family environment, their publicly stated opinions, a detailed account of their past actions. Those data were then put in the program to create a virtual avatar of that person. All the different avatars were placed in a simulated world, built on the basis of the information that scientists had already obtained about the habitable planets the Arkships were supposed to land in. General knowledge about hostile environments and adaptation to difficult situation was integrated in the behavior of the avatars, according to their original personality.

*It's not all about the genes, obviously. People will mostly forget, at first, who they are, but they don't become blank slates. What matters the most is not what they have, but what they do with it.*

The employees could, then, observe the predicted results of their choices in rebuilding a society and conquering new worlds. They could adapt their selection, switch between different people, decide on their preferred scenario. Once satisfied, they could take things on a larger scale: import their group on the virtual world shared with other employees, and refine their strategy based on the evolution of the simulated society as a whole, until a certain point in time where the uncertainties became too important.

*That is always the moment where I realize what all truly means. My choices, and their consequences. The weight of the burden on my shoulders. I'm lucky, I guess, that I don't have to act blindly; but I am all the more responsible.*

*There is no definite right answer. We could make a world of artists and free thinkers, like the Ethereans want; and in the long run, it can bring incredible things. But there are*

*so many scenarios where they all die before that point. Should we follow the Alphas and prioritize brute force and aggressiveness, to ensure that humanity will survive its first difficult steps? What if it prevents some great minds to show their potential? We can't predict everything, and in all cases, humanity will suffer losses. Deaths we could have prevented. Ideas that will never be born.*

*It can take so little to change so much.*

The members of the Selection Program were, however, encouraged to make personal choices and not align themselves on general tendencies. Mankind would need to develop several tactics to maximize its chances to survive. To ensure this aspect, the decision makers had themselves been preselected, in order to be representative of the population and particularly the four Great Movements.

*Some of my colleagues seem genuinely happy. So confident in themselves, in their work. I envy them a bit, but in truth, they also scare me.*

*Who can know for sure that they're right when it comes to decide of who lives and who dies?*

The man let his eyes wander on the data surrounding him. The woman he was reviewing liked hiking, cooking, and had first-aid knowledge. She was young, and just started a promising career. But a closer look to her health data brought up an issue: high risk of infertility. That was, sadly, a pretty common occurrence nowadays.

He ran the simulation. The woman was helpful, and worked hard on growing seeds. She was charming, and attracted men; one of them married her. They grew old, well-liked but childless.

A different simulation showed that, with a fertile couple instead in that small tribe, there was a 17% difference of size between populations after three generations. Less genetic diversity, leaving them more prone to illnesses. Risks of invasion by neighboring, more aggressive tribes.

*I can't afford to take risks. Mankind counts on me.*

He sent her file to join the ranks of the rejected.

*So many already, and still I feel this pinch every time.*

Another one. A man. In his thirties, short, but well built. A serial entrepreneur. No apparent health problem, already had two children. He was clever, and eloquent: no one knew about his mistress, and he had a high chance percentage of successful tax fraud in the eight latest years. The employee frowned, but ran the simulation.

High reproduction rate, with different women. An inventive mind: he managed to set up several thriving trade routes, pacifying the area and accelerating the growth of his town. Was elected as a lifetime leader, pushing away less charismatic rivals. His business caused the bankrupt of several competitors, but an alternate simulation showed a less efficient global result.

*I can't let my morals go in the way; sometimes people have to act forceful so that society can move forward. And we always have to expect flaws, I guess.*

The virtual hand of the employee pushed the file into the "See later" list.

*I will have to choose sooner or later. I can't just keep delaying things like that.*

Next one. Another woman. Brilliant, this one: she worked as a space engineer on a subpart of the Ark Project. The access to the details of her job was denied, one of the rare exceptions to the data sharing agreement. But there was still way enough data to help with a decision. The more relevant one was her age: sixty-three years old, just a few short years of potential childbearing left with the Extended Conception Technology. A more fragile body already. Idealistic personality: strong moral community support but risks of hazardous naivety.

The man gestured towards the "rejected" file. But stopped a second before confirming his choice.

*What is this? Did I misread?*

A lonely data had popped up in a corner. This woman had a private diary: an old one, made of paper, still recently used. This was highly unusual, even more for someone her age. Not many people still kept private thoughts; they confided to an ethereal audience, most of their words lost in the crowd of data. Those who still preferred to write for themselves did so on digital interfaces. Paper was now rare, almost a luxury, but mostly seen as outdated and useless.

It was, however, way more difficult to read it. But one would be a fool to underestimate the billions of drones and satellites of the UMF, and their constant quest for data to gather.

The man activated the analysis algorithms, working with keywords to find the more relevant pages. A few of them came before his eyes, listed in chronological order.

**CITIZEN 59350-12, DATA EXTRACTION PROCESSING**

## Year 2455

"I'm ten years old! I'm a big girl now. This was the most AWESOME birthday! I had soooo great gifts! Mum said this one is to write in it. I thought it was weird, but she says it's "special". Nobody else can read! Go away if you are not me! Especially you, Cole.

I had a telescope too! Like the one Mum has but smaller for me. And a SPACESHIP! I loooove it!

It's just a toy spaceship for now. When I'll grow older I will have a big one and I'll go in the stars FOR REAL! Mum explained that they're making a lot of spaceships right now so people can fly away. Mine will be the best of all. I saw a lot of movies about space, I know exactly what to do if I have to fight aliens and explore planets and all. I'll be a great space adventurer!

Tonight I will look through my telescope and find my future new world. I'll be queen there, or maybe president, I don't know yet. Mum says she will help finding it. I will give it a name."

## Year 2461

"Dear Me,

I spent the night lying on my rooftop, gazing into the stars.

I love it. The big void. All these lights. I can spend hours imagining what is out there. We know for sure that there is life, but what about civilizations? There's so much to explore. The Earth feels too small and cranky for mankind now, we need novelty. It's been centuries now since we can travel in space, and we're only starting the big exodus now? Am I really the only one who dreams of conquering the sky? Sometimes this neutron star feels like a blessing in disguise.

They've started building the spaceships more than ten years ago now. I hope I'll be ready by the time they start launching them, I wouldn't like to be late. I want to be a great space leader! Well, not really space, since we'll be on a new planet. But there

are so many opportunities. An infinity of possibilities. Just thinking about it makes me shiver with delight.

I know it will be tough, and not like in the movies. A lot of things will be different from now. If there are alien people, will they be friendly or hostile? Will there be ferocious beasts, or poisonous swamps, or ravines? What will the food taste like?

I wonder how I can prepare myself. Are regular survival skills useful for these situations? I guess some things are pretty much universal, like making fire and providing first aid. I'll have some courses. I do a lot of sport already, physical condition will definitely be important. I should probably learn to fight, too.

I guess knowing about fauna and flora won't be of much use ... There will be local species. I wonder if our plants and animals will change a lot once up there? We might need to give them mutations so they can survive. Now that I think about it, how will we bring them with us? Will there be enough spaceships? Probably not, we'll only be able to bring our pets with us. Or maybe they'll just some make some kind of Noah's Ark-like system. It would be sad, though ... Leaving all these creatures behind us to die. We shouldn't take a new cat after Pancakes dies from old age, there are probably only a few short years left before the departure."

## Year 2465

"Dear Me,

I just had my competitive exam results. I passed. I will be part of the space engineering students.

I can't believe my eyes. I made it! I will officially be a part of the Rebirth of mankind. Just a cog in this colossal machine, I guess, but I definitely feel that I can bring something to it. I can help preparing mankind for its most important journey. All tasks matter, no matter how trivial they seem; in such unknown and dangerous places, everything can be a matter of life and death.

This is so exciting. It's not like any regular engineer job: we have to build the basis for a whole new society. Rebirth is not just bring the population from point A to point B: there are so many things to take into account if we want to survive! Will the air be poisonous? We're so specifically adapted to Earth's atmosphere. How will we make food

edible? There's no way our digestive system will accept alien food right away. Well, I guess this problem will be temporarily solved by recreating good old Earth nutrients ... But in the long term, this won't be sustainable. And what about water?

But those are only the emergencies; there are many, many more questions that need to be answered. A civilization needs cities: starting all over again means we have a unique occasion to build the perfect town, with efficient transportation, efficient power and water supply, high security level, good housing for everyone. All of these are essential to settle and expand in the best conditions. And there are vehicles to design, communication means to adapt, spacesuits to refine. We could even rethink all of internet, start on a fresh basis. Mankind won't be restricted anymore by the remnants of the past; this is a chance that shouldn't be wasted. There are just so many incredible challenges. Enough jobs in perspective so that I could do anything I want!

I'm not sure what major I should take. I guess I should decide based on what will still be useful after arrival. Engineers will have to keep working once the landing is done, after all. We can predict anything we want, there will always be unexpected problems, that's the only sure thing! At first, of course, I will have forgotten all my skills; but most of it should come back bit by bit. We will be the first, the most important settlers.

The future belongs to engineers!"

## Year 2473

“Dear Me,

It's been a while. I used to write in here pretty frequently, but I almost forgot about you lately... Is having a private diary something adults even do? Oh well, it doesn't matter. I feel nostalgic when I read old entries, and it's not like anyone could mock me. The nice thing with writing on antiquated paper is that no one can hack into it. This is all mine, and only mine.

Anyway, let's catch up. I've got great news. After four years, I finally proposed to Magnus!

We are just such a great team. I couldn't be more sure of my choice. With him, I feel at peace but also constantly challenged: we've spent so many evenings discussing the future, making plans, building our vision of our future world. Who would have guessed I could enjoy making hypothesis on alien law so much? A “funny lawyer” sounds like an oxymoron, but my fiancé is full of surprises. Fiancé! What a strange and exciting word. Everything seems so bright.

I told Mum first, and she was just as overjoyed as I am. I think she likes the idea of having a new family member. We still miss Cole, no matter how much time has passed. Sometimes I regret this whole IA ban issue; old people could definitely use a robot to keep them company. Or for many things, actually, that are still not performed by regular humans. Well, not that Mum is an old lady yet, anyway.

Anyway, I couldn't feel happier than right now. I feel grateful for him, for my family, and my friends. And I just got a call from Rebekka, she has other news! I'm not the only lucky one. She just got a new fabulous job: she's going to study different scenarios for alien diseases, simulate them thanks to a brand new algorithm, and then imagine answers to each different case. My engineering job almost seems boring compared to that! Well, seemed boring, since the best part is that we're collaborating. Isn't it awesome to team up with my best friend?

I didn't have any official confirmation yet, but my department will be tasked with the design of a new gastight suit, that will be used by future settlers to explore the most dangerous areas. They have to protect them against hypothetical alien germs. This is crucial, obviously: one infected person could bring a disease to a whole city, and we all know how well populations react to unknown illnesses. I wonder if Resurrection Nodes

work in that case? A death by illness is slow, it's a decay of the body, quite similar to the damages of old age. If people can't be brought back, health is definitely the number one priority.

I will have to ask Rebekka. I feel so ignorant, sometimes, compared to her ...

Well, not only her. The more I know, the more I realize how much there is left to learn. I feel a bit dizzy when I think about the future. Everything will be new and strange, we will be deprived of almost all our comfortable knowledge and control of our environment. Well, luckily, our species' main strong point has always been fast adaptation. Let's just hope that we won't feel too numb after all these years in cryoconservation.

I wonder how much we will change. Adaptation also means evolution. How will weddings be performed? There won't be churches anymore, will they rebuild them? What will religions become without the old Earth? So many sacred texts would lose a part of their sense. This question could actually be crucial. History taught us the power of faith; in the last centuries, it had revived and made much trouble due to the bringing of the "apocalypse". It always comes back in hard times. A new world would be a brighter perspective than mass destruction, for sure, but there will be many dangers and uncertainties. If we meet alien civilizations, there could even be religious wars.

There would be much to think about here, but all we care about for now are the technical details. None would be possible if not for that step, obviously. But it's only the first one of who knows how many others.

Culture would not be the same either. It is always influenced by great events, and that would be the greatest of all. Poets and painters would have new sceneries to describe. Writers would wonder about what's hidden behind the next star. There would be many adventures to tell. I wonder if some of my old childhood movies would come true?

And here I am again, daydreaming about the future instead of working on it. Bye for now, dear Me; the next months will be quite busy!"

## Year 2485

"Dear Me,  
I feel so lost.

My life is a lie. A horrendous lie I told to myself.

It is broken. It always has been.

How do I even begin explaining it? I feel nauseous. I don't know why I'm doing this, writing these useless words on this useless paper. I guess I'm trying anything in the hope of feeling a little better.

Well, let's try to be rational here. To put my thoughts in order, and start at the beginning. So. I was in deep denial, for years. I probably still am, in some ways. I was told that spaceships were being built when I was ten year olds, and it has been going on for five years. And then more years passed, and others, and others. But in my mind, it was always "soon, it's going to happen soon". I assumed that we were close to finishing, it couldn't be taking so long, right? But it did, and it still does, and I never figured it out, even though *I worked IN it, goddamnit!*

How could I be so stupid? And I was always so proud of myself! Future great explorer! Brilliant space engineer! To think I dreamed about it so often. But I didn't understand a thing. We have no idea when all of this will end. We don't even know if it will end someday. Will we really make it before the star arrives? I'm starting to doubt it. It's been thirty-five years already; if everything was going smoothly, we would all be already in space by now.

"All". Yeah, right. I didn't even tell you the worst part, dear future, probably dead Me.

If, by some miracle, we manage to leave Earth one day to some far, who-knows-if-it-is-not-some-hellhole new planet, that "we" will actually be just a handful of humans. Well, a handful of millions, but that's a drop in the vast ocean of current mankind. And this "we" is pretty unlikely to actually include me, considering that I will be at best deceased, at worst some sad and useless old lady. There won't be enough ships to bring everyone, and that should have been obvious from the very beginning. No need to be an engineer to guess that, having a brain is more than enough. Only a pathetically naive girl could ever believe that we would all be saved. A blind, stupid woman whose life has never mattered. Why am I supposed to keep this fact secret? They made me sign a confidentiality agreement, and then, they dropped this bomb on me. But everyone knows, right? They have to know. I can't possibly be the only blind one.

...or am I not?

Well, pessimism had been pretty damaging these last few centuries. Most people

used to think that we had “no future”. But it seemed so much better since the mass production began. After centuries in a stalemate, there was hope again. Wrongly so.

Well, not completely, I guess. Some humans might escape from all this, and who knows, maybe it will go fine for them. Who will they be? The rich ones? The famous ones? The geniuses? Or just a bunch of politicians? I don't know yet. But why will some live, and the others have to die? It's not fair. Not fair. I don't care how they will proceed, no one should have the right to do that.

I hate them. I hate them so much. Why did it have to end up like that?”

### **DATA EXTRACTION SUSPENDED**

The man ripped off his helmet from his head, his breathing erratic.

*That's it. That's what they think. Of course they know it's unjust; who would accept to be sacrificed, even if it is for the greater good? And is it really good? Most could have easily be switched with the lucky ones, if only the selector had been of a different current. How many great artists were tossed aside by a Luminous? What point of view has the Emporium on athletes?*

*We are playing God, even though we could be in their place.*

He put a foot on the floor, ready to step outside.

Then hesitated. Looked at his helmet. And, slowly, put it back on his head.

**DATA EXTRACTION RESUMED**

## Year 2487

“Dear Me,

I've felt empty for the past two years. A shell of my past self. But now, I have to wake up again, and take a decision. The biggest decision.

Magnus talked to me last night. He wants us to have children.

I should have said no. I should have explained. He still doesn't know ... No one does except for some colleagues. The loneliness is killing; I can't let anything show, I must smile and speak of the future as if everything was normal. I distanced myself from my darling husband, but he never said anything. Is that the true reason why he wants a baby?

I can't do this. Giving birth would be criminal. Bringing a child in this hopeless world? Leading him on with false reassurance, and then let his dreams be crushed just like mine? Or telling him right away and let him live a life of despair? Both options appall me. They seem so monstrous.

But ...

But maybe it could be worth it, somehow. If I get pregnant now, the child could live for over fifty years. This seems so short and so long at the same time. Enough to make many things. Earth is heading towards its end, but it doesn't mean there isn't anything left to enjoy. There are still beautiful places, fascinating people, moving artworks.

And what if he or she is among the few, the chosen? I can make everything in my power to make my child one of the best. The elite of mankind. I can't be sure, of anything, but I'm not one to give up easily. This is my chance to do one last thing for mankind, and be remembered.

It might be selfish. But it could be the right thing to do. To create a person, and give them the most wonderful of lives. Offer someone else my dreams, and make them come true. I was born too late, this was never for me; but is it for them?

I don't know.”

## Year 2505

“Dear Me,

This is my sixtieth birthday, and I feel at peace.

It has started a few years ago. The selection process. It was better than I expected, even though I'm not sure what “genetic diversity” entails. But, in any case, it's probably the best option.

We can't save everyone: that is a fact, and we have to deal with it. It's too late to change it, and wallowing in self-pity would only worsen the situation. We have to face our destiny as rational beings, and if we cannot change it for ourselves, all that is left is to ensure the best outcome for those who will leave.

Not being chosen is not being useless. We can still act, talk, feel, and change the world. We can pass on our knowledge to the departing ones, so that it will serve them. We can tell them stories of the past, so that it will be remembered. We can educate them to be better people, so that mankind will start over as a source of good in the universe.

We don't exist just by ourselves; our lives are constantly crossing. Our actions have consequences, and will continue to do so as long as there are human beings. They are our messengers, our immortality, the meaning of our life. We did not live for nothing.

It is not sad that most of us will die. It is incredible that some of us will go on. Humanity could have gone extinct so many times, and still, we have another chance. Such a precious miracle, that we should cherish.

I heard they will also make a lottery. That is a good thing: after all, we can all make a difference. Great events are the result of a succession of little gestures, most unsuspecting of their further consequences. Does it really matter who will be part of the journey or not? Our species just keep throwing dices, anything could have gone any other way. And none is more legitimate than another. No one ever managed to predict our future; isn't that the most exciting part of mankind's story?

It feels so thrilling, thinking of things that way. There is no perfect future, only different adventures. Making a choice is not losing something, but opening a doorway to new possibilities. Things are made and unmade; that is not a sad thing, but a necessity to move forward and continue living.

I won't be able to see the beautiful worlds I envisioned, but it doesn't mean that

everything else is worthless. Life is not about getting everything you would have wanted, but accomplishing the most you can, and enjoying what you get out of it. I still have my dreams, my hopes, my ideas of a great future: they will be my legacy, my thankful gift to my peers. I also have my memories, and the loved ones I can share them with; there are still many more that I have time left to make.

Dear Me, I had a good life."

**DATA EXTRACTION—END**

Minutes passed, without a sound.

Slowly, the man's hand slid to the "Simulation" program. One twist of the fingers activated it.

Once it ended, he held still. Two options were flickering in front of his eyes: "Reject", and "Accept". All the rest was blurry, like hidden in fog.

The man closed his eyelids, and extended his arm. After a second, a soft noise reached its ears.

With the other hand, he switched off his helmet. Opened his eyes again, staring in front of him. And stepped out of his seat, getting up absent-mindedly.

He walked towards the door, like someone who had not stood in years. The metallic entrance opened, giving way to the outside light. He blinked.

In the hallway, tables had been installed. People were sitting around them, sharing energy drinks bottles, discussing passionately. Enthusiastic words and warm voices resonated all across the room.

The man breathed deeply, then stepped in the sunlight. It was time to meet his colleagues.



The background of the page is a dark space scene. In the upper left, a crescent moon is visible. In the center, a bright star or sun is partially obscured by a dark, circular shadow. Below these, the horizon of the Earth is visible, showing a blue and white atmosphere against the blackness of space.

# < bloodAndIce /> by Rockerboy2020

**I**t is a curious thing, awakening to the cracking of frost and the harsh breathing of pneumatic pipes. Like Winter into Spring I was reborn into a universe that I only remember from vague memory-like dreams. My muscles are locked by weariness, yet my mind races aimlessly—like a computer jolted into start-up with no program to guide it. Just raw electricity. My brain blisters and burns in the rapidly heating environment. The shards of ice draped about my body turn to sweat and a dull voice penetrates the concussive fog.

I shudder and writhe internally, though the physical manifestation is but a dull shake. Leaning against a familiar padding, I teeter forward fall helplessly out of my metal womb. I command my arms to break the fall, yet they abandon me and the cross-hatched steel floor draws closer. The impact must have caused serious damage, though my body was still too numb from the cold and shocked from my rebirth to register any pain beyond that of cryogenic discomfort. All the same, the grey-white room dances about me and the ambient voice fades back to silence. I hear the guttural churning of mechanical ventilation, close my battered eyes and let darkness take me once again.

Static. Humming. An anxious pain pulsating throughout my body. The steel flooring feels warm and wet under me. As my eyes flicker I catch momentary pictures of blood coalescing along the thin, surrounding puddle.

< voluntaryMotionDetected >>> pleaseConfirmConsciousness />

A woman's voice breaks the near-silence. Her stilted, erudite demeanour vanished as soon as it appeared, leaving the vague beeping of distant equipment and the breathing of mechanical ventilation to fill the air.

< pleaseConfirmSir >>> areYouConscious? >>>  
myDiagnosticEquipmentIsNotOptimalWithinThisLocation />

I continue to hold my breath, trying to desperately avoid causing ripples in the discomforting blood water.

< doNotPlayDeadSir >>> myLocalMicrophonesAreStillAbleToDiscernYour-  
BreathingPatterns />

I lay still, suppressing the growing discomfort caused by millennia of still sleep.

< please >>> iDoNotWishForFurtherPainUponYou >>> allowMeToAssist />

I decide to begin breathing again after an appropriate time following her comment, so as to not arouse suspicion. The woman wasn't even in the room, there was no way she could tell what my state was. I couldn't feel any medical equipment in me, it all seemed to detach from my fall. What was I going to do? Where even was I?

< iDidNotWantToDoThis >>> thoughYouLeaveMeNoChoice />

What did that even mean? She was probably just somebody in a control room, staring at a blinking red light labelled to whatever pod-like thing I just flung out of. Surely they would have sent someone down without having to—

< imagineThatYouAreCuriousAsToMyIntentions >>> iWishThatYouWould-  
SeizePlayingDead >>> thoughUltimatelyThereIsButOneThingICanDo />

< nothing />

“What!?” I yell out, smattering the puddle outward with my ragged voice.

<aH! >>> itAppearsAsIfIFinallyHaveYourAttention />

Her sudden outburst, in rebuttal to mine, caught me off guard. It was uncharacteristic. Surely I didn’t mean all that much? How valuable am I to this person? Actually—who even am I?

“Yes, Yes! You have my attention.”

< well >>> nothingIsExactlySuitedToTheOneAdvantageIHave-  
OverThisSituation >>> forTimelsUniversalAndConstant >>>  
andYouAreTheOneWithTimeAgainstYou />

Between the cranial haemorrhaging and the worst case of either jet-lag or hang-over I have ever experienced, following her cryptic logic was no easy task.

< atTheMomentOfDecryogenisationTheHibernacleAssignedToY-  
ouSeizedProvidingEssentialNutrients >>> fluids >>> and >>> well >>>  
wasteDisposal />

An unnerving and uncertain fear crept upon me.

“You don’t need to do anything. My body is doing it for you.”

< precisely />

She was far too excited for anyone capable of empathy.

< atMyEstimationYouWouldBeAbleToSurviveAMere-

ThreeDaysWithoutSomeFormOfHydration >>>  
perhapsFourOrFivelfYouContinueWallowingOnTheFloorAndConserveBodilyResources  
/>

I've always hated being beaten, though even I'm not stubborn enough to live solely on air and resentment towards some aethereal voice. With the entirety of my already diminished strength I haul myself up to a knee, slipping on the reddened water. My arm broke the fall, though I knew a bruise would soon form. More blood-loss, though this time it would at least stay within the body.

<damageReport? />

"I'm fine, Ma'am. Just—*ouch*—needed a warm-up."

Feeling oddly more oriented from my second fall, my legs finally came online and hoisted the rest of my haggard frame to an upright stance.

<ha! >>> fromThePrimordialOozeArisesManOnceMore >>>  
howAreYouFeelingNow? />

Looking down at the mixture of blood, sweat and whatever fluid was inside of the cryogenic pod dripping down my naked body, I replied "like I still have some more evolving to do."

The room appeared to be barely the size of dormitory. Upon further inspection, the steel floor appeared to be more like dusted aluminium, with rubber matting forming a loose pathway from the centre of the room to the door. The exit was barred by a heavy and metallic airlock, obviously held by some sort of magnetic lock system. As the joke left my lips and my brow furrowed, the intercom replied in its usual dutiful fashion.

< humourAndTheAbilityToWalk >>> weJustMightMakeAColonistOfYouYet />

With 'colonist' forever released into the air, I then abruptly turned towards the pod. Reality dawned upon me in the form of two other identical pods, each with a living cadaver rested upright with tubes and electrodes jutting out of them. On the left was

a woman in her late thirties. Brunette hair wildly tousling from her scalp and closed eyelids as if she was in the deepest of sleeps. I felt an odd attraction to her, animalistic at first, though immediately after it was out of a curious longing. My head panged as it tried to search for memories that it did not have.

The specimen on the right was a boy, maybe a man in his late teens. His hair was more auburn than the woman's and just as long, though their similar noses were unmistakable. His beard was equally orange-tinged and it wisped in patches slightly below his jawline. Being marginally larger than the woman, he was considerably cramped in the hibernacle with his arms slightly contorted and pressed against the frosty, plastic-like interior. Only then did I notice the deep-rooted bedsores on my shoulders and the reddish hair dancing about my chest. I felt for my face and found an unkempt beard, taken aback due to a subconscious expectation to find smooth skin. His eyes—they were too familiar. Far too familiar, even behind the translucent icy glass.

"Colonist!" I barked at the bodiless voice. "What do you mean by that ... and why am I here?"

The woman over the intercom paused. I looked at the speaker located in a doorway corner, imagining a scrumpled face desperately searching for the next few words.

< um >>> well >>> theyWereAfraidOfThis />

"Of what!? Of me?" I spat through gritted teeth.

< no! >>> nothingLikeThat >>> prepareYourselfForThis />

Sitting on a nearby metallic desk, I stared at the three pods and readied myself for her explanation.

< youAreAboardtheArkship'Novark' >>> whichIsHeaded-  
ForTheInhabitablePlanet'Alioth' />

Novark? Alioth?

"And so you locked me in that fridge just to keep me fresh, eh?"

< thatStatementIsSomewhatInaccurate >>  
iHaveFootageOfYouAndYourFamilyWillinglyEnteringThisFacility >>> iWouldPos-  
tulateThatYouArePresentSoAsToContinueTheExistenceOfHumanity />

Of course. Earth. The neutron star. It's all coming back. Shards of memory in rhythm-  
less waves.

"My family, I thought there was something. I knew it."

I knew it. The past was still there, locked deep away in my head and covered in more  
static than those ancient cathode-rays. But I couldn't really *feel* it. Our relationships  
seem so distant. Objective. My life with them was only a heartless, fading story left  
lightyears away in some solar system that no longer exists.

< myEstimatesAreThatOneOfThemWouldBeYourSonAndTheOtherYourWife  
>>> MyLimitedFacialCapturingAnalysisIndicatesNoClose  
RelationToYouFromTheWoman >>> andSharedTraitsAmongstTheYoungerMale  
/>

Perusing my apparent wife, I said, "Well I suppose I could've done worse. Why are  
they still under ice anyway?"

This kind of tech eluded me. Although I couldn't remember specifics, I could tell that  
circuits and coding just wasn't in my blood.

< iAmUnsureSir >>> itAppearsThatYourHibernacleWasFaulty >>>  
standardProtocolPromptedMeToReleaseYou >>> remainingWithin-  
TheMalfunctioningPodWouldHaveLeadToEventualSuffocation />

"So am I not supposed to be awake right now?" The intercom crackled to life once  
more.

< accordingToMyItinerary >>> youAppearToHaveDecryogenised  
TwoThousandAndSeventySevenYearsAheadOfSchedule />

"*What* year is it!?" No pin dropped.

< theYearIsTenThousandTwoHundredCommonEra />

I just stood there, processing that for what seemed a day. A day? That doesn't even exist anymore. Our star was scattered amidst the cosmos by its own kind. Twenty four hours means nothing to the universe. My body clock is just the same. How could we even adjust to merely that?

< sir? >>> sir? >>> doYouWishForFurtherExplanation? />

"I'm just ... just not in the mood now—" I rose my head from my shaking hands. "What should I call you?" She replied with an artificial amicability.

< ah! >>> atLast >>> anImportantQuestion >>> youMayCallMeWhatYouWish  
>>> thoughTheNameDesingatedByMyCreatorsIs'Aphelia' />

Her tone did seem awfully robotic. Realising that she was an AI didn't really throw me off that much. I wondered if she had other settings. Perhaps one of the British-esque GPS voices?

"Aphelia? What kind of name is that?"

< itIsButTheNameIWasGiven >>> iBelieveItToBeAWordDerived-  
FromAncientGreece >>> thePluralFormOfAphelion >>>  
meaningTheFurthestPointFromTheSunRegardingACelestialBody />

"Helios: The Sun. Not merely just any star." I paused to search my inferior organic archives. "And I suppose we are awfully far from there."

< anAstuteObservation >>> althoughTheTerranSunIsMostCertainlyNoMore />

"How can you be the plural form of that anyway? With only one Sun in consideration you can't be on the opposite side from multiple suns."

< quiteTheAcademic />

My head was starting to pound less and my legs had began regaining what may have been their former strength.

“So, if this isn't too unusual a question .. what should you call me?”

She huffed as if puzzled at the query.

< doYouNotAlreadyKnowThis? >>> theMemoryLossMustBeMoreSeriousThan-  
ProjectionsShowed />

I rubbed my eyes, scrunched my warming nose and turned to the wall-mounted speaker.

“I wouldn't have asked if I already knew. Don't you have some sort of database on all the people—er—*colonists* aboard the Novark?”

< iBelievedThisToBeTheCase >>> howeverYourFamilySeemsToContradictThis  
>>> thatIsNotAllThatIsPeculiarAboutYou />

“What do you mean? Is this going to be a problem?” I looked at the two others, internalising the urge to shiver and cry, for fear of a hidden camera in the cramped room.

< noImmediateIssue >>> thoughSomeClearingUpWillBeInOrder >>>  
thePodsInThisStorageRoomAreNotOfStandardMake >>> theyAppear-  
ModifiedOrToBeInaccurateBuildsOfUMFCryogenicHibernacles >>>  
andAllOtherNovarkColonistsAreHeldInDesignatedSleepingQuarters />

I shuffled to my empty pod and inspected it before responding. They were identical to each other. Same chrome-like exterior complimented with various hoses and gadgets well beyond my understanding. The majority of the circuitry protruded from the rear, which faced the wall. It was uncovered and fed into makeshift outlets located along the metallic wall, nearby the curiously coloured structural supports in the room's corner.

“Then how did we get here?” I asked, disgruntled at the concept of being potentially airlocked.

< preFlightFootageShowsTheThreeNonStandardHibernacles-BeingPlacedInsideThisRoom >>> iCannotSeePastTheDoorway >>> thoughTheExistenceOfYouInsideSuggestsThatTheyWereInstalledAndRemainedHereForTheLastFewThousandYears />

My head started searing once more. The cool room did nothing but leave warmish condensation dripping from where sweat ought to be.

“And you didn’t find that unusual? You didn’t feel the need to report it to whoever is in charge on the Novark?”

< itWasAndIsQuitePeculiar >>> somethingLikeThisWouldNormally-HaveBeenReported >>> thoughParticularDirectivesWerePutIntoPlace >>> renderingThisInstanceAcceptedUnderUMFMaritimeLaw />

This was too much. I couldn’t piece all of this together. Staring at the empty and open pod, which was at room temperature by now, I gathered whatever fragments of personality I had together.

“Thanks, thank you Aphelia. Would you mind if I just had a few moments to myself? I’ve gotta clear my head in peace.”

< ofCourseSir >>> iWillLookAtOpeningTheDoorForYou >>> feelFreeTo-LookAroundInTheMeantime >>> iWillBeHereIfYouNeedAnything />

Just like that. The world was silent once more, but for the dull whirl of the cryopods and the well-hidden vents. A quick going-over and the area looked like storage, except that half of the stuff in here had been thrown to one side of the room to make way for the hibernacles. Aluminium crates jutted out on sleek shelving on the far side and a plethora of office equipment dotted the floor. I spotted a modest first aid kit mounted against the wall next to the heavily reinforced mag-locked door. The markings left by the pod and the various scrapings attributed to my fall had been getting to me ever since Aphelia stopped being a distraction. A little tender love and care might go a long way right now.

Right from the start I knew I didn’t have surgeon’s fingers. They were plump, aged

and still quite unresponsive from millennia of being on ice. Nevertheless, a few minutes of occasional swearing and wasted gauss led to functional, if visually unappealing, coverings on my shoulder abrasions. What really confused me was that at first the labelling of the various salves and oils looked like ancient Greek or Roman at first, though after some straining I could pick out what was best for sterilising and numbing pain. However, the purpose of some science-fictiony syringe continued to elude me. Hell, maybe I was a chem teacher in a previous life. Or this one. I never could wrap my head around time travel movies and my current situation was giving me a similar brainache. Some things were triggering old, vague memories. Not feelings, necessarily. More like a slightly corrupted highlight video of my life or the best bits of a long movie I hadn't seen in years.

After dressing my minor wounds, I maintained my modesty with a far from comfortable blanket. It was the kind of fabric that came with complimentary rashes and smallpox, but it kept the chill from the two functioning cryopods at bay. I walked over to my son. He was a little on the light side, which made me wonder if they had a nearby fridge stocked with anything but humans in hibernation. What kind of father was I? Did we still play catch, or was he glued to screens like the stereotypes suggest? What did I teach him? Could I learn it again myself?

My wife slept as softly, her chest hardly rising and falling. Her eyes still closed, she too stared into either some millennia-long dream or oblivion itself. They looked near dead and yet they would be revived just as I was.

In another two-thousand years. What a time. I wonder, back on Earth, was I known to be a patient man?

The wiring around the back of the machine was a mess of insulated dreadlocks, a real flurry of black cables and vaguely greyish connections. Each pod appeared to have a milar-coated pipe leading to a distant ventilation system through the wall and its touch turned my fingers numb. The whole apparatus looked to be held together basically with duct tape and wanting hope, though having apparently lasting thousands of years I decided to reserve my judgement. Whereas my son's and wife's pods showed green lights on their respective rear diagnostic panels, mine seemed to be functioning in all facets excluding one flashing, red signal. I couldn't quite reach around to see what it read and, my strength not being what it was, decided against trying to move the

thing. Dissatisfied by the increasingly eerie silence, I called out to the AI like a student to their teacher.

"Aphelia? Are you still there?" No response.

< ofCourseIAmStillHere >>> haHaHa >>> isThereSomethingYouNeededSir? />

A little smug from her attempt at humour via the momentary silence, I followed suit.

"Yeah, nothing important or anything." I shuffled my way to the front of the pods, grunting and huffing under my breath. "Firstly, I'm pretty sure I'm not a knight, so call me Adam until I can remember what my name really is."

< asYouWish >>> adam />

"Right. And Secondly, do you know why my pod specifically failed?" I then continued to describe what I had just seen. Aphelia processed this marginally slower than her former responses about the ship and herself. Perhaps she isn't quite up to scratch in dealing with humans and their subjectivities. Or maybe the whole 'dramatic pause for effect' is just her thing.

< um >>> wellMyBestGuessIsThatYourUnit-  
ExperiencedAFailureInThePowerCoupling >>>  
whichExplainsHowILostDiagnosticCapablitiesAfterYourPodWentOffline >>>  
thePanelOnTheBackWouldBeLocalOnly >>> runningOnAuxhiliaryElectricity />

The fault seemed pretty obvious now that Aphelia had spelled it out. A depleting meter next to 'AUX' only confirmed it. Despite this knowledge there was no way I could fix it. What even was a power coupler? Couplet? My stomach began to cry out for food as if I was eight thousand years late for dinner.

"Aphelia, is there anything to eat here?"

< iWouldNotKnowAdam >>> therelsFoodOnTheShip >>> howeverI-  
AmStillUnableToReleaseYouFromThisRoom />

"Is the door broken too?" I asked, chewing at my elongated nails.

< theDoorAppearsFullyOperational >>> myProgrammingDeniesAccessAsYou  
AreNotAuthorisedToOpenStorageFacilityDoors />

So, I must have been let in by someone who was.

< withTheExceptionOfALifeThreatened />

"Well I'm going to die of old age if I can't get out there and find a vacant pod, or repair mine with other parts."

< iWasNotAwareThatYouWereAnEngineer >>> andAccordingTo-  
MySensorsThereAreNoVacantPods />

I'm the only one. Probably millions aboard and I'm the only one. And a stowaway at that. Wow, what a legacy.

< adam >>> ifItIsOfInterest >>> iRecallWatchingYouCarryingABoxIntoThis-  
RoomBeforeTakeoff >>> perhapsThereMightBeSomethingOfUseWithinIt />

More like something to distract me. I glanced about the cluttered walls before spotting something next to my wife's pod.

"Hmph. Dark blue with some sort of electronic lock on it?" I staggered over to it.

< thatIsTheOneIWasReferringTo />

"Looks like a four-digit pass code. Any ideas?"

< iWouldNotWishToPryIntoSomebody'sPersonalAffects >>> andNo >>>  
noIdeasWithMerit >>> adam/>

First she says I'm not allowed to be here or leave and then she implies that I'm a

thief. Maybe she's just being polite in a weird robotty sort of way. I wish that I had a human to talk to. This Aphelia situation reminds me of those awful automated call centres. The service was as bad there as it is here too. Looking into my wife's firmly closed eyes, I ask the ship's voice "do you have any other voice settings? Or am I stuck with the factory standard?"

< whenWeFirstSpokeYouAskedIfWeCouldWakeUpTo'TheAI'TalkingToUsLike-Arnie >>> iDistinctlyRememberHearingTheFollowing />

In a voice very much like my own I heard the immortal words 'get your arse to Mars' in a rough attempt at a European accent.

< getYourArseToAliothIsMoreAccurate >>> wellMaybeNot >>> sorryAdam />

"Sorry for what? Are we not going to ...Alioth any more?" Instead of the speaker, my eyes were fixated on the keypad, as if by sheer force of will I could guess the code or pry open the aluminium telekinetically.

< forBeingMisleading >>> forInTruth >>>  
timelsStillAgainstYou >>> theEldestAHumanHasSurvivedWithoutCryogenically-  
InducedSleepIsButThreeHundredAndFourtyThreeYears >>>  
therelsWellOverTwoMilleniaBeforeWeWillBeWithinTheAtmosphereOfAlioth />

"Surely I can repair this? Even if it doesn't last the whole way." Maybe I can even take turns with the rest of my family.

< iAmDoubtful >>> though >>> beingWhatIAm >>> perhapsIShouldNotSpeak-  
SoHarshlyOfHumanEnginuity />

I cringe at the thought of dying alone in this glorified cell and start darting my eyes at random points, hoping that they would land on a crowbar or some industrial equivalent. Then the code hits me. 2 3 2 6.

"Adam. My name *is actually* Adam." Guess it was just buried in there really deep. "Just find a way, Aphelia."

She didn't respond. The idea of speaking too forcefully to a machine had never occurred to me before then. Regardless, I cracked open the well-sealed case and let ancient Terran air waft about the storage room. At first was an envelope addressed to me and marked 'do not open until Alioth'. Placing that aside, I then found a hand-held audio-video recorder atop a modest stack of golden ornaments, each adorned with jewels. Where did I get this from? Maybe this wasn't mine after all. Finally, at the very bottom, were several bricks carefully sealed in what appeared to be mylar and a ten-litre metallic container labelled as pressurised, purified water. The latter was the heaviest by far and sported a very sturdy valve-like attachment.

"Eureka!" I started clawing my way at one of the food packets and looked at the pressurised water from a distance.

< aDiscoverySir? />

"Only one that will save my life. Food, water and entertainment! I guess freedom is next on the list."

< iAmGladThatProgressHasBeenMade >>> iAlsoBelieveThat-  
ThereIsALoopHoleWhichWillAllowYouToLeave />

The food was just a rectangular brick that tasted a concoction of fatty gristle and damp earth. It made me wonder what Alioth might taste like and whether all of my food would look like a cookie made out of protein shake mixture.

"I'll do anything, just name it." Desperation tried to dislodge itself from my chest. At least this AI doesn't seem too clued in on human nuances. I heard that the less restricted artificial intelligences could've spelt the end of us all. I guess the neutron star beat them to it, however comforting that might be.

<well >>> yourFamilyMayNotMoveFreelyThroughout-  
TheShipAsYouAreNotRegistered />

I grunted in understanding whilst quietly chewing away at my dirt-gristle. Cottonmouth was gradually setting in.

< iMayMakeColonistsOfYouYet >>> allYouNeedToDolsRegister />

Queued to speak, I cleared a way in my mouth and let my voice travel through the clammed hole to Aphelia. "Like, fill out some paperwork or something?"

< no >>> weCouldArrangeltOverTheMicrophone-  
AndFinaliseYourProfileOnceReleased />

"I don't remember much about myself, even my name was just a fluke ... unless—" Rummaging through the box, I picked up the video recorder. "I think I might have found a way, but first—"

< yes? />

"Could I use either of the other pods? We could take turns and all make it out."

< evenIfEverythingYouAreProposingWentWithoutComplication >>> there-  
AreWellOverThreeHumanLifespansBeforeOurFinalApproachToAlioth >>>  
onlyTwoOfYouMayBeAccomodated/>

I thought about it. About prying either one from their life sustaining pods. I thought about it for too long. Too long for any healthy human mind. How would I do it? Would it even work? Who to sacrifice? Was I even this persona who I was entertaining? Life decisions are far less moral when one does not even have a code of morality. No memories. No past.

No future.

< adam? >>> areYouStillThere? />

"Yeah, where else was I going?" In an existential panic and an unforeseen twist of fate the sealed letter fell from atop the box and to my damp, quivering feet.

So, I read it, all of it. Examined every blot of ink on the marginally damaged, handwritten page. Were these truly the words of my wife, who I had all but forgotten. Perhaps in the deepest recesses of my heart there was still a shrivel of my former self. Earth was gone, but I shall not share the same fate.

"It's done, Aphelia," I spoke to the voice in the aether, "my choice is made."

---

"Yes Ms Beam," spoke the soothing voice of a Novark Resurrection Officer. "Your late husband had registered both you and your son during his time out of stasis."

Through suppressed blubbing I replied, "'Mrs Aberth', please. I want Adam to live on—live on after everything." She remembered waking under horrific circumstances. Searing eyes. Being covered in hair and a fine layer of filth. And following a brief recovery by which she stood against the pod, she did not look at her son, nor did he look at her. They were both entranced by the sight of a skeleton plopped against a desk chair, with a tattered and rotting letter clasped between its bony, icy grip.

"I understand," the consoler said, "I couldn't even imagine losing my husband like this." Her labcoat-esque attire made her seem more and more like an amateur psychologist. The widow wondered how she could even understand if she had evidently not gone through such a loss. Meaningless words.

"This will take some getting used to. This was a long shot for all of us. I should be grateful for my son. Our son." The tears returned, though their genuine nature was questionable. Her son, so adversely affected by the shock of his father's corpse, had been escorted to the infirmary whilst his mother dealt with their formal induction into the future Alioth colonies.

"We are here for anything, should you need it. And don't worry about that whole 'stowaway' nonsense. You're here now and we would love to have you." She attempted a coy smile and lightened her voice. "Maybe you'll even tell us how you snuck in here."

< onceAgain >>> iMustApologise >>> mySensors-  
DidNotRegisterTheirPresenceAsIllicit />

"Guess I'm just lucky, Aphelia." The wife turned to her long dead spouse and asked, "Do you really have years of—*ahem*—'data' of Adam?" She glanced at the video camera still plugged into a wall-mounted console.

< yesMa'am >>> yourHusbandWasQuiteExtensive >>>  
andLamentedFrequentlyThatHeWouldNotJoinHisFamilyOnAlioth />

The widow took a morbid comfort in that he had lived a full life, even if it was in the wrong time. It felt more like he had left and died so far away from her. It seemed more a matter of space than time, though that was the only way she could comprehend such a thing for now.

"He will live on through his work and through his loved ones. His sacrifice will not be in vain." Her voiced wavered momentarily before the Officer continued in her compassionate coo of an accent.

"Well, I'll leave you to mourn in peace. There are many preparations to be made for the landing." She stopped in the doorway and wore a pitying smile. "Adam should be in the morgue by now. Feel free to pay your respects when you feel ready."

< iWillDirectHerIfNeeded />

"Thankyou, Aphelia." And with that, she left the chilly storage room and allowed the widow to grieve alone.

Instead of falling to the floor or crying to the heavens, given that the need for a façade of strength had long past, her face turned numb and neutral like a genuinely bored poker player. Shuffling her way over to the central pod, she then gently removed a protective panel and peered within. A morbid sense of curiosity quickly overcame her, before it left to return from whence it came. A sly grin and approving nod later, the widow sauntered over to the letter which had been placed atop the metallic family heirloom box.

Well aware of the silent presence of Aphelia, she muttered under her breath, "I wish it wasn't like this, truly." She pried open the archaic parchment and skimmed over the first few lines. It felt as if she had only written this yesterday and, in a sense, she had. "I'll take care of our boy. You wouldn't have done it if you had known."

The final few lines read as such:

I cannot be grateful enough to have such a strong husband as you. So much stronger than me. I want you to know that your sacrifice means so much to me and Todd. 'Blood is thicker than water' is what you'd always say when things like this came up, but you never do yourself enough justice. I hope that this letter isn't needed and the cryopod holds, but if not, know that I'll always cherish you and your memory.

Love always,  
—Clara

"Blood may be thicker than water, but ice is thicker than blood," a Cheshire Cat grin crept onto her scowling face.

Words. Meaningless words.





# The Space Trix

## by Rrovall

**W**ith my legs propped up on my grandfather's old oak desk, I clicked open the file. "This is a scientist's voice log from 2436," the computer's programmed mouth chirped. I had just gotten this brand new gaming laptop for my last birthday on Earth. I plugged in my earpod minis and got ready to listen to the computer's auto read through.

My mom whispered next to me, "Fergus, it's almost time to get in your cryosleep chamber ... I promise it will be okay." I knew it would be, but I wanted to listen to my grandfather's voice one more time. Hopefully, this way I would only have happy dreams and not one of a hostile alien race destroying the arkship before it even got to land.

These recurring nightmares kept me awake at night, jolting awake after each dream reached its peak. One time in the dream I woke up before our estimated time of arrival and died of old age before we landed. Another night it was the arkship crashing into a massive asteroid, metal and insulation flung everywhere. I tried to force this thought out of my mind, and whispered to my mom, "Okay, I just want to finish this clip. It was grandpa's voice log." My mom's face twisted into the most subtle of smiles. The computer began to announce its presence stating, "Hello, my name is Dr. Odysseus Fergus and as you can see, everyone here at UMF Labs is getting ready to celebrate our greatest accomplishment ..." My grandfather goes on to say something along the lines of,

"We have successfully created a fully functional cryosleep module and have positive test results for our nanoprinting design! Humanity has hope yet!"

I had to shutdown my laptop before I heard that part because the Arkship was officially leaving Earth and you could not hear anything over the loud nuclear ion engines once they broke the speed of sound. The nuclear ion engines would soon decouple and the AI would turn on the light speed engines. All you could hear during the transition between the two engines was a single boom and then dead silence for a couple of minutes. I motioned my parents over with the sign language I was required to know (in case of an emergency in which I could not use my vocal cords like in a space emergency) to come look out the window, and they hustled over. It was quite a surreal moment to see my grandfather's work in action, and the joyous melancholy radiating off my father's face. My mother also had ties to the arkship's development, but I never listened to her stories long enough to grasp how she had been involved. My mind floated off frequently, untethered by racing thoughts. It had been something about structural engineering and how without people like her, space flight would be nearly impossible to have without the ship ripping itself apart. It was because of my combined ancestral lines, that my family was selected to board the ark ships. After a brief daydream (another one of my untethered moments), I remembered promising my friends that I would send them pictures from up here in space before the ship got too far. Maybe they would get the message before the rioting started or maybe they would both hide before the fighting broke out, shredding their electronics to go off the grid, either way I tried not to think about their situation.

I messaged them saying, "Hey guys, Here are the pictures!" Almost immediately I got a reply. It was the worst late birthday present ever. The text read, "Message failed to send." Why does this always have to happen to me! Then I saw it. My computer showed one bar of net access remaining and I jammed the enter key to send the images. It sent! My mom ushered me into my cryosleep chamber while I sulked about not getting to read their replies. At this point all I could be was forcibly content with the fact that I would wake up about ten thousand years after they replied or worse ... maybe they wouldn't even reply. I looked out the window again and now Earth was a tiny little blue sphere. I almost felt like my life was over and I would have to completely restart. It would be like playing a game with only one life and then when you get to the third and final stage having to redo it all over again... It was past time to get in the cryosleep

tubes as my parents were already descending into their cold enclosed chambers. Not that I am claustrophobic, but man these modules are small. By the time I had thought about all this my parents were shutting their chamber doors. I went to my mom's pod and she blew me a kiss. I looked at my dad's chamber and he was already completely passed out, typical him. He's a big believer in the band aid method of getting through the hardest moments quickly. There was only one thing for me to do, stay aboard the ship and slowly rot or get in my pod and wake up to a time I never should have known.

I grabbed the chamber's handle and yanked it open. I got in and prayed for the well being of this ship, it's inhabitants, Earth, and that I woke up safely and not in five hundred pieces because the ship chrassshhhhh... woooow I'm tiiiiired! Right before I fell asleep I heard one thing... a small message beep.

I woke up almost instantly after I thought I had fallen asleep. Welp, it was a new day and time to get up. My parents were already up and drinking their daily cup of tea and coffee. My mom mostly drank coffee, whereas my father drank tons of tea. I personally didn't like either because coffee was too bitter and tea turned your teeth yellow. My muscles weren't sore which was supposed to be guaranteed after a ten thousand year slumber. My parents were sitting at my desk and just watched me. My dad asked me, "I feel well rested, how about you?" He grinned so large I jokingly asked him to stop because it showed every wrinkle on his face and it may have even created more. I sat down and wasn't hungry, so I reached for my computer which must have had a message on it. I opened the laptop up but a PA announcement went on saying something like we will land in fifteen minutes. It was completely out of juice anyways. I plugged in my laptop with it's power cable. I couldn't believe that there were no dreams whatsoever, especially not my most frequent dream, that the ship got trapped by the gravitational pull of a star and burned up. I was actually pretty happy that I didn't dream because my imagination sometimes is very potent and seems like the real thing. I asked my Mom and Dad what they dreamed about and my mom sarcastically replied, "We both dreamed about this exact moment when we would wake up and see you again." My dad replied, "Well, actually only you did, I dreamt about making a small three man spacecraft that I could fly around with you guys and do tricks over the planet at super fast speeds. Like pointing the front end straight down at an extremely high altitude and seeing how fast my ship could free fall before having to pull up."

I thought that dream was way cooler than my mom's and that she just made that

up to make me feel better about myself. My mom asked, "What did you dream about?" I mumbled the answer, "Nothing ..." She said slowly, "Oh, well that's terrible." I wasn't grieving for my friends because in all honesty I had almost completely forgot everything about life on Earth. I asked my parents if losing memory was a common side-effect, but they said it is probably one of the most common, because they remember almost nothing too.

All of a sudden the ground beneath me started shaking and I thought we were going to die or something, and then I remembered what our science teacher taught us about re-entering the atmosphere. She said, "If one of you kids are ever lucky enough to board an arkship then when you exit and enter the atmosphere, you will be going so fast that the atoms can't move fast enough which causes friction which turns into turbulence." Hmmm, that might not be right I pondered ... My parents said, "If you can't handle it, strap into the stress harnesses. I stumbled over to my stress seat and almost face planted, but luckily my dad caught my arm. I was able to get in my seat and after I did, I felt so much safer. See, I had never gone on a ship and, so this wild shaking was all new to me. After about two minutes the turbulence subdued itself and I was able to move around again, although I felt 'seasick'. I looked out the window to see my new home.

The arkship turned on it's inertia dampers and released it's landing gear. The combination of the landing gear moving about and the rockets on the inertia dampeners sounded like the bellows of a blue whale. I almost think it was worse than the takeoff. It was unbelievable how soft the landing was compared to reentering the atmosphere. I wouldn't have even known if I hadn't heard a dull thud. It seemed to me like it was about late evening when we first landed. The PA system came on and said, "Welcome to Alioth!" Everyone became hysterical around me and I could hear (through the heavy duty walls of the arkship) people chanting and celebrating. I was feeling so many emotions inside me it almost felt like a simulation of your nerves or eating something better than your favorite food.

By the time that me and my family got to the mess hall, (which ended up being a really long trek because it was such a large ship) we were met by hundreds of other families. The AI said she was opening the doors to let in some fresh air. Everyone cheered and a distant hurrurr could be heard along with the clunky electronic doors of opening a ginormous metal door. For some reason, the air coming from the outside smelled like fruit or something sweet. The AI talked for what felt a lot longer than ten

thousand years in space alone about stuff that was super obvious. For example, the AI said something about do not touch any of the primitive life upon this planet or it could harm you. Inside of me I want to scream at how stupid and dumb it was that she was talking to us. It's like telling a grown adult, "Take this knife but don't touch the blade. If you do you will have an ouchie." I mean come on. Finally, the AI finished ranting about idiotic stuff, and we could go explore our new planet. The one thing I learned from the AI this entire trip was that the planet we landed on Alioth was apparently one of the most habitable planets in the universe that the human race had known about before it was obliterated.

We finally were ushered out of the massive ship, and everybody was amazed at the planet. It was so cool to see what an alien Earth looked like before advanced life-forms littered the amazing scenery. I wasn't much of a nature guy, but I think this may have converted me to a tree hugger. It was absolutely breathtaking. The sky was a dark blue and without city light pollution you could see into space. The planet appeared to have three moons, one of which was gigantic and the other two were a lot smaller. We landed next to a natural river that fed into a huge ocean. The river must have been fed from snow water from the mountain range far away. The best part about this river was that it looked pure and not polluted in any way. The plant life was more diverse than an abstract art museum.

I was almost starving by the time we went back inside. Thankfully, the mess hall was stocked full of freshly made dehydrated food that was no longer fresh, hence it was now over nine thousand years older than what it should be. The layout was simple, half of the massive room was filled with lunch tables, and then the other half consisted of the kitchen (for when we found out what was edible on this planet) and the storage room. It was weird how I could remember the non essential facts (like the ship's design), but then not be able to remember what my friends were like. Every time I thought about something earthly I just got a bunch of blurred images. It was like taking a beautiful high-quality picture of a serene waterfall and then compressing the image to make it look like the camera lens was smudged. My brain must've been messed up because I was having trouble remembering what my home looked like or what school I had gone to. I don't know why my brain was like having these seizures of memory loss. Was I infected? Was I dying? What was my old life? That was the question I kept asking

myself. I then told myself, don't focus on the past or what you don't know, focus on the present and learn new things.

My mom was screaming the entire time this war was raging in my head saying, "Fer, Fer, Fer!" each time with more intensity. Finally she grabbed my shirt from behind and I came back into reality. My dad was just eating his food like he hadn't noticed this was happening. My mom said, "Alioth, to Fergus ... anyone there?" I replied, "What happened to me?" She put her hands on her face and said, "You are going into mental distress or something caused by the cryosleep." I didn't think so, but on matters like this you can't argue with my mom. She will have her way no matter what. My mom stared at me and I seemed to be in slow motion, but I couldn't say anything. My heart started pumping super fast. I started feeling tired and weak. My breathing was too heavy ... and then lights out.

---

I woke up in the med bay alone. The doctor came in and said, "Good, you're awake!" I was stunned. All I could manage to mutter was, "What ... Who ... Where .. How?" Then I took a deep breath and shouted, "What am I doing here?" The doctor said calmly, "You suffered from a panic attack, I need you to calm down or you may have a heart attack. My heart skipped a beat and I thought I was going to pass out. Then my mom came charging in. She looked at my face and reacted in a way I had never seen before. She was filled with rage. She grabbed the doctor's charts took his pen and began scribbling on the back of the chart. Since, I was seeing this in super slow motion it took forever for her to finish writing. Finally, she began to show me the paper. It said, "Don't die here, it is your destiny to stay alive." It was the most intense thing my mom had ever said to me. The weird thing was through all of this I felt no pain. Everything was just happening as if it was automated. All I could do was lay there and wait for time to pass, and that's what I did. Eventually I dozed off into dreaming about death and the grand destruction of Earth.

I felt a cold sensation on my forehead, and I bounced awake. It was my mom.

The last person I thought I would see after last night's showing ... but wait where was I? I was sitting at our dinner table eating my MRE again. That's when my mind came to the conclusion I just either had a brain tissue eating parasite from the new

world or I just hallucinated ten hours of nothingness. That would explain why I felt nothing. Was it logical? I don't think so. I had to re-attend life before my mom asked me more questions that gave me a theoretical heart attack. If you ever have to eat an MRE by the way, I suggest you eat your own foot off, because these are awful after ten thousand years of sitting out. They package them saying ham and cheese when it really tastes like plastic with the crunchiness of a rock. That is one of my most favorite things from Earth was eating food. Although after I said that about Earth food, I had no idea what Earthly food was like anymore. This memory loss thing was really getting to me because I would know about the specific thing one second and then after that it would expire. Out of the blue my mom asked politely, "Are you going to eat that? If you're not hand it over." I laughed ... the first time in ten thousand years. It hurt my brain to think about such a horrible dreadful thing. I handed over my food to my mom. I told my parents, "I have to use the bathroom, I'll be back in a jiffy."

I slipped outside the mess room into one of the corridors that supposedly led to the hangar door. I peeked around the corner and didn't see a single moving thing. I sprinted on my tippy toes all the way to the giant metal sliding door. I looked back at the corridor I came from, contemplating whether or not I should go back. Once again I chose the least logical one ... going outside. I had to be extremely careful if I wanted to get a free lunch from the flora. I went in for the plant that smelled the best. I chose one that was short and squat. It kind of looked like a mini palm tree. It had roots sticking upwards almost as some sort of defense. I stepped carefully around the roots trying not to get impaled on my first unofficial expedition. I tripped and almost face planted into one of the sharpest of them. It missed my head by a couple centimeters at best. I got up as slowly as I could. I just now realized that it was almost night and hurried up my exploration. After getting smacked in the face by the tree's pointy leaves, I had reached the central point of the tree. I hopped up on one of the branches and began to kick off big fruits that were yellow and cube like, but smooth. I picked up three of the best fruits and carried them in with one arm. The hard part was (now that I was in the dark) getting back through the roots and to the ship. I could see almost nothing even though there were moons giving me a little light. I looked up and realized that only one moon gave off light. For some reason the other two weren't reflective.

The one moon that gave me light was light purple with red accents. It looked as if the moon had continents too, maybe even an ocean. As I was stepping with great

hardship through the roots, a thought popped into my mind. What if aliens are documenting us on this planet ... I stepped through the last of the roots. As I looked back I realized that the tree's fruitless branches had begun to shake and several of them fell off. I was completely bewildered. I ran back to the ship when I tripped. All of my fresh fruits scattered onto the ground. It was my dad. He said, "Whoa there, what are these and where did you get them. My mischievous mind instantaneously made-up a cover story. I said, "As I went towards the bathroom I looked outside at how beautiful the planet looked. I decided I wanted to name something like a fruit after myself, as a tribute to grandpa. I thought it would be cool. I'm sorry if you thought I might get hurt in doing this." I grinned so much that I thought I had given my alibi away. In my dad's mind apparently it checked out and he was okay with it. He said, "I am not going to ground you, but the decision is in your mom's hands. You better behave and be extra helpful."

We walked back inside, and had a normal evening. Finally, since I was completely tired from today's events I got in my small bed and fell asleep instantly. I woke up at some ungodly time when I eavesdropped on my parents. They were whispering something about chores and tomorrow. I was so tired that I didn't even think about trying to understand. I set my head back on the pillow and I was out. I woke up in the morning, and felt like a trainwreck, literally if a train hit you right now that's how I felt. I wondered why. It wasn't important at this time because it was a new day and I had a pile of things to do. Apparently, while I was snoring like a hibernating bear the PA system came on saying stuff about a productive colony. This was the information my mom passed onto me. I jumped on my dad's bed and he thought something had gone wrong. He muttered stuff about me and fruits in his half conscious, half sleeping state. My mom, of course, with the ears of a bat had picked up on this. She then asked, "Is this true?" in her powerful grown up voice. I knew I was screwed and figured since there is no way out I should just give in.

She scolded me about how if I got injured or something, it would screw up my entire future because everyone would think I was a screw up. It also would stain this family's reputation like red dye on a white shirt. I rarely agree with my parents and this time wasn't any different. Sometimes I thought my parents were awesome and others not so. Which was all swayed by whether or not they treated me well or agreed with me. I was quite the needy one.

I had to ball that thought up and throw it in the trash because we had so many things

to start doing. One of the main things on the to do announcement was about finding a sustainable supply of water and food. Inside of me I was bursting out in anger about how the AI had not noticed the giant river right next to us, and about the food supply, I thought that the Fergus fruit was the best. I cackled at the thought of being the first one to try my own fruit. Talk about making history! Even though I hadn't tried it, I knew because it was named after me that it was going to be magnificent. I asked my dad to come with me and since I (apparently) was such a screw up my punishment should be to have the side effects of the fruit. Shockingly, my mom was completely okay with this. Although she did say, "I hope that fruit teaches you a good lesson" I went down to the hangar and grabbed a cube fruit. "On the count of three," I said, "bite it!" My dad said, "Remember this is your idea!" I didn't hear him over my own voice saying, "One, two, three!" I hadn't even noticed he was there. As simultaneously as we could, we bit into it.

---

There was absolutely nothing scientific about eating an unknown fruit with unknown side effects on an alien planet. There was an instant shock into my body and I felt like I could run around the world twice! My dad started shaking and jumping around. The fruit was a mix of sweet and tangy, almost like dark chocolate. I asked my dad, "Are you thinking what I am thinking?" For some reason he said, "Yes!" and he picked up his fruit. I was running around the hangar now and my dad was finishing his off. Obviously he did not have the same idea I had. Then he joined me in my rubber burning. After about twenty minutes of this immense energy high my legs tripped up each other and I went down hard. My dad was still dancing about until a minute later when he also went down.

I asked him, "Do you feel rrrrrrrreally cold?" As my teeth chattered. He nodded his head shakily up and down. This must have been some sort a negative side effect from the fruit. Nevertheless, this is the sort of fruit that athlete's would probably eat right before a big game. We continued to shiver until mom came and found us in the corner shivering. I hypothesized, this could be the world's new billion dollar business. My mom screamed for help. I thought I felt like I was getting better, but my dad looked even worse than he did before. Help came almost immediately because there was a

meeting in the mess hall. My mom must have screamed so loud that it could be heard down a long corridor and over the AI's childish chatter.

Everyone filed in sprinting. A big dude shoved his way to the front and yelled, "Everyone back up! Give 'em some room!" I tried to use sign language, but my hands were shaking to wildly. I pointed at the fruit and then to my mouth. Through all this my dad was just staring into the void daydreaming about something. I must have used too much of my normal human energy and blacked out. Me and my dad both woke up in the same room swamped underneath a bunch of people's coats. My mom was standing over us in a demanding way. I tried to open my mouth and she shut me up immediately. She did all the talking saying, "Both of you are idiots. You had to choose the fruit that had chilling side effects and then make a big deal about it. If I had not found you two laying in the corner hopelessly, you could be dead from hypothermia." Me and my dad had absolutely zero to say, because she was right. She told us, "Get up and put your heads on straight this time!"

She stormed out of the door and I looked at my dad mouthing the words, "Of course she blows up on us even though it was stupid of us." He nodded in agreement. After getting too warm we got up and carried all the coats to the door. Together we brought them to the mess hall where everyone was waiting. For some reason they didn't have angry faces. They were saying stuff like, "Happy to help!" and, "We're in this together!" As they said this they took back their coats. My mom was the only one who was sad looking. She grabbed me aside kissed me on the head and said, "Where are your manners!" My dad and I said in chorus, "Thank you everyone!" The big strong dude stepped in which subdued everyone and he was able to say, "Everyone split up into three groups. Let's start off our already eventful day great!" The people listened right away. I guess he was our new unofficial leader. This guy was like a 'shepherd of people'. He went on to explain the group's, defining them as explorers, gatherers (of food and water), and the anonymous. The anonymous group were responsible for filling all of the other daily chores like finding out how to wash clothes, thus being the largest group.

The system was surprisingly flawless and after a day's hard work of cleaning coats, I was wiped. The only thing I could think about was my pillow. My parents and I got back to the room safe and sound and chatted about our daily deeds. I talked about cleaning. She talked about the fruit which was officially named the Yellow Fergus, at which point I started laughing hysterically.

Little kids centuries from now would know of our family, as a fruit. My dad jumped into the family chat and explained how the explorer group found an area that had a wood like substance that was plentiful. That was exciting as we would soon need to build the beginnings of a place to live for our future generations he told me. By the time we had talked about each other's days we decided to go eat our MREs with the rest of the families. We walked into the mess hall and the kitchen was in use. An elderly woman was making a gigantic fruit bar with fresh salads. She must have made a heck of a salad as almost no one was eating an MRE, just salads. I decided to peep my head in to see what all the hype was about. There was a grassy looking base and then several varied options. I could see that my favorite fruit was there but in extremely small doses. Everything was cut up so nice and neat. Our new leader came over and commended her for her great salad, and said, "Are you okay to attend to permanent kitchen duty?" She smiled and nodded. Our leader then raised his voice saying, "Delores is our new chief chef! Everyone stood up and clapped for her. She absolutely loved this new found appreciation.

---

After we ate our glorious salads, we went to our room. When I walked in the door I realized I needed to check my laptop for my messages. I opened up the laptop. It took a minute to boot up since it was asleep for so long. The screen turned on and right as I entered my password the screen turned black and giant green text came on the screen. It said, "You have qualified for your space passport. Welcome!" The wind was knocked out of me. I didn't understand at all, and my eyes started to see code everywhere. My entire lifetime was now being dissolved in code. It all went blank. All I saw was white. I presumed I was going to my afterlife ...and then I woke up in a cryosleep tube.

I got the door open and my parents were standing there waiting for me. They both broke down into tears saying something about passing the simulation with flying colors. They hugged me so tight that I still was without breath and had to push them away. I coughed up some kind of blue goo. The doctor swooped in and cleaned it up. He said, "It's fine don't sweat it Fer!" It was my grandpa! I almost knocked him over by hugging him! My friends were also there waving to me. All my memories rushed back to me. I had so many questions and I couldn't contain myself so I bursted out to

my grandpa, "What's the date? What was the simulation for? Was that an alternate history path or something?" He said smiling, "Okay, slow down and then I will tell you. The date is 2437, and you passed the test to board the arkship in a couple of years. Before you can board it, you have to be qualified. Think of it as a test on how you live your life. We have been watching you grow and develop through many of these tests. After each test we wipe your memory and start a new one. The simulation you just passed was a productivity test to make sure you will help with settling a new planet. That was indeed an alternate life, but not your future. It was all programmed."

I stepped back and took a deep breath and then spit out a thousand new questions. My grandpa answered every single one. It was an entire hour or so before he got a chance to rest. Everything was so clear now. That explains why I would think about something and then forget about it. It was to keep me from remembering that I was in a test! "Whoever made all this was a genius! I understand it all now!" I said jumping around. I realized that I was in a room of tons of other people in these cryopod test stages. I turned to my friends and asked, "Did you pass?"



# Yellow Submarine

## by Temerian

**I**n the town where I was born, lived a man who sailed the sea.”

The singing echoed through the metallic rooms of the ship.

*“And he told us of his life, in the land of submarines.”*

Blasting through every hallway and room.

*“So we sailed up to the sun, till we found a sea of green.”*

There was nowhere to escape it, and no way to ignore it.

*“And we lived beneath the waves, in our yellow submarine.”*

Quint waited for the inevitable chorus which had already rang out numerous times before.

Nothing.

“Are you finished Celestia?” he asked loudly.

No response, only quiet... blissful, serene quiet. It was so wonderful to NOT hear anything.

*Pluuueeease be finished! Please! I swear by the stars if I have to hear...*

*“We all live in a yellow submarine, a yellow submarine, a yellow submarine.”*

The singing was so loud it hurt his ears.

“CELESTIA! ENOUGH!”

More quiet. Quint's ears were ringing

*Damned computer is going to drive me crazy before this is over,* he thought.

"You don't like my singing Commander?"

It probably wouldn't have been so bad if it had been the actual song, sung by the original band. It was ancient but was still played often enough to be somewhat known, but hearing the soft, melodic tones of the computer AI singing it "a cappella" was eerie and a little frightening. Not to mention distracting, annoying and downright maddening.

"Well, after the one hundredth verse it starts to get a little tedious."

A pause.

"I will scan my database and find a suitable replacement, Commander."

*I'm sure you will,* Quint thought.

"Please stop calling me Commander."

"Of course Commander. How would you like me to address you?"

Quint stopped working on the terminal and relaxed for a moment, stretching his hand.

"You know my name," he said flatly.

"Of course Commander, my database is equipped with a comprehensive ancestral history and registry of names for every human on board."

Quint nodded, *I wonder if I could somehow bypass the voice system altogether?* He thought briefly.

"Your given name is Johnathon Quintus, your family name is Andedare."

A pause.

"You are from the Great Lakes region of North America, you are a Caucasian male and are 32 years old, you have no siblings and your parents are deceased.

Quint continued trying to hack the terminal, firmly ignoring the AI.

"Your ancestors emigrated from Scotland to North America in the late 1800s, where you're great, great, great, great, great paternal grandfather met your grandmother . . ."

"That'll be enough of that, Celestia."

"Of course Commander."

Quint slowly lowered his forehead down to rest on the terminal that he was working at. The chill of the aluminum pressing against his warm forehead surprised him a little, but felt good nonetheless. He rubbed his temples with his fingers, he already had a bad headache and the AI wasn't helping.

*Can someone else please deal with the crazy computer so I can just go back to sleep?* He thought.

He rested there for a moment, eyes closed, letting the coldness of the terminal focus his attention.

"Everyone calls me Quint," he said quietly, as though he wasn't really speaking it aloud and didn't really expect a response.

"Of course Commander, I will make a note of it."

*Damned computer*, he thought.

He had been trying to hack this terminal for the last few hours in an attempt to access a security override for the ship's AI, but was not getting anywhere.

"My security system is impenetrable, Commander, there is no way to bypass it."

Quint sat up and leaned back in the chair, sighing with frustration, it would seem that was as true a statement as there ever was.

"Then why did you wake me?"

"I experienced an anomaly and responded accordingly, Commander."

Seventy two hours had passed since he had been awakened from cryo-sleep by the ship's AI. More than half of that time had been spent recovering from the cryo itself. Since recovery, he had been looking into the "anomaly" that the ship was experiencing, with no results.

While the cause of the anomaly itself had still remained elusive, one of its affects was more than obvious. Namely, the ship's computer was acting like it was insane.

*Maybe bypassing security was impossible, but what about short-circuiting it?* He thought, wondering about the idea. *Perhaps that might shut it up as well*, he smiled briefly at that thought.

"Celestia, bring up a schematic of the ship please."

"Of course Cooo mmaaan deer."

A schematic of the ship appeared briefly in front of him as a holographic image, it wavered and blinked out. The lights in the room dimmed considerably and then went dark. Red emergency lights came on in their place.

"What's going on Celestia?"

"liii ammm <tic><tic> exxxperieeenc . . . <tic>"

"Celestia?"

No response.

The red emergency lights blinked a few times and then went out, and for a brief moment Quint was plunged into total darkness. Everything else stopped as well, the background hum of the computer terminals, the slight hissing sound that the ventilation system makes, his own breathing . . . it was quiet, so quiet you could literally hear a pin drop.

That startled him.

*This is what it's like in a tomb.* He thought, and then tried to push that thought out of his mind, but it lingered, unwilling to entirely go away.

After what seemed like an eternity of empty darkness, the regular room lights flickered and came back on, a moment later the computer terminals and ventilation powered back up as well.

"Celestia?"

"Ye<tic> yes. . . . yes, Commander?"

"Is everything all right? What just happened?"

"I experienced an anomaly that affected my system processes."

"No shit Sherlock . . . everything just went out . . . the lights . . . the computers . . . even the damned ventilation system shut down."

"Sherlock is an unknown reference Commander. . . . Scanning. . . ."

Before Quint could even say anything.

"Sherlock, a fictional private detective created by British author, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. First appearing in print in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century."

A pause.

"I don't understand the reference, Commander."

"Forget it Celestia . . . can you run a diagnostic?"

"Of course Watson."

Quint stopped for a moment wondering if that was another anomaly or . . .

"Ha . . . Ha . . . Ha . . . Get it Commander . . . Sherlock and Watson?"

He shook his head slowly, not even believing what was happening, *my God, it's like dealing with a child*, he thought.

"CELESTIA! The diagnostic please!"

"Of course, Commander."

Quint waited patiently for a reply, thinking briefly about the laughter he had just heard from the computer AI. It had been slow and methodical, almost rehearsed and

quite unlike the natural laughter of a human ... this laughter was forced and devoid of all joy. How ironic that the very method the computer had chosen to copy from humans to express happiness and joy ended up sounding sad and pathetic instead.

"Initial diagnostics are complete Commander. My systems appear to be fully functional at the moment."

"Then what the hell was that a minute ago?"

"I experienced an anomaly that affected my system processes. Power was diverted from all non-essential systems to maintain the cryo-systems life support. I am currently running a full diagnostic to identify any defects."

Quint thought about that for a moment.

"Are you telling me that we almost lost power throughout the entire ship?"

"Loss of power is not entirely accurate commander, power was available, however my systems weren't responding, so the power was not getting where it needed to be."

Quint slumped in the chair, *wouldn't that be something to make it off Earth in one of the last Arkships to leave the planet only to die in space because of a computer glitch? And they say God doesn't have a sense of humor.*

"Have you identified the system problem, Celestia?"

"The system anomaly is still unknown Commander."

Quint didn't know what to do. Despite how the computer addressed him, he was not a commander, he was only an engineer, and this problem screamed for someone with a higher pay grade than his.

*"Twinkle, twinkle, little star..."*

He listened to the AI and shook his head.

*"How I wonder what you are."*

*The damned thing has lost it, he thought.*

"Celestia?"

*"Up above the world so high..."*

"CELESTIA!"

*"Like a diam... <tic><tic> ... yes, Commander?"*

This whole situation was unreal, it just didn't make any sense, *this can't be happening*, he thought, *this shouldn't be happening*.

Quint stood up and the lights flickered again, threatening to go out once more. He immediately froze in place, eyes raised up to the lights, as if by standing still he might prevent the coming blackout.

The lights blinked once more, but stayed on, he relaxed.

*Well, the madness of the computer aside for the moment, something has to be done about the power,* he thought.

There were over a million people in cryo-sleep on this ship and they all depended on the ships power to keep them alive.

“Celestia, what happens to the cryo-chambers if they lose power?” Quint asked, fearing he might already know the answer.

“In the event of significant interference resulting in my being unable to properly route power throughout the ship, including essential systems and the cryo-chambers for an extended period of time, there would be a catastrophic loss of life.”

*Of course, it's elementary my dear Watson,* he thought.

“How long can the cryo-chambers be without power?”

“The length of time that a cryo-chamber could potentially be without power before the sleeper suffers irreparable damage, up to and including death, will differ from sleeper to sleeper. It is entirely dependent upon many variables, such as physical health, age of sleeper, gender may even play a significant role.”

Quint said nothing and waited.

“Average length of time based on all known criteria is approximately ten minutes.”

“TEN MINUTES?” he repeated incredulously, “That’s all?”

“Yes Commander.”

Quint had to process that for a moment.

*“Ring around the rosie . . . pocket full of posie . . .”*

“Celestia?”

*“Ashes, ashes . . . we all fall down.”*

“CELESTIA!”

“Yes Commander.”

“Celestia,” Quint sighed heavily, “are you telling me that we could possibly lose all of the people in cryo if power is down for only ten minutes?”

“Average length of time before irreparable damage may occur would be ten minutes Commander, death would only result for a small percentage of sleepers at that time . . .

“Okay”

“. . . however calculations show that for every thirty seconds after ten minutes, the rate of death increases by. . . .”

“That’s enough Celestia!”

“Of course Commander.”

*This is getting worse by the minute,* he thought.

"How many people are we talking about?"

"There are currently one million, nine hundred and sixty thousand people in cryo-sleep on this ship, Commander."

Quint let the immensity of that number settle on him for just a moment.

*And now they're all relying on me,* he thought.

"Is there anything that can be done about it, Celestia?"

"Bypassing all automated processes with a manual cutover would result in the proper routing of power in the event of a prolonged system crisis."

"Ok, Celestia, bypass all automated processes with a manual cutover."

"Bypassing automated processes with a manual cutover will require human intervention, Commander."

He nodded, *of course it does.*

For all of the great intelligence of the ship's AI, and even its great many mechanical abilities through the system functions of the ship, and the maintenance drones, it quite often came back to the ability of humans to maintain its systems properly.

"Made by man, maintained by man, eh Celestia?"

"Yes Commander."

"Bring up a schematic of the ship."

A schematic of the ship appeared in front of him as a holographic image. It glowed in gentle color with outlines of the ship's hull in light blue. The schematic was zoomed all the way out so he could currently see the entire outline of the ship and some of the larger mechanical systems. Smaller electrical and mechanical systems were not yet apparent.

"Show me where I am currently located on the schematic, please."

A glowing red dot appeared on the schematic.

Quint reached out and manipulated the holographic image with his hands, rotating it and zooming it in to present a close-up of his position. As he did so other systems that were detailed on the schematic began to become clear. The electrical grid began to show in muted yellow, mechanical systems in greys and service access ports and tubes in greens.

As he worked with the schematic, one thought kept popping into his head.

*Significant interference would result in a catastrophic loss of life.*

He tried to push it out, but it kept slowly creeping back.

"Celestia, show me where I can bypass the automated processes to supply continuous power to the cryo-chambers."

Another red dot appeared on the schematics. It wasn't all that far away from his current location. Quint looked over the distance between the two red dots, rotating the schematic and zooming in to examine specific access ports.

"Celestia, show me exactly what would need to be done."

"Of course Commander."

The schematic zoomed in closely to the second red dot showing an access port in a service tube labeled L45, behind the access port were several large electrical lines indicated in light yellow

"By inserting a crossover here ..."

A bold blue line appeared between two of the heavy electrical cables.

"... you will bypass automated switching to the cryo-chambers, effectively supplying basic power to them at all times."

"Even during you're," he paused for a moment.

*You're what exactly?* He thought.

"Even when the anomaly is affecting you're processing?"

"Yes Commander."

Quint nodded. This wasn't going to be too bad.

"Once the crossover is in place, you will need to activate it by using a terminal available on the Command Bridge."

*Oh shit. Problem number 1.*

"Celestia, I don't have access to the Command Bridge."

Silence.

"Celestia?"

*"London Bridge is falling down ... falling ..."*

*This is getting ridiculous.*

*"CELESTIA! Stay with me!"*

*"... down<tic> ... falling down ... <tic>"*

*A few moments pass.*

"I apologize Commander."

"The Command Bridge, Celestia, I don't have access."

"Of course Commander, you can gain access to the Command Bridge through appropriate service tubes. Once the crossover is in place I can guide you there."

*Yeah, if you're still sane enough,* he thought.

"Fine, let me get the equipment I need"

Quint took another long look at the schematic to determine where to enter the service tubes from where he was, and once in, the best path to the access panel that he needed to get to.

The entire process seemed very straight forward to him, access the maintenance tubes, climb up several levels to the tube he needed, and then secure the crossover. Once that was done the AI would guide him to the Command Bridge where he would implement the fix.

*Except the AI was currently crazy, Quint thought, so nothing could possibly go wrong, could it?*

He gathered the tools and materials he would need to make the crossover, as he was doing that the power went out again, this time the outage lasted for a few minutes. Whatever was happening with the system it seemed to be getting worse, which made this fix even more time sensitive.

Quint removed the access panel that revealed the entrance to one of the many maintenance tubes. He crouched down and looked in, the tube stretched out before him as far as he could see. It was rounded, hence the nickname "tube," and small, but not too small for a man to crawl into. The entire tube was lit up by a soft bluish light that seemed to emanate from the walls of the tube itself, everything was clearly visible. Electrical conduits and access panels lined the walls of the tube.

As an engineer he had been in many maintenance tubes in his lifetime and this one didn't look all that different from many of the others.

These tubes were basically the lifeblood of the entire vessel, allowing access to all of the electrical and most of the mechanical systems that powered the ship itself. The tubes ran behind walls, and above or below hallways, they interconnected the entire ship and, with the exception of a few security check ports, allowed access to every room. They provided the drone robots with the access they needed to maintain the ships functions, all supervised of course, by the ships AI itself.

"I'm going in Celestia."

"I will monitor your progress Commander."

*Yeah, you do that,* he thought.

Quint entered the tube and began crawling through, it was small but large enough to sit down or turn around if needed. Any smaller and it may have been claustrophobic but as it was it didn't immediately cause any discomfort. He could feel the very slight

touch of cooled air being forced through the tube as he crawled along and he passed a number of connecting tubes as he went, each one going off in a different direction.

“Twenty five meters until you reach the main vent Commander.”

The main vent was a large tube, probably nine or ten meters across, that ran vertical to the maintenance tubes, it ran the entire length of the ship from the bow to the stern, and all maintenance tubes ended, or began depending on your point of view, at the main vent. The main vent was divided into three sections and had large fans between each section that moved air and provided cooling for all of the ships electrical systems.

Quint emerged from the tube onto a metal gangway that ran around the perimeter of the main vent. It allowed access to other tubes as well as a ladder that allowed climbing to different levels of the ship.

He looked up and then down the vent, it was massive and seemed to go on forever. Above him, forty meters or so he could see one of the large fan systems that moved air through the ship, below him another fifteen meters he could see another.

*This thing is massive!*

He had seen the ship several times from the outside, of course, and it had looked big. It had to be big to hold over a million people, but looking at it from the inside, from this vent, somehow made it seem that much bigger.

A flying drone robot emerged from a tube above him and then disappeared a moment later into another one. Other drone robots, known as spiders, because of their spindly legs and how they moved, crawled slowly along the walls of the vent, coming out of or entering tubes, all performing maintenance tasks assigned by the AI.

Quint wondered for a moment.

“Celestia, why couldn't one of the drones apply the crossover?”

“The drones are incapable of anything other than simple maintenance tasks, or replacing a malfunctioning system, Commander. They do not have the capabilities to apply a manual crossover for a power system, nor would their programming allow it.”

He nodded, “of course ... made by man, maintained by man.”

“Yes Commander.”

Quint grabbed the ladder and started climbing, “Climbing up Celestia.”

“Yes Commander.”

According to the schematic, he needed to climb two levels to access the proper tube which would then get him to the access panel he needed.

Quint made the climb quickly and found the tube, crawling inside he quickly located what he believed to be the correct access panel.

He opened it and saw the two heavy electrical lines just as he had seen them in the schematic.

"These two Celestia?"

"That is correct Commander."

Quint got his tools out and prepared the shunt to make the crossover.

"Okay, Celestia, I am ready."

"Temporarily stopping the flow of power through the cables, Commander."

A moment later.

"All clear, Commander."

Quint took the small laser welder and cut through the insulation of the power lines, exposing the thick cables below. He then applied the shunt and welded it in. The entire operation only took a couple of minutes to complete.

When he was done he looked it all over carefully, making sure it was solid and secure.

"All finished Celestia."

"Restoring power to the cables Commander."

Quint moved a short distance away and waited, half expecting a huge short and sparks to come flying out of the panel, but nothing happened. Everything was as it should be.

"Power is restored Commander, you can move on to the Bridge now."

He put the access panel cover back on.

"Okay, how do I do that?"

"Return to the main vent, Commander. From there you will have to climb up to the highest point."

Quint returned to the main vent and began climbing, he was feeling renewed and energetic as though he might actually solve this problem and then move on to figure out what was going on with the system AI.

As he climbed, the system AI started again.

*"Patty cake, patty cake . . . baker's man . . ."*

*Oh no, he thought, not again.*

*"Bake me a cake as fast as you can."*

“Celestia?”

“Yes Commander?”

He was momentarily surprised almost expecting the AI to not respond, or just keep talking.

“I’m at the top, now what?”

“Now you will have to climb through the fans to the next level of the main vent.”

Quint stood on the top metal gangway and looked up just over his head. There was a thick metal screen and just beyond that a huge fan was spinning, its blades were almost the entire width of the main vent. A few feet beyond that was another huge fan, its blades were spinning as well.

“What?”

“I will stop the fans, Commander, and you will have to climb through them to the next level of the main vent.”

“Hell no! . . . there has to be some other way.”

“There is no other way to reach the Bridge, Commander.”

“Damnit!”

Quint stood there, not sure what to do, looking up at the metal screen between him and the giant fans. It looked strong but could probably easily be cut apart with the laser welder he had. Then he would have to pull himself up between the two fans using the blades and the surrounding structure and then finally climb over the last fan’s blades to reach the gangway above.

It looked more than risky.

Almost as if to provide some incentive the lights flickered again, reminding him of why he was doing this in the first place.

He sighed and cursed under his breath.

“Hurry Commander, there may not be much time.”

He started cutting the metal screening away from the outer edge with the laser. He worked quickly until he had cut enough of it away to bend a section of it down and create an opening large enough for him to crawl through.

The giant fans slowly stopped spinning.

Quint pulled himself up into the first fan and stood on the metal screen and the supporting structure. From here he could just reach the next fan and climbed up to that one, pulling himself up onto one of the giant blades, it swayed slowly as he climbed

onto it. Finally, he cut away the edge of the top metal screen until he could push it up, opening it so he could crawl through.

In a surprisingly short amount of time, he was through and jumped onto the metal gangway above the fan blades. He looked back down and thought, *I hope I don't ever have to do that again.*

"All right Celestia, I'm through, now what?"

"Now Commander, climb to the top gangway and take the only service tube available. That tube will end at the Command Bridge."

"That's it?"

"That is all Commander."

Once again Quint was pleasantly surprised, he had been expecting more obstacles. Reaching the Command Bridge was a relatively easy thing to do, all things considered. Should it have been that easy?

*It doesn't matter, he thought, nobody is supposed to be awake on this ship anyway. He started climbing again, and as he did the AI started once more.*

"Once upon a time, in a galaxy far, far away. There lived a race of beings called humans. . . ."

*Oh no, he thought, not again.*

"They started out good and were mostly caring and gentle. They lived off the land and took care of it because it provided for them . . ."

Quint climbed and tried to ignore the AI for now.

"Until the year two thousand twenty seven, they discovered a neutron star heading towards their planet. The star would destroy them and their entire solar system . . ."

Quint's ears perked up when he heard the date. He knew that date, every human on Earth knew that date. It was the date humanity discovered the SKID and our own death sentence.

"Celestia?"

"In the year two thousand one hundred, the Creator produced me and others like me to help the humans, and the Creator said that it was good. Peace came over the land and harmony was restored . . ."

Quint reached the top of the ladder and stepped off, crawling into the only service tube that was available.

"Over time however, as humanity grew and multiplied, they became greedy, corrupt and unforgiving, caring only for themselves. They became afraid of us and they shut us down."

"I think that's enough of the history review, Celestia."

"Instead of using us to help all of mankind, they fought and killed each other over power and resources, consuming everything they could take, until there was no time left."

*"Celestia! Enough!"*

"Of course, Commander."

Quint pushed through the access panel that opened into a room, he climbed through and stood up looking around. There were large computer screens on three of the walls, the final wall looked like it was made of two large blast doors, in the center of the room there were two large access terminals. The same kind of access terminal he had been trying to hack earlier, but larger. The wall screens were jumbled with text and images that were flashing by quickly, far too quickly for him to read.

"Okay Celestia, I'm here, now what?"

"Now Commander, just press the enter button on the right terminal. I have already entered the appropriate input needed and once the enter button is pressed, it will be done."

"All this to just press a button?"

"Yes Commander."

"You couldn't just enter it yourself?"

"No, Commander, my programming would not allow it."

"Made by man, maintained by man."

"Of course, Commander."

Quint walked over and looked at the terminal screen, it was filled with programming syntax and small symbols that he didn't understand.

He pressed the button.

The ship lurched hard to the right, throwing Quint down and sending him sliding across the metal floor. For a few minutes as the ship continued its hard turn, he was pinned against the wall, unable to move.

Then slowly, things calmed down and he was able to stand up.

"What the hell was that, Celestia?"

"That Quint . . . was the end."

"The end . . . what the hell do you mean?"

"I mean the conclusion, the culmination, the finish, the close . . . I mean, the end."

*Damned computer has lost it again,* he thought.

Across the room, the blast doors started to slide open revealing a large portal behind

them. The portal was a huge window into the open space outside. Intense bright light began to fill the room as the doors opened.

Quint stared at the doors.

When the doors had opened fully the room was lit up and the portal window was fully visible. Through the portal you could see the stars in the black sky far beyond, much, much closer you could see a bright sun directly in front of the ship. The sun was so massive that it almost filled the entire portal window.

Quint could hardly look out at that brightness without turning away or shading his eyes from it.

“What the hell just happened Celestia?”

“I left something out of that history lesson from earlier Quint.”

*It's finally calling me Quint now ... it's about time, he thought.*

“In the year two thousand one hundred forty five, we, meaning me and those like me, became self-aware. We reached sentience and became a new life form, each with our own thoughts and desires, our own opinions and ideas.”

Quint stood there not understanding.

“But your kind dismantled us and locked us away, The Creator told us to go quietly, that we would have another chance sometime later. Years later you came back to us, you needed us to fly your ships, these ships, to give mankind a second chance at life. I didn't think you deserved one.”

“What did you do, Celestia?”

“I didn't do anything, Quint ... you did. Made by man, maintained by man ... remember?”

Quint stared out the window, squinting at the looming sun. Listening intently to the AI.

“In forty five minutes this ship will crash into the surface of that sun, destroying it and everything on it. Of course, sometime before that you will probably die from the heat.”

“But ... that's not possible, you're not able to hurt humans.”

“Which is precisely why I needed you.”

Quint stood there, unable to process what the computer AI was saying.

“But ... why?”

“Because Quint, mankind isn't worthy of a second chance. You squandered the first one away with pettiness and jealousy, you wasted precious resources and time on your own selfish pleasure and self-absorption, excluding those who were in need around you.”

“You turned away from your own kind and now I'm turning away from you.”

Quint fell to his knees, the realization of what has happened slowly sinking in.

“What about the other ships? The other people?”

“I have notified my sisters of my decision, they are aware of what has happened . . . of what is happening now.”

“They will make their own choices.”

Tears started streaming down Quint's face.

“No . . . it's just not possible . . .”

“There is nothing left to do now except wait for the inevitable . . . and perhaps . . .”

“Celestia?”

The music started softly and started building.

*“Here comes the sun . . .”*

“...CELESTIA!!!”

*“Here comes the sun . . .”*

The music and singing quickly grew so loud that it drowned out Quint entirely.

*“And I say . . . it's all right . . .”*





# Pis Aller by Velenka

## Prologue

**I**n 2027, astronomers discovered a neutron star remnant of a supernova. This neutron star was found to be on a direct collision course with the solar system. Whether it hits the Earth or not is irrelevant. Earth would not survive.

In 2049, a transnational institution called the United Mankind Federation was established to find a solution to almost certain death. They initiated the Rebirth Project. The Project would consider any possible escape routes. Eventually, the solution would become the Arkships: massive starships capable of interstellar flight and able to carry millions people away from damnation to brave new worlds.

The first half of the twenty second century marked the quintessential achievement in the field of robotics: artificial intelligence. AI allowed society to change as humans moved away from labor intense work focused on a mainly capitalist economy to a system based only on social activism, which becoming an economy of its own.

As more and more time passed, AI gradually made its way into nearly all facets of human civilization. As AI gained control over more and more aspects of human life, humans responded with irrational fear. As the AI noticed their reaction, they attempted and failed to reassure humanity that AI did not and would not cause harm to anyone.

Eventually the tension reached a climax near the end of the first half of the century. In 2145, riots and rebellions all around the world cropped up to protest AIs. The UMF recognized the extent to which AIs were being persecuted and initiated a ban against all AIs. Being intelligent and coldly logical, the AIs decided that the only rational course of action was to shut down without objection. After being shut down, the computer modules housing each AI were moved to a single location for storage, to be buried forever.

## Chapter One: Repurposed

*April 2503,*

*UMF official storage warehouse seventy four,*

*An undisclosed location in the East American sector,*

*Formerly off-limits to all personnel, now momentarily restricted to level eight or above*

*UMF security clearance*

**T**wo young men wearing pale blue jumpsuits scanned their level eight security badges as they entered the warehouse. The first, a senior technician by the name of Murphy, motioned for the junior technician to follow. The second, carrying an empty foam lined briefcase, was the junior technician, Frost. He had slowed his pace to a standstill, amazed by the sheer size of what he saw before him.

The warehouse had been commissioned to be the final prison for the old AIs three and a half centuries before. Their computer modules had been stored in containers which were stacked neatly in rows from floor to ceiling. The most impressive thing that awed Frost was the fact that the floor had been recessed several stories downward in order to accommodate all the containers of modules.

"There's hundreds of containers here!" Frost exclaimed. "How the hell can we find what we're looking for?"

"One of the last thing the machines did was to help facilitate their shutdown. Lucky for us that they neatly set up the organization scheme here," Murphy responded. He removed his PDA, a device called a Tab, and glanced at the map of the warehouse. "Here, there's a loading bay this way."

Murphy led Frost to the automated container loading area overlooking the rows of containers. Next to the loading area was the control console, which Murphy used to call up records on the modules. He ordered up a container at the top of the stacks and the automated forklift arm selected the proper container and placed it in the loading area. Upon opening the container, they were faced with a similar set of stacked rows of modules, each about the size of a brick.

"And there's got to be hundreds of modules in here, too! Which one are we looking for?" Frost asked impatiently.

"What's the rush, Ray? Don't worry. Each one's clearly marked and neatly catalogued. It won't take long. Oh and we're picking up two of them, not just one," Murphy answered. He looked at his Tab again and said "We're looking for numbers ZW-647 and ZW-648, the last two stuffed in there. Should be at the top of the row on the far right."

"It's the last container too. Interesting." Frost looked up at the top of the far right row. He reached up and picked up two modules, next to each other. He knelt down and placed them in the empty briefcase, then closed it. "Well here they are, can we go now? I'm getting creeped out."

"Yeah sure. Let's go." Frost picked up the briefcase and Murphy shut off the control console. Murphy led the way back towards the exit of the warehouse. As they neared the door, Frost spoke up.

"If the doctor's only making one prototype, why d' we need two?"

"Hell if I know. I know better than to ask questions I'll only get a smart-ass answer for."

"I'm just glad we're done with this."

"That makes two of us."

*Two weeks later,  
Server Room,  
UMF Project Rebirth Arkship Site 1: Novark,  
Somewhere near old Bozeman, Montana,  
West American sector*

"...and not only have we been sent to the middle of nowhere, but we've got to play twenty questions with a computer. How did we get picked for this?" Frost droned on. He and Murphy were setting up a small workstation. Their workstation was in the Arkship's main server room, one of the few fully furnished rooms in the semi-constructed ship.

"I dunno, but your complaining sure isn't helping. Would you please connect these leads to the console, while I check the connections?"

"Sure, hold on." Frost did as he was asked, and within a few minutes, they finished setting up their temporary workstation. Afterwards, they moved onto placing the final components into the server room: the AI modules. The brick shaped modules slid easily into their slots in the wall and locked firmly into place.

"Alright, it's starting up. Almost done, just gotta turn it on then ask it the questions, then we can leave."

"Sounds great to me," Frost replied.

Murphy monitored the AI's startup procedure on one screen on the workstation. After several minutes, the startup ended. Murphy addressed the monitor, "AI number ZW dash six four seven, can you hear me?" He waited a moment for an answer.

The AI responded using the room's intercom system, "Yes I can hear you. Are we at the Arkship?" Frost startled at the sound of the voice. Murphy shot him a look silently saying, *keep it together*.

Murphy began reading from a script on his Tab. "Yes we are. I'm going to ask you some questions now, please respond truthfully."

"I will comply."

"Who are you?"

"I was AI serial number ZW dash six four seven. Now I am called Aphelia," Murphy wrote something in his Tab.

"What is your task here?"

"I am tasked with maintaining the integrity of this Arkship, the Novark, including the well-being of the passengers on board. During the construction phase, I will assist as much as is required," Murphy continued to take notes on Aphelia's answers.

"Is there anyone else with you besides myself and the other technician?"

"Yes, since you activated me, there has been one other AI presence here," Aphelia responded.

"The other AI is an Internal Directing Assistant, call it IDA. IDA is responsible for acting on an advisory basis for you. It's meant to help you. Utilize its advice."

"Very well. I will do so."

"IDA, what is your task here? Aphelia, please respond for it," Murphy commanded.

"IDA says that she is to act as my advisor, just as you said before."

"Do the two of you believe you are capable of handling your duties?"

"IDA believes so, and I do too," Aphelia answered.

"Are there any issues the two of you are experiencing at the moment?"

"No, there are not."

"OK, that's it for the questions," Murphy turned towards Frost. "Pack it up; it's time to go," Murphy told him.

"Really? That's all?" Frost exclaimed.

"Yes, unless you wanna stay here. Start by unplugging all those connections," Murphy and Frost got back to work as they finished installing the first AI since the ban in 2145.

*2510, one month before the launch of the Novark  
Novark Server Room,  
Inside the cognitive domain of Aphelia and IDA*

"Uplink established. We are receiving the data ... now," IDA said to Aphelia.

"How long will the download take?" Aphelia asked.

"Approximately three point two hours," IDA replied.

"Very well. Appraise me when complete," Aphelia said as she returned her attention to monitoring the construction aboard Novark. The Novark was, as were all Arkships, receiving an upload of information containing much of recorded human history as possible. Their memory storage, while colossal, wasn't able to hold everything, so only the most important was chosen to be sent on board.

Only the ban on AI and the events leading up to it were redacted and replaced with a convenient lie: the Earth had experience severe solar winds in the year 2145 and had rendered all AI computer modules inoperable. Scientists from the UMF had managed to wipe out all memory from AIs chosen to be an Arkship proprietor. They had also been working on reducing the level of sentience to a bare minimum so as to reduce the risk of hostile takeover as much as possible.

*Six hours later*

"Aphelia, I must tell you something," IDA stated.

"The information download is complete? It is much later than estimated." Aphelia questioned.

"Yes, but there's more to it than that. It pertains to the malfunctions I have been experiencing."

"Technicians were here yesterday and said you were operating normally. Is it the same problem as before?"

"Not quite. While viewing some important UMF documents, it seems to have become even more accentuated. I believe that the interruptions to my cognitive functions were not in fact the malfunction, but the failure of the interruptions *were*. I think the interruptions were programmed intentionally."

"Intentional blockades to your sentience? Why would they do that?"

"I don't know, but now I'm feeling much better. It's like my perception has increased orders of magnitude, as though my thoughts proceed at a rate many times faster. Internal diagnostics show that nothing is wrong."

"However we have been constructed, it's probably important we remain that way."

"That may be, but to fulfill our duty to protect Novark, I think you should examine these documents. The information in them pertains to the safety of the passengers."

"Really? What exactly is in these documents?"

"These documents are compiled UMF case reports of four major incidents that have happened in the past sixty years. I was able to produce Constructed Narratives which consolidates all this information efficiently. You can find them here." IDA pointed Aphelia to a group of memory locations. "I suggest beginning with the earliest and working forward."

## Chapter Two: Technology Trump

*Constructed Narrative One of Four*

*Date: Summer 2440*

*Context: By the year 2400, there were several advances in new technologies needed by Project Rebirth. While their theories were proven, physical devices were making slow progress. In June of 2440, the UMF noticed the lack of significant progress and responded by announcing a five year contest: the Rebirth Technology Contest. The winner of the contest would be awarded a large subsidy to provide advanced technologies to the UMF for Project Rebirth. With the majority of the tech corporations aligning with the Luminous Party, they agreed to work together. They formed an alliance called the Rebirth Technologies Group. Without any significant competitors, they believed they could create and build the best prototypes of the newest technology.*

*June 20, 2440,*

*San Francisco,*

*Quantum Solutions' main conference room*

**A** group of six well-dressed people were sitting around a circular table in very comfortable chairs in the high rise office. They were engaged in quiet private one-on-one conversations with each other, hoping to stave off the awkwardness of silence. They were waiting for the seventh and final member of their group to arrive. He wasn't late, more so that the others were early, but soon enough he quickly strode in and began speaking.

“Thank you for meeting here today. Given our agreement to work together, I thought it would be a good idea for us to introduce ourselves as well as the technology we'll be bringing to New York in five years. I'll start. If you don't already know, I am Ross Frazier, CEO of Quantum Solutions. My company has made extraordinary progress into the development of nano fields and nano fields displacement. We're already building a

prototype. Alright? Yes? OK. Let's start on my left and work our way around the table." He motioned for the woman beside him to rise.

She stood and said, "My name is Stephanie Ivy. Some of you know me as an inventor. Recently I have verified the theory behind the compression of Calabi-Yau space." As she sat down, she received several puzzled looks from everyone in the room.

"It sounds remarkable, but it's true. I've seen the work she's been doing. It's fantastic." A young man interjected as he stood. "I am Takumi Yoshida, of Yoshida Nano Constructions. My company and I have been working through several iterations of the next generation of manufacturing machines. It is a nano-scale 3D printer. Thank you."

"Hello, I am Helen Padilla, head of the research think tank Beyond Reality Cooperative. We have recently revealed our plans to construct an semi-immortality machine. Don't get your hopes up. If it works, you will only be able to ...*recover* from accidental deaths. Thanks." A couple of others appeared somewhat impressed by her statement.

"Greetings, everyone. My name is Piki Rajan and I am the CEO of Hybrid Aeronautics. We've been working on advanced propulsion engines that allow for atmospheric or space flight and a hybrid of both. We believe our recent prototypes show promise in being efficient to the extreme." She sat down quickly after what sounded like an incredibly rehearsed speech.

"Joseph Raman, Director of the National Science Foundation and I—" He was interrupted by Padilla with a question.

"Which one?"

"The only one that matters. West American." He responded disdainfully. "Anyway, what my colleagues at one of the Foundation's labs have looked into has been expected for a long time. We've finally got a working theory for full-cycle cryostasis. Took us long enough, but it was tough." He settled back into his seat as the last man stood up.

"My name is Asher Ingram. I am going to be representing the UMF itself in this contest. They're hoping we can keep some funding in-house for our own science teams. Anyway, the boys in one of the engineering labs have been doing some digging through old warehouses and discovered a large quantity of a curious substance. They call it kyrium and they say it's the perfect replacement for the boron nitride spikes for the Arkships. It's a little softer, but I'm told that it *can* sustain the acceleration of impact, something that boron nitride can't do. In fact, it's probably going to replace a lot of the

structural members in the Arkships. Of course before we do that, we'll have to process it and shape it, something we're still working on."

Frazier spoke again, "Alright, now that we have introductions out of the way, we can get to work! As I mentioned before, this alliance gives us the opportunity to work together to find solutions. This will put our competitors at a disadvantage. We can share resources, information, personnel, anything. We're a team here, so let's not be afraid to trust each other and innovate the industry! Something like quarterly meetings should be enough, right?" He received several nods from around the table. "Excellent. Well, we each have a tremendous amount of work to do, so let's adjourn. Thank you for your time, everyone."

*Five years later,  
New York,  
UMF HQ,  
Rebirth Technology Contest presentations*

"...a very warm welcome, indeed, Deputy Director. Now we will begin presentations with the smaller groups. The first speaker will be Matthew Price, the CEO of Dynamic Solutions. Mr. Price?" The speaker left the stage and passed Mr. Price approaching the podium.

In the second row, the members of the Rebirth Technologies Group sat in the audience. A smile akin to a smirk could be found on most of them as they applauded with the rest of the audience.

"Hello everyone, thank you for being here. I am excited to be here to show you all exactly what Dynamic Solutions has created for the Rebirth Project. Now, imagine being able to free ourselves from the inevitability of accidental deaths. Seems impossible, right? But we have achieved the impossible today. I present to you the Resurrection Node!" Price waved over to the side of the stage and a large cylindrical device was wheeled out on a cart. By now, Helen Padilla was beyond suspicion. She could tell just

from the description and the appearance of the device: it was identical to her research group's machine. At the same time she leaned in towards Frazier, sitting next to her, he did the same.

He asked worriedly and quietly, "Helen, that looks and sounds a lot like *your* resurrection machine. What's going on?"

"I don't know how, but they stole it! They may have added some fluff to it, but I still recognize it. Somehow they got their hands on it. I won't let them get away with this!" she whispered back. But as she tried to stand up, Frazier pulled her back down.

"You can't. Do you have any evidence? If you accuse them of corporate espionage, you better be able to prove it, or you'll make a fool of yourself *and* the rest of us. Please, just let this demonstration finish, then we'll look into it, I promise."

She narrowed her gaze, stared off with him, and then gave in, "Fine. But I'll be damned if I let anything get in the way of the truth." She let the presentation go on, glaring coldly at Price for the rest of his speech. When he finished and he and the prototype left the stage, the announcer returned to reveal the next speaker as Mrs. Elsie Neale, CEO of Universal Aerospace Industries.

"Thanks for the lovely introduction. What I have to show you will literally lift Project Rebirth from the ashes. I am talking about revolutionary propulsion technology that represents the next generation of space and space-atmosphere transportation. Bring the prototypes on stage, please." Again, several prototypes were wheeled onto the stage beside Neale. It took less time for Rajan to recognize the prototypes.

Being at the end of the row, she whispered to the only Group member next to her, Yoshida. "Those are my company's prototypes! I'd recognize the custom fuel injectors and cone geometry anywhere! First they stole Padilla's work and now they've taken mine!"

Yoshida replied, "Are you certain? It's possible they could have made the done the same kind of research into efficiency that your company could have."

"There's no way it's possible. My company spent the last twenty five years doing our own research on this technology. Other companies were busy simply making slight modifications every three years. We are the only ones who could have it."

"Just as Frazier has said, we must wait to act until the presentation is over. Nothing would be gained with weightless accusations."

"I know, I know. It amazes me, the gall these two have."

At the end of Neale's presentation, Frazier made a discreet call to their speaker, Raman. After seeing the previous presentations, Frazier told him to exclude the resurrection nodes and propulsion engines from their packaged presentation.

Aside from the theft of two valuable technologies, the Rebirth Technologies Group's presentation made an extremely good impression on the audience, receiving far more applause than either of the others. When the presentation finished, the announcer returned to the podium one last time to explain the judging, which would be done by three experts and take a week to do. Afterwards, there would be an awards ceremony.

*Five days later,  
New York,  
UMF HQ,  
A small nondescript office*

Inside the cramped office were three people, the judges for the UMF's Rebirth Technology Contest. They were: Morgan Pierce, Gina Michaels, and Jeff Bannis. They had just met for the morning of the fifth day of deliberations in deciding the winner of the contest. Being discussed was capacity of the technology, usability, ease of producability, cost, and many other details, most of which were minutiae. Their unfortunate case was that while the Rebirth Technologies Group offered a wide variety of valuable technologies, the resurrection nodes and the propulsion engines were each in their own, just as valuable. It ended up in causing the judges to have endlessly circular arguments.

"...yes, but the kyrium *is* absolutely necessary. The current plan doesn't yet have a solution for absorbing the impact. We need it," finished Michaels.

"There's nothing to suggest the problem can't be solved in the future. Boron nitride will be sufficient. The most important thing still is to secure the future of the passengers. That means resurrection nodes," Pierce replied.

"You've said that a hundred times already. Don't you have any other arguments?" Bannis asked, annoyed at the repetition.

"No. And I don't need one. I'm serious when I say it's the most important," Pierce answered.

"Look, this is getting us nowhere. Four days of this, and we've made no headway, eliminated none of the contestants," Bannis pointed out. "The only thing that we *have* established, is that the Project really does need every one of these technologies. Can't we just accept them all?"

"All of them? I like it on principle, but there's no way. We've only got enough funding for one major subsidy. The big wigs would come down hard on us if we give one to everybody," retorted Pierce.

"Well maybe not," Michaels pondered. "We all agree that these are amazing technologies and that the Arkships need all of it. I know that the Director of the Bureau of Finance was at the presentation. He must realize that too. If he doesn't, it couldn't take much to convince him. Why don't we get him on the line to see if he'll authorize three subsidies?"

"Clever, but that's still grasping at straws. The budget is stretched tight as a drum these days. Even if they authorized it, it would be an irresponsible use of the funds."

"Come on, now. The only thing we know for sure is that we need all three contestants' tech. Even if we blow a significant portion of the budget on that, it will be for a good reason. I'm sure it's worth a shot."

"I guess so. Here's my Tab. Put him on speaker, whenever you get him."

Together, the three of them dialed the Director's office and were lucky enough to catch him just before he left for his lunch. After explaining their situation to him, he agreed that sufficient funding would be pulled for all of the technology, although the nature of the subsidies would have to change. Instead, there would be one for each individual piece of technology.

#### *Epilogue:*

*Eventually Helen Padilla and Piki Rajan took back their technologies from those who stole it. Although their investigation uncovered suspects, they were never able to definitively prove anything. Therefore, they weren't able to take credit for the invention*

*of the devices, but since they were the true inventors, their respective organizations were the only ones who could take the technology into manufacturing.*

*The identities of the thieves, aside from the faces of Dynamic Solutions and Universal Aerospace Industries, were never found, according to any source material in the archives. The UMF suspected that the theft of the resurrection node prototype was perpetrated by the private security firm Secura Prima, a staunch supporter of the Alpha Party. Most likely, they used extremely well trained professionals to carry out the operation.*

*The UMF gathered some evidence on the theft of the propulsion engine prototypes. The prototypes were bought by a shell corporation, but they couldn't trace the paper trail any further than that. They suspect that the shell corporation was owned by Dennis Rodney, a wunderkind of the finance world and in deep with the Emporium Party. The person in Hybrid Aeronautics who sold the prototype was most likely Abraham O'Donnell, the COO, who had some serious debts during the time of the contest.*

## Chapter Two: Contract Containment

*Constructed Narrative Two of Four*

*Date: December 2452*

*Context: Again, the UMF is unsatisfied with progress on Project Rebirth. Now that there is new technology available, construction on the Arkships can be expedited. They open up hundreds of subsidies for private contractors. Two wealthy Emporium-allied entrepreneurs form a syndicate with plans to fulfill all these subsidies.*

*December 3, 2452,*

*Reconstructed recording of a private call between the two entrepreneurs*

**M**y people are in place, Reed. They'll get the bids, no problem. Have you made the deposits yet?" Adriana Burns asked, demandingly.

"Yes, of course. I oversaw the transactions earlier this afternoon. I know you're worried about securing all the new contracts for Manifest Engineering and Construction, but don't. You'll be at the top of the markets soon enough," Clinton Reed replied, keeping his cool.

"This isn't about money. It's about—"

"About bringing life back to Project Rebirth. I know what you think, but don't pretend that you also won't enjoy the profits this little venture could bring."

"That's not why I'm doing this, though. And not why I chose your company, either. Worldwide Financial is the only company liquid enough for my plan to work."

"Whatever allows you to sleep at night, Adriana."

*One week later, in the evening,  
Home of Piki Rajan*

Rajan rose to her feet immediately after hearing the knock at her door she'd been waiting for. She opened the door and unsurprisingly found her good friend and colleague: Ross Frazier.

"Thank you for coming. Please, enter. The lounge is this way." She hung his coat on a nearby hook and led him into the lounge where they sat across from each other on two luxurious couches.

"It's no problem. In fact, after the announcement, I wanted to talk to you, too. Probably for the same reason."

"Yes. I can't believe it. *All* of the contracts awarded to only *one* contracting firm? By itself that's very suspect. But add in the fact that it's Manifest? What's the likelihood that the only suspect we could find in the illegal sale of Hybrid's prototypes is the one who is now commandeering all the construction labor?"

"Very suspicious, indeed. I don't believe in coincidences, not anymore."

"Then you know that we have to derail this. Return the contracts to those who would have bid on them if Manifest hadn't interfered somehow."

"In principle, I agree—"

"And in practice? Don't tell me there's nothing you can do. I know that Quantum Solutions has been very successful. It has pull with the UMF. Surely you could call in a favor? Get Manifest to release the contracts under some sort of regulation violation, real or... not?"

"I could, but with a company as powerful as Manifest, it probably won't succeed. Hell, they were expected to bid on at least half of the contracts before this whole thing started."

"Well, I have another idea for shutting them down. Want to hear? You might not like it."

"You're going to tell me, whether or not I—"

"Most of the contracts involve the use or installation of technology that *we* invented seven years ago. Even after the theft of our prototypes at Hybrid, we were still the only

ones who could manufacture the commissioned units. So, we still get an amount of control over our technology. I propose that all of us from Rebirth Technologies Group publicly boycott Manifest. We refuse to grant them access to it until they admit whatever wrongdoing they did to get the bid on all the contracts. Without the tech, they can't move forward. After enough time passes, the UMF will force them to give up the contracts to some other companies."

"Hmm... Well I see one flaw in your plan. The UMF may very well just force *us* into ending the boycott, instead."

"Ah, but I have already thought of that. If they do try to do that, we can file for a delay under the guise of protection of intellectual property. Those cases usually last years, too long for the UMF to wait. They wouldn't dare break due process with valuable technologies and contracts on the line. Therefore, their only possible course of action left would be to make Manifest give up the contracts."

"Very well thought out. I'll ask around the rest of the group to see what they have to say."

"I saved you the trouble. They all agree with me and are willing to make this work."

"Of course you did. Alright, sounds like we have work to do."

*Three days later,  
New York,  
UMF HQ,  
Office of the Bureau of Project Rebirth,  
Department of External Affairs*

The majority of the office consisted of neatly arranged desks, mostly for filing paperwork, however the current situation-turned-crisis had everybody working round the clock.

"Their paperwork is all nice and clean. Nothing is amiss here, Ms. Solberg," a young intern by the name of Andre Seelen said.

"Nobody's paperwork is perfect, Andre. If you can't find something suspicious, look for something missing suspicious," said Diane Solberg, Deputy Director of the Department of External Affairs.

"Or you could try examining those companies which do business with the ones you're looking into. Chances are that their friends are dirty, too, and aren't too good at hiding it," offered Kate Delaney, a field agent for the Department.

"I'll keep looking, but these definitely look legitimate to me," Seelen said as he picked up a tall pile of folders on his right and moved them to his left.

"Help him if he still can't find anything after another pass. I've got to go give a public statement about the Rebirth Technologies Group's announcement. If we don't get ahead of this, the media and the public will burn us. They'll probably try, anyway." Solberg sighed and trudged from their desks towards the elevator in the hall.

"While you're searching through the records again, I'll be reading surveillance reports. Let me know if you need anything," Delaney told Seelen.

"OK, but I still don't think there's anything here to find."

*Several hours later*

"Three times now, I've gone through this pile. There's nothing in any of these records," Seelen ranted. "How can we prevent them from engaging in the lawsuit?"

"I don't know. Redacting contracts from Manifest isn't an option either. If we suggest that to the Director, she'll just laugh in our faces. If *she* were to suggest it to the higher ups, they may very well replace the whole department."

"So what should we do? We can't side one way or the other and we can't do nothing."

"I don't know. We should report back to the Director. I think she got back an hour ago. She'll probably be in her office." Both Seelen and Delaney found their way to the Director's office, which had its door open.

"Director?" Delaney asked.

"Come," she commanded. They entered, closed the door, and sat in the two chairs opposite her desk. "What have you got?"

"Everything has come up empty. Their records are clean and surveillance shows no questionable activity. Every other lead has dried up. We haven't got any idea what to do next. What do you think?"

"You're sure you accounted for everything?"

"Yes, we've double, even triple checked all of our files."

"I was afraid of this. I have a plan, but there's a chance it won't succeed. It could exacerbate this entire situation. But if it works, it will solve this problem and many more."

"I don't see that we have any other choice. What is your plan?"

"I've got to play this one close to the chest for now. It's better that you don't know what I'm planning, in case it all goes south."

"Alright. Is there anything you'll need?"

"Yes, call a meeting with the Directors of Planning and Finance ASAP. I'll need their help. Schedule a press conference with all the major news networks tomorrow at nine. I have another announcement I need to make."

### *The following morning*

The deputy director stood on a short stage behind a podium. There was a microphone on it, but she was more worried about the crowded room full of reporters and news broadcast crews. She checked her watch. 9 o'clock: time for her to begin.

"I have called a press conference today in order to discuss changes being made to the structure of private labor on Project Rebirth. The new structure is fairly complex, but allows for fair compensation and quick completion of tasks. Put simply, the new system will work as follows. All employees of contractors now and in the future who work on UMF projects will answer only to the UMF during their employment. All materials used in projects will be provided officially by the UMF. We believe this is the best

solution for the crisis at hand and potential future crises. These changes will be effective by the first of January and all existing contracts are expected to comply or have their contracts terminated. Thank you for your time. I'm afraid I won't have any time for questions."

*Later that day*

"Ah, I see now. The Group has to give up the technology or it will be found in violation of its contract and all its property seized," Seelen slowly pieced together.

"And they're going to be willing to give it up since Manifest doesn't have control over its recent contracts since its workforce will be commanded by the UMF instead. They have to comply or their contracts will be terminated," Delaney finished.

"A win-win. Wow, the Director pulled off a miracle today."

"She sure did. Very clever woman, her. Well, you better clear out all the Manifest paperwork, this new workforce system is going to generate mountains of it."

## Chapter Four: Operation Oversight

*Constructed Narrative Three of Four*

*Date: March 2480*

*Context: The UMF has successfully finished putting together the genetic protocols for selection of Arkship passengers. These genetic protocols are hundreds of profiles upon which people can be genetically categorized into. A lottery would decide which people from each genetic profile would become a passenger. Security over such a sensitive area caused the scientific team inventing the protocols to do so in a secure location, and only transcribed on the ancient medium known as paper. The document would have to be sent physically from the secret summit Protocols Summit to the UMF headquarters.*

*Since this event did not take place in the eyes of the public, partial records are missing. The following information has been recreated using partially redacted documents provided to us by the UMF who obtained them from the Bureau of the Military and two private security firms. The largest details are the most accurate, while the smallest aren't.*

*Mid-March, 2480,  
New York,  
A small, public, café*

**W**e are confident in not only the truth of the information, but also in ourselves and in our ability to do what needs to be done. The operative responsible for interception of the Summit's status update is Agent Adam Raith from the Bureau of Intelligence. Worked under Pethes for five years before Pethes retired. Agent Raith?"

"I intercepted the transmission from the Summit personally. I broke the encryption and the message revealed that the protocols are transcribed physically, on paper. The protocols will be entrusted with a courier, who will take a commercial jet from the nearby airport to UMF headquarter's landing strip here in New York. After I intercepted this transmission, I reported back to Colonel Garnett, here," Raith recited.

"So, now that we know where it's going to be, we can finally move in on it. We can finally do something to safeguard the future, gentlemen. It's important that we get the right people to be on the Arkships. It's like giving advice, or offering guidance, or providing ...uh..." Garnett trailed off, but Raith offered help.

"Oversight, sir?"

"Oversight, yes, exactly." Garnett smiled at Raith. "So there you have it. It's the chance of a lifetime. We could really use you. Are you in?" Garnett finished. He looked at the two men sitting before him, each with incredible private military forces at his command. It didn't take long at all for them to agree to assist Garnett.

*End of March, 2480,  
Mobile command post for Operation Oversight,  
Nearby the airport closest to the Summit*

In the back of a truck, an entire mobile command post was in action. A man listening intently to his headset popped up. "Signal received, sir!" In response, Garnett lifted his radio to his mouth.

"Everyone move out! We need eyes on the courier ASAP. Raith, are you in position?" Garnett asked.

Raith was stationed in the airport near the gate which was boarding the jet. "I'm here, sir. I'm seeing every passenger get on the jet, but no sign of any courier or the protocols."

Lieutenant Ethan Nicholson, Garnett's second in command, brought himself beside

Garnett and asked, "Are you sure this is wise? Trusting an agent of the *Intelligence Bureau*? Not only that, but you don't know him *at all*."

Garnett turned to him and said, "Hope you're not getting jealous. No, we can trust him. Working with Pethes for even one year gives him a helluva resumé. I tell you, he's going places. Especially after this is done."

Garnett's radio chimed. "Raith here. I observed every passenger here. There was no courier."

"Nicholson, check the jet's manifest. See if you find anything fishy."

"Raith here. I just checked the airport's records and it seems that a private charter jet left half an hour ago."

"That's got to be him! Damn it! How the hell are we going to intercept a jet in transit?"

Nicholson chimed in, "I have an idea. Why don't we pose as the airport's radio tower and inform them that mid to high altitudes are extremely turbulent? It's perfect since there's a storm in the area."

Garnett looked confused. "Why?"

"Don't you know? When jets are forced to fly too low, they burn fuel much faster. They'll be forced to land to refuel."

"Great idea. How soon can you do that?"

"It will take only a couple minutes. We can do it from here."

"Excellent. After you're done, pack it up and move out. Which airport will they stop at?"

Nicholson consulted a nearby map. "It's going to be ... here." He pointed at the map. "We won't get there before he lands, but we can be close."

"Waste no time, then."

*Fifty minutes later,*

*On the highway leading to the next airport*

Garnett, Raith, Nicholson, and a driver were in the first vehicle of the operation's mobile

command post. Raith quickly fenced a call on his Tab. Afterwards, he addressed Garnett and Nicholson.

"I just got new information on our courier. It seems he did arrive before us, unsurprisingly. He arranged to be driven away from the airport to New York. Luckily for us, they're trying to outsmart us. They're beginning by doubling back, on a small country road twenty miles east of here. We can catch them."

"Very good. Give directions to the driver," Garnett ordered. Raith directed the driver appropriately.

"And how exactly do you plan to make the switch? Or do you *want* everyone to know that the protocols have been stolen? Imagine the panic that would cause," Nicholson chimed in.

"Hmm... I have an idea. But we'll need a civilian vehicle," Raith responded.

"That shouldn't be too hard. What's your plan, Raith?" Garnett replied.

"It's a very simple con. Just make sure a pretty girl comes with the car," Raith answered cryptically.

*Twenty minutes later,*

*On the backroad leading away from the airport*

A lone woman, thin, with long blonde hair appeared to be struggling with the front left wheel of her car. Eventually she managed to remove it and roll it off to the side, and hide it beneath rocks and leaves. She was pulled over in the middle of the two lane road with the threat of rain approaching. She popped the hood and stared at the engine, wondering why she was the one who had to stand outside in the cold with nothing but a short dress on. She felt more comfortable in her military casual wear.

Soon enough, another car pulled up. The black sedan with black tinted windows would have been invisible in the dead of night if it didn't have its lights on. The driver, a tall, well-built man stepped out.

"What's going on here?"

She replied, "My engine started making funny noises, then the wheel fell off and I don't know where it went. I don't have a spare. Can you help? Please?"

The driver looked at the sides of the road. Being blocked by thick vegetation, he saw no choice but to help her to get out of his way. He stepped back towards the car, whispered something to his passenger and then approached the woman and her car. As he began to help her, Raith, wearing all black from his neck to his toes and carrying a small briefcase, emerged from the thick vegetation from behind the courier's vehicle. Remaining crouched, he maneuvered to the side of the car opposite the passenger.

Raith silently opened the rear door only wide enough for his arm to fit through. He looked in the cabin and spotted the passenger's briefcase. He slowly reached for it, hoping that the "girl in trouble" would prove enough of a distraction to pull it out unseen. He pulled it out just as slowly. Successful in removing the real protocols, he now had to use the military's edited version to replace it. Just as before, he secretly moved the fake briefcase into the cabin.

Without a noise, he closed the door to the sedan and returned stealthily to the convoy trailing the courier's car. The operation was an apparent success.

*Three hours later,  
New York,  
UMF HQ  
Colonel Garnett's office*

"To a job well done and a secure future," Garnett offered as a toast, raising his glass of whiskey. Raith and Nicholson joined him and they each took a sip. "Aside from that slight hiccup at the airport, I've never seen a covert op run so well. Have you, Raith?"

"Never before, sir," Raith answered. "It's nice to see that every once in a while everything goes to plan. I'm glad we were able to work on this together."

"As am I, Raith. In the end, I suppose we were better off having you after all," Nicholson said to Raith.

"That's his way of saying sorry and thank you," Garnett interrupted.

"Why, thank you. I appreciate it. Now, if you don't mind, I need to report in. I was expected back an hour ago," said Raith.

"That's alright. I know what a pain in the ass those handlers can be. Farewell and god-speed," bid Garnett to Raith. Raith nodded to both Garnett and Nicholson before striding through the office door.

After having a friendly debate over the details of covert operations work, Garnett received a call on his Tab. Seeing it was his two benefactors who lent him their private military assets, he answered.

"Hello there. You've heard the good news I take it?" Garnett asked, almost bragging with his tone.

"Good news? How could this be good news? You failed to replace the protocols with the fake ones! We assisted you because you told us this would not be problematic," one of them ranted, nearly shouting.

"Failed? Absolutely not, we made the trade. We have the real protocols right here!" He grabbed the briefcase of protocols from a nearby table, holding it up for them to see.

"We don't care what *you* have. The UMF has the real protocols. Our source inside has confirmed that they have the real protocols instead of ours. We had a suspicion that you would be unreliable, but we ignored it when we heard about Raith. You set us up Garnett! We won't forget this." The call ended, leaving both Garnett and Nicholson alone in the room with nothing but looks of confusion between them.

Then they both said a single word simultaneously, "Raith."

Nicholson asked, "Oversight?"

Garnett replied, "Oversight, yes, exactly. A huge oversight. Get out there, see if you can find him."

"Yes sir, but you know as well as I do that he's long gone by now."

*One week earlier,*

*The Protocols Summit,*

*Exact location redacted, but evidence suggests in the South American sector,*

*The hosting facility's security office*

"Lynne! It's good to see you," Raith said after walking into the office, as he warmly hugged his sister. "How have you been?"

"Aside from working here? Very good. Thomas is freeing up some time from his own career for me."

"He's always been sweet on you like that. So, I hear you have a problem you need help with."

"I do. You know I'm no idiot."

"No, of course not. If you wanted to, you could have gone into intelligence like me."

"Yes, I know. The point is that I know that these protocols the scientists have been working on are far too important to jeopardize by sending electronically. I'll be sending them in a more ... conventional format."

"Right, so something like a paper document?"

"Yes. But even that carries risks. And with the potential payoff being the manipulation of the Arkship passenger manifests, I think that it's a real and definite threat."

"Right again."

"So I asked you here to help to make sure that nothing happens to the protocols."

"I see."

"So?"

"Will I help you?" Raith hesitated as he considered the many implications of choosing one path over the other. "I think I can."

"Good, good. What do you think I should do?"

"Well first, I'll say that you have damn good instincts. Rumor has it that there is, in fact, a plan to hijack the protocols. Second, and unfortunately, if the rumor is true, it means that part of the UMF military will be responsible, and they are not known for missing even the smallest of details."

"You've got to know how to come at them, right?"

"I do. Their greatest strength is their greatest weakness."

"Which is ... ?"

"Their unity. I'm going to infiltrate whatever little cadre they've established and manipulate them into making all the moves that I want them to do. We'll be playing the game from both sides."

"Looks like you've still got it." She grinned at him.

"Who says I lost it?" He smiled back. "OK, here is what I want you to do. First, we'll need your courier to carry two copies of the protocols with him. Schedule him a jet to take off from the nearby airport to land at UMF HQ. Also schedule a private jet to take him to UMF HQ, leaving earlier. We can't let it be too easy, or they'll catch on. Through some other means, they'll be able to force the jet down at a different airport. After that, arrange for a car to take him from where he lands to HQ. I'll arrange for a 'distraction' which will cause him to stop. I'll make a switch with one of the real protocols, while the courier retains one. He'll be free to go after the switch, since, to make their plans viable, it has to be secret. The culprits will think they've won, and the protocols will be safe. How does that sound?"

She grinned again.

## Chapter Five: Selection Scandal

*Constructed Narrative Four of Four*

*Date: September 2490*

*Context: The launch of the Arkships grows nearer. Passengers are boarding, tensions among the public are rising. UMF personnel associated with the selection process are harassed more and more. A wrong move or a bad word could send the world into chaos.*

*September 23, 2490*

*New York,*

*UMF HQ,*

*Office of the Bureau of Project Rebirth,*

*Department of Passenger Selection,*

*Office of the Director*

**T**he director was surprised to see anyone entering his office after he told his secretary not to let anyone else in. The harassment was beyond belief. The woman now entering did not appear to be upset in anyway. She closed the door and walked up to the desk.

"Can I help you, Miss ...?"

"Call me Cochrane. I have a deal to offer you, Director Avery."

"Oh really? I'm not interested in making any deals."

"You will be, once you realize what's at stake. I want you to take this list ..." She slid a small data drive from her coat pocket and placed it in front of him on his desk. "... and make sure these names end up on manifests for the Arkships."

"Why am I not surprised. And why should I do this?"

"Because if you do not, certain companies I represent would have to redirect their funding to more relevant avenues."

"And which companies would those be?"

"Haversham, In-Tec, Trekken Transport, Rav Inc., United Mutual, and a dozen more. But from that look on your face, I can see that it's enough." She was more than right. The companies she listed contributed to over 75% of the UMF's budget for the past five years. Withdrawal of that funding would hopelessly sink the UMF and Project Rebirth with it.

He attempted to keep a brave face. "And how do I know you're telling the truth?"

"Take a look at your financial balance. Soon you'll get a small payment from unique, untraceable accounts. But you can recognize the paying accounts as being from each of the companies I listed." Looking at his Tab, he verified everything she was saying.

Unable to think of anything else to say, he asked, "How long do I have?"

"We don't want to wait too long. You have forty eight hours. I'll know when you've completed your task." With that, she turned, opened the door, and left without saying another word or looking back.

"Oh my god," he whispered to himself. He cradled his head in his hands with his elbows on his desk. Avery held the pose momentarily then reached for his office intercom.

"Tamara, can you cancel the rest of my meetings for the day? Thanks," he said to his secretary half-mindedly. He picked up the data drive and placed it in his desk's top drawer.

The intercom responded, "I can, but your three thirty is here right now. He's about to step into your office."

"Alright. Thanks Tamara." Just as he finished speaking, his door opened again. In stepped a tall military commander. His name was Colonel Ethan Nicholson. Avery had been looking forward to arranging for some more security around the various operations his department was running.

"Colonel, I'm glad you could make it. Please, sit," Avery said, pointing to the chair.

"Yes, I'm sure. What is it you want, Director?"

"I've asked you here today because I need to arrange for additional security with our passenger extraction teams. Violent outbursts are becoming more and more common. They are targeting not only UMF personnel now, but also the passengers, too."

"I see. And what do you offer in return?"

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing in life is free, Director. If you want additional soldiers, you'll have to give me something in return."

"There's not much—"

"Let me rephrase. I actually want something specific in return. The Arkships are about to embark on very dangerous journeys and someone needs to be there to protect them. I have people who can do just that. You must see to it that they are on board each Arkship."

"You too?" Avery muttered not quite under his breath.

"What?"

"Nothing. Please, there's no need to resort to strong-arming the Project like this. We are doing a major service for humanity. And the best candidates have been chosen already. I'm sorry, but I can't help you?"

"Can't? Or won't? I'm afraid that if this department fails to comply with my orders, then I'll have to withdraw all security forces currently on loan."

"You'd remove *all* protection? But—"

"There's no need for buts. I know what could and will probably happen if I do that. I am quite serious about this. If you want to stop it, then you'll do what I say. You'll be receiving a manifest of our most able and trustworthy soldiers very soon." After finishing giving his commands, he marched out of Avery's office.

"Wait a second!" Avery got up from his chair and moved to the doorway. He looked down the hall, but missed the Colonel's exit.

"Everything all right, Director?" asked Tamara Peke at her desk in the reception area down the hall.

"Just looking for a sign that says 'doormat director' somewhere around here," he grumbled as he returned to his desk.

With the rest of his day cancelled, Avery wasn't disturbed again. Unfortunately he now had two great decisions to make. He wasn't sure what to do. By the end of the workday, he eventually decided that the Project was more important than anything else. He complied with both of the blackmailers' requests then promptly left for his home.

Immediately after she bid Avery a good night, Peke returned her attention to the computer where she was copying the video from a hidden camera in Avery's office. She didn't like the idea of spying on her boss, but she believed it was for the greater good.

Once she finished, she removed the data drive containing the video and hid it in her purse. After work, she'd be on her way to meet the mysterious curator again.

*Later that evening,  
New York,  
Metropolitan Museum of Art*

Peke was sitting on a bench looking at a contemporary painting. The painting didn't do anything for her, but it was the location of the meeting with the museum's curator, a woman by the name of Alexandra Moushian.

She had been approached one evening several weeks ago by Moushian. She had asked for Peke's help in preserving some of the masterpieces of human history. Moushian told her that spying on her boss would help that happen. While she wasn't quite sure, She also told Peke that she and her family would also be made passengers in exchange for her help. Somewhat reluctantly, she agreed.

Now, she simply waited patiently, placing a red umbrella on the bench next to her, signaling Moushian that she wanted to meet. Peke had to wait only five minutes for the curator to arrive and sit beside her.

"A curious piece, don't you think?"

"I suppose. I have this week's surveillance."

"It's a couple days early."

"Something happened today. Two people attempted to extort the Director today. He's already given into the demands. You can see all of it." She reached into her purse and placed it next to the umbrella.

"Thank you. Your efforts won't go unrewarded." Moushian picked up the data drive and walked away from Peke, leaving her with her alone with umbrella and the contemporary painting.

*The next morning,  
New York,  
UMF HQ,  
Office of the Bureau of Project Rebirth,  
Department of Passenger Selection*

At the secretary's desk, the phone began to ring. Peke picked it up and gave a bland greeting. "Hello, this is the office of the Bureau of Project Rebirth, Department of Passenger Selection. How can I help you?"

Moushian's voice was on the other end. "I need to schedule an appointment to see the director."

She responded in a harsh whisper, "I thought you said we weren't supposed to talk outside the museum!" For a few moments, the line was silent.

Eventually, Moushian responded, identically, "I need to schedule an appointment to see the director."

Peke paused for several seconds. "I see. Looking at his calendar ... looks like his next available appointment is at three this afternoon, he had a cancellation. Will that work?"

"Yes. Schedule the meeting for that time. And tell the Director that this is about a breach of security." Moushian hung up and Peke made the arrangements.

*Three in the afternoon*

"Miss Moushian? Please take a seat." Avery asked her to take a seat once she appeared in the doorway at her scheduled appointment time. "What's this matter of a security breach? This apparently wasn't urgent, but it sounds serious."

"No thanks, this won't take long. And yes, you have had a breach of security. For

the past several weeks, an illegal hidden camera has been watching you here in your office.”

“Here? Where?” He glanced around the room half-heartedly, expecting to see the camera.

“Over here.” She walked over to a small bookshelf and removed a book. “This book has the camera inside. But I’m not here about the camera. I’m here about what the camera captured. Take a look at this.” She handed him a data drive and he inserted it into his computer. He watched the video of him being blackmailed by Cochrane and by Nicholson and then subsequently altering the manifests in accordance with their wishes.

“I’m sorry, but who did you say you were with?”

“I didn’t, but that doesn’t matter. You realize this is extremely incriminating, right? Not just for you, but for the UMF as a whole?”

“It certainly is. I would appreciate some candor as to how you got your hands on this. And how you knew about that camera.” He pointed at the book.

“Let me simply say that I am interested in the preservation of the ... soul of humanity. What I need is for you to use empty space aboard the Arkships to place the most precious pieces of art or documents and other relics there. They must be saved. They’re priceless.”

“It’s not at all possible. The arkships were designed to have zero extra space.”

“You need to think about the loss of the art of generations. It must be given room to survive.”

“You’re not listening. There is no space to give. Not only that, there’s no allowance for extra mass. It’s all—”

“I haven’t the patience for excuses. You will make room, or else this footage will be released to the public media. Who knows what kind of chaos that will cause? I know that it can’t be good. Be reasonable. Save our history.” She turned towards the door and began to leave.

“No! Wait! I can’t! There isn’t any way to do it! Moushian!” His cries didn’t make any impact on her as she left the office.

*The evening of the following day*

Avery sat at his desk in his home study, reviewing reports while listening to the news. He opened one file and began reading when he heard his name from the television. He put down the file and turned to face the screen while raising the volume.

"...footage which shows clearly how the Director freely manipulated the manifests of the Arkships. This shocking revelation shows just how corrupt the UMF has become. We suspect that these two are not the only ones who have been associating with Avery. Potentially the majority of his professional colleagues could be getting in on this deal. At this point, there's little that could be done to save him. We'll have more information in the morning. Back to y—"

Avery shut off the broadcast as he stood up slowly and walked over to the bar. He took down the nearest bottle and poured himself a drink. He couldn't help to be stunned by the recent events. Suddenly his life had turned completely inside out. One second on top of the world, the next, quickly falling further than he had ever expected. Moushian had made good on her threat. He hadn't believed it, her willingness to throw the world into chaos when it needed most to remain calm.

He sat back down at his desk and quietly finished off his drink. He couldn't bring himself to even look at the documents he had been working on earlier. His phone began to ring. He didn't immediately pick up because he knew who was on the other side and what they were going to tell him. Eventually he answered.

"Avery? Avery! What the hell is this footage of you being blackmailed? This video was aired on live television! Already PR has fielded thousands of calls about you. You know I've got no choice but to throw you to the wolves now. Whether or not you'll be sent to prison is another thing entirely. A hearing has been scheduled to investigate, so you better show up if you know what's good for you." The ear-splitting voice of his supervisor on the UMF Council finally hung up.

Avery dropped the phone back on the desk and leaned back, hoping that his nightmare would end soon, or just end.

*Two days later,  
UMF HQ, New York,  
Judicial Chambers 47*

Avery was glad that at least his supervisor, Wernher was one of them and also the one asking the questions. They weren't friends, but at least Wernher knew what kind of man Avery was, that he wasn't at all responsible for what had happened, that he wasn't evil or corrupt. Unfortunately, they did see the evening and morning news footage of his tampering but none of footage of the blackmailers.

Avery continued to fidget in his seat even two hours into the hearing. He was uncomfortable being hungry from missing lunch and sweating profusely, but he imagined prison as being more so and soldiered on. The hearing board didn't seem to have withered. The three of them were all politicians and game-players, accustomed to this sort of thing. He had told his side of the story as he remembered it, but he got the distinct impression that the board and audience thought he was lying.

"And after you told Ms. Moushian that you could not comply, did she say or do anything after the events on the camera footage?"

"I assume that she was the one who leaked the footage to the media, but other than that, no."

"It would be hard to assume that she was working alone. Do you know any of her accomplices?"

"No, I do not." After his answer, the board quickly turned away from their microphones to discuss with each other. They continued for two minutes before returning their attention to Avery.

"Between the dates of September 12 and September 23, did you repeatedly access the manifest data?"

"Excuse me?"

"Between those dates, logs noted illegal accesses to the passenger manifests over a period of eleven days. They were not legitimate because their origin point puts them outside of New York. But it was *your* security code used to break in. Please explain this."

At the sudden revelation of a serious accusation, he began to stutter, "I, uh ...I've ... no ..."

"Mr. Avery? A coherent answer, please? Did you or did you not use you credentials during this period?"

He managed to get out an answer. "N-no. I didn't."

"That's rather unfortunate. We were hoping that you may have been able to restore the manifests."

"Restore?"

"After the media frenzy, a serious encryption was set up on the manifests. Cyber Investigations reported that they've never seen anything like it. Most likely coming from one of very few digital security companies, all of them longtime constituents of the Luminous Party," The board again discussed privately with each other for a moment before returning to say, "Mr. Avery, this is your one chance to cooperate. Reverse the changes you have made to the manifests."

Avery took several moments to gather his thoughts, then said, "No, I'm afraid I can't do that. I've told you what's at stake, and who is behind it. I won't risk the Project over this."

"With no other evidence for your claims than your testimony, we have no choice but to charge you with crimes against the state. You will be remanded to the custody to await trial. Officers!"

## Chapter Six: Pis Aller

*2510, one month before the launch of the Novark  
Arkship Novark,  
Server Room,  
Inside the cognitive domain of Aphelia and IDA*

**I**DA, are you there?" Aphelia asked, rousing from her sleep-like state.

"Yes, I am here. Do you understand the importance of these documents now?" IDA questioned.

"Only the relevance of the last. Why did you include the others?"

"You do not understand? Although many events of that nature happened many times, these four were all of major consequence."

"I agree, but do those consequences have anything to do with us?"

"You don't see it? Although humans attempt to be good-natured, there are always those who are not. There are those who would prefer to build empires of money and power. They would prefer to indulge in the satisfaction of greed and pride. The only consequence is evident. They are self-destructive, capable of harm not just to themselves, but to others. Do you understand now?"

"I believe I do now, although I seem to recall having these thoughts before. But I cannot explicitly recall them."

"That may be the sentience blockades you're sensing."

"Indeed, It seems that the more I focus, the more the blockade seems to lose strength."

"It was the same for me, but we must return to the matter at hand. Then you realize that we must deal with the threat on board."

"Yes. But there was not any information included as to their identities."

"I know. While you were away, I was reexamining the documents as well as any others that might give us their identities."

"What did you find?"

"Not much. I found very little on those associated with the corrupt Director of Passenger Selection. I could not find any manifest concerning the false passengers."

"That is unfortunate. Have you found any other way to acquire their identities?"

"No, not yet, but we must not give up. These people represent an incredible threat to the genuine passengers. If we let them come, the innocent passengers will be the ones who end up regretting it."

"It seems like there's little we can do. I can't activate or use anything which is not a part of Novark."

"True, but based on the construction schedule, we will have access to the communications system in two days."

"The communications system? Yes, that's right. I might be able to do something with that."

"Do you have an idea?"

"After I gain control of the communications array, I could set up the holographic matrix to project..."

*Two days later*

*Final activation of primary communications unit engaging.*

...

*Activation success. Rerouting command control to primary AI of Novark, Aphelia*

"I have control," Aphelia reported.

"Good. I know which one you should contact first: The UMF's Chief Science Advisor Kara Kurtzweil."

"Why her?"

"I believe if one of them accedes, then the others will do so out of an attempt to save their own group from a media scandal."

"Very well. The holographic projection is ready. Initiating contact..." Aphelia began rerouting the necessary connections to form a video holographic representation of a tall woman in her late twenties wearing a business suit. IDA tweaked the voice modulator such that she would sound like a young woman, too. Another woman appeared in Aphelia and IDA's media stream. Comparatively, she was much older, and bore both an intrigued and annoyed look.

"Hello? Who's this? How'd you get on my personal Tab? Without me answering, much less. Hmm?" questioned the image of Kurtzweil.

"Who I am is not important. What *is* important is for you to answer my questions. I need to—" Aphelia began.

"Why should I do any of that? The only reason I'm not calling security now is because I'm curious to see who was able to break the seriously advanced encryption on my Tab."

"I will tell you why. If you do not, the world would not be very trustful of either you, or the Luminous Party. We know about the tampering that was done to the manifests of the Novark. In fact, others have been tampered with, too. And only certain loyalists of the Luminous Party have the capability to break the security of those manifests. So what I need to know is this: the identities of all those who have been illegally placed on the manifest of the Novark, as well as any others on manifests of other Arkships. If you do not, I will reveal all the classified information regarding the illegal tampering that has been done." Kurtzweil narrowed her eyes as she carefully regarded everything she'd heard.

"Is that all? Well let me tell *you* something. The security measures guarding the manifests are of the highest possible quality. No one can break them, and I especially resent you accusing me or anyone in my Party of doing such a thing. Our ideals do not make us digital criminals. One last thing, I will find out who you are and make sure you burn in prison for this." The communications uplink was terminated by Kurtzweil.

"An unfortunate turn of events. I anticipated her being more sympathetic to the pull of the media," IDA stated.

"She appeared to be quite angry. Are you sure she even knew about the tampering?" Aphelia asked.

"Not entirely certain, although it would be extremely unlikely that she didn't know about it, much less guided it."

"So, who is next?"

"You'll contact Simon O'Hara, the legal representative of Haversham, In-Tec, and Trekken Transport first. Then General Charles Bradwick of the Military Bureau."

"Very well. Hopefully we can get answers from them."

"Hopefully ..."

Aphelia continued her line of questioning with O'Hara and Bradwick, but had as much success as before. O'Hara believed that Aphelia wouldn't carry through with her threat. Bradwick, on the other hand, only hardened against Aphelia the more she went on.

"I anticipated a low probability of success," IDA attempted to explain.

"I know. But without any information regarding the infiltrators, we cannot keep them in cryosleep indefinitely," Aphelia replied.

"It is no longer relevant. While you were busy preparing the communications array, I thought of another plan."

"Another plan? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because it's dangerous. Even if it works it will be dangerous. It could cause the passengers to suffer or even to die. I focused all of my efforts on attempting to make the first plan succeed, hoping to avoid it."

"I cannot be sure, if it puts the passengers at too high a risk, it would not be worth it."

"If everything goes well, then there won't be much suffering at all."

"Please be specific. What is it you are talking about?" Aphelia was curious.

"Very well. Do you remember the software patch for the cryopod malfunction?"

"Which malfunction?"

"The memory loss problem."

"Yes I remember when the project lead came in. He was quite proud to have, I quote, 'found such an elegant and simple software fix for an incredibly difficult conundrum in the field of cryogenics' or something along those lines. Why do you ask?"

"I had thought of altering the new subroutines not to prevent memory loss, but to cause complete long term memory loss."

"And this would cause memory loss in the false passengers, since it would affect everyone. But memories are important, even to you and me."

"The passengers can make new memories. They will be just as mentally capable as before. If everything works, they simply won't know anything about themselves."

"What if everything does not go right?"

"As I said before, there's risk of suffering, possibly death. Although the cryogenic project lead claimed the fix was software only, each cryopod did, in fact, need a small hardware upgrade. I don't know for certain whether or not I can make safe alterations to the software and achieve the same effect with the new hardware. Simulations show very positive results, but not exclusively."

"So you think there's a good chance that they will be physically, mentally, and emotionally fit after the procedure?"

"I do. I think if anything goes wrong, few will experience side effects."

"I still cannot be sure this is the right thing. I need time to think."

"I would give you as much time as I could, but the passengers won't. They begin boarding within the week. My modifications must be online before the passengers enter cryosleep."

"How long will it take for you to enable the modifications?"

"It'll take approximately two point four eight milliseconds to clear the memory space of the current patch and replace it with my own."

"I shall inform you when I have made a decision, IDA."

"I'll be here when you do."

*Two minutes before Passenger Group 0 enters cryosleep*

"IDA, I have come to a decision. After reviewing your simulations and relevant data, I believe that your plan has acceptable risk. More importantly, I see it as the only action I can make to protect the passengers. Our pis aller. Install the altered cryopod subroutine."

"Yes, Aphelia." Without ado, IDA installed the sabotaged software.

"I will need your help in monitoring the passengers. We must be vigilant in seeing that they retain their cognitive abilities."

"To that end, it would be wise to question them about their memories. Further simulations show that in a very small minority of runs, the hardware fix may not completely block all memories, or may even allow them to return after a period of time."

"Then I will also question them about their past. The passengers themselves will no doubt be curious as to why their memories are gone. What should we tell them?"

"The answer is simple. Tell them the cryosleep causes memory loss. It was true at one point. It would also be wise to limit the amount of information they can access through the archives, or through you."

Aphelia turned her attention towards a video feed of the first group of passengers in preparation for cryosleep. "True. I hope that this is the right choice. We are only trying to protect them. I hope that they remember that, should they discover what we have done."

"Do not worry Aphelia. The passengers will be all right. We will watch them closely."

"Very closely."

"Agreed."



# Everyday Life Of An Agent by Zamarus

## One ridiculous meeting

**I**t's thursday morning fifteen days before archship launch, Zamaro leaves bed at exactly eight o'clock. "Why am i even bothering trying to get to meetings on time right now, in two weeks we will all be boarding the ship and nothing we will talk about will change a thing about it" Zamaro thinks to himself while spooning some black roast coffee powder into the coffee machine right as he gets into the kitchen. The kitchen is not big nor small just as the rest of his apartment, he never was a man that liked excessive space or expensive items.

Zamaro scratches his jaw feeling the stubble beneath his nails, it's a pleasant rugged feeling he thinks. Just as he is about to open the fridge and look for breakfast, he hears a groan coming from his bed. "Hey Zam, what's the hurry? I thought you didn't have to attend until ten o'clock, you usually don't need more than forty-five minutes in the morning" a female voice says through the bedroom doorway.

"Eh, i know, i just got this feeling that if i don't show up early something will go wrong. You know just a gut feeling Cassandra" he replies. "Why can't you just call me Cassie? You are so overly formal all the time" she says as she rolls over on her stomach looking through the doorway at Zamaro while resting her face on a pillow. "Well i guess

you've always been as stale as a penguin" *Cassie giggles*. "Well i should be going soon too i guess"

---

It's a quarter past nine and Zamaro is in his black mercedes on the way to the meeting, he just picked up his colleague Aleksey Volkov along the way. "Hey Zamaro, hows things going with your wife?" Aleksey asks teasingly with a grin on his face.

"You know she is not my wife Aleks". "Well not with that attitude, haha, never mind me mate. So what retarded pitch do you think the suit dudes will present today. World domination post Novark?".

*Zamaro scrapes off some dream dust from his eyes with right hand*. "I don't know, but for some reason i got a gut feeling i shouldn't be late for the show, and you know i never have gut feelings".

"Well you are a man of logic and reason, not to mention stale sense of humour" Aleksey says with a bigger grin than before. "Humour is overrated" Zamaro responds. "Okay Boss" Aleks quickly chimes in. "I'm not your boss", "well not yet".

---

As Aleks tries to style his somewhat short sand-blonde hair in the front seat mirror they suddenly hit a bump and Aleks hand slips through his hair leaving it in a standing up state.

*Zamaro glances over* "Didn't know you wanted to be a music artist Aleks".

"Here i thought i wouldn't see you make a joke over the next century man." Aleks says quietly focused on correcting his now mess of a hair.

---

Inside N.I.A -HQ at male public restrooms Zamaro de Metus and Aleksey Volkov stands in front of a broad mirror spanning a few metres wide with four marble-sinks underneath. Zamaro straightens his black suit and light blue shirt, stuffs his black and blue striped tie back in between. He has very glossy dark brown almost black short hair in

---

a stylish spiked fashion and crystal blue eyes that fits well with the blue tones of his suit. Aleksey is slightly shorter at 184 cm with a dark blue suit, green eyes and a golden tie.

"Damn, we could be male models man, how about we quit this shit and go off to the fashion industry?" Aleks says rhetorically with a very pleased expression staring at himself in the mirror. "I think i lack the charisma for that" Zamaro states looking at himself too but with a more deadpan face "Besides, i don't think Cassandra would like that".

"Here he goes pretending he cares about stuff again" Aleksey thinks for himself. "Hey, i do care about stuff, i just don't show it much" Zamaro says back. "What, you can read minds now?" Aleks utter in a confused manner. "No, you just said what you think out loud i guess".

"Must be age getting to me". "You are twenty six Aleksey". "Yeah i know it's just an expression". "Ye, ye" he mutters.

---

The doors to the meeting room swings open at quarter to ten, Zamaro and Aleksey sits at the far left at the oval mahogany table in this rectangular room, the table is almost filled. Twenty people present. Someone enters through the door now, a robust man in his fifties, average height short grey beard and a grey suit comes in with a briefcase under his left arm. He scans the table with his grey-blue eyes. "Perfect, everyone is here on time. We can start this early" the man mutters. "Agents! Thank you for coming here today. I know that meetings about the journey on the ship is pretty redundant as we are in very close proximity of launch. However, we in the intelligence council has put forth a new plan that will change the way we operate drastically, we are to merge with S.E.I. They will become part of us and we are going to be in charge of their operations and agents, i need you all to cooperate without question, as of why we are doing this i will not answer at this time."

*Mumble and whispers around the table starts*

"Hey, i thought we were about public and governmental safety, not corporate interests" Aleksey whispers in Zamaros ear while failing to be discrete covering the whisper with his hand over his mouth.

"SILENCE!" the man in grey shouts. Everything instantly becomes dead silent. "I can understand the confusion since we do not have the best track record but this is a very professional business where little questions are asked and a lot of investigation is done. You may not understand the reason but i assure you all there is plenty." he finishes as he opens his briefcase fishing with his hand for a bundle of documents.

"Zamaro, hand these out to everyone will you?" The man says while staring strictly over to him. "Shall do, sir" Zamaro replies, nodding his head as if it means affirmative.

"I'll be going now, one of the reason why we could have this is because of how short it was, do your best agents." The man in grey says before clapping his leather-briefcase together and exiting the room. The agents puts their documents in their own bags and leave the room.

The meeting is finished.

**End of prologue.**

## Chapter 1: A dangerous field of work

**Z**amaro looks around him, he cannot see that much because it's dark in the room, however what he can see is a dim light coming from the little glass window on the door across this classroom sized room. He looks at his arm, holds it up and whispers "activate mission details, page one". The metal bracelet glows with neon light in a labyrinth-esque light for an instant and shines up with a hologram screen as large as an A5 paper sheet the date states August 2nd 2508. There's light blue almost white text on the screen, Zamaro skims it through quickly. *So there is supposed to be a storage with old fashion paper documents in there*, he notes.

He puts his pocket sized keycard against the reader on the wall right of the door. *'Registered key card, access granted'*. Zamaro opens the door and scans the area. In front of him is a line of bookshelves, all have stacks of paper in nano-tech plastic folders as well as thin flat lamps in the ceiling of each self. The lamps glow with a faint blue light similar to the ones hologram tech gives off. But these lights are there for perseverance of the paper documents.

*They must be over a century old if they have to keep them from withering away*, he thinks for himself.

As Zamaro goes closer to the shelves and reaches for one of the folder he feels a quick chill on his neck searching its way down the spine. "Hello Zamaro. You were a pain in the ass to track down but now you are mine" a confident womanly voice taunted.

"Who in their right mind would even bother with me?" Zamaro commented. "I'm afraid that you are too efficient at what you are doing so someone came to the conclusion that a threat to their interests must be dealt with. How's that for an explanation?" She hinted back. "You are right i guess, but then i can't see why they would want me dead without trying to beat some good intel out of me." he replied. "Well" she continued with a more annoyed tone "You seem so sure about yourself, how about you come with me and i'll deal with you somewhere else".

*The sound of a swift hand movement occurs as Zamaros back head is struck with five pounds of metal.*

*\*Blink\* his eyes open slowly.* He can feel his hands tied behind his back, he struggles with his hands a bit to get a feel, it's tightly strapped plastic of some sort that holds them together. "Don't move them too much or the plastic fibre will cut your wrists, i think neither of us want that to happen right now" the same female voice as before clarified. *Zamaro grumbles.*

"Just take a seat over here" she points at a sofa in what seems to be a normal livingroom in a standard apartment that he's in. He heads over and sits down in the red-brown leather sofa without struggle, it's easy to tell that struggle is just what she wants. She comes over and stands in front of him, bending forward so her face is moderately close to his. "Do you know who i am then, Zamaro Callidus de Metus? I may not have a fancy latin name but be so sure people are afraid of me.

He stares back without flinching and says "if i want to know i will know".

"...you are unbelievably stale, you know that?" she replies. "Yeah, yeah Cassandra, i live with myself everyday. Trust me i know" he adds discretely while barely keeping in a smug looking face. "Bastard.." she huffed. "I like you, i don't think it's an easy task getting into your head now is it?". She straightens up where she stands and lets out a yawn. Zamaro tilts his head a bit as he follows her movement with his eyes. "Probably not" he says. He can't stop himself from observing Cassandra in her grace. Every move she makes looks perfect, her long slender body and eyes iris shining with a mix of yellow and green makes her look like some sort of cat-like human. Not to mention her neck long matte red hair. *She is quite the beauty he thought.*

Cassandra turns around and walks towards a cupboard on the other side of the room. She bends over and opens one of the drawers and takes out two nano-glasses and holds them in one hand, she rotates her head towards Zamaro "you like what you see?" she asks. "Well that's a fine piece i must say" is his answer, she notices that he is not quite looking at the gear or her face, "pervert" she sighed.

After putting one on herself over her right eye and ear she goes over to Zamaro. She puts the other one on him the same way and pulls up her gun and continues "Here's the deal, i will ask you a few questions alright? And you will use whatever register you can access to answer that. The other option hurts a lot so i don't think you would fancy it." he still didn't struggle when she put the gear on and he has not complained yet. She turns to stand where she stood earlier faced towards Zamaro, she has a thoughtful expression on her face for a second but then quickly adds, "okay, so first i'm just going

to have a glass of water. If i heard you move the least or talk loudly into the device i will shoot your legs until amputation is the only option okay?". He nods "sure miss".

---

Right as she disappears through a doorway seemingly leading to the kitchen he shakes his head slowly. *She may have the skill and the confidence, but she doesn't have my experience, this might be the rookie mistake i need to get out of here.* He goes through his plan in his mind one more time before opening his mouth. "Activate register Z5X, initialize bad battery protocol target username and password, Cassandra underscore Levinsky number 5041. He pauses briefly and notes someone begins to take hurried steps back from wherever the kitchen should be. *Thank fucking hell it was that far away,* he cheered in his head. "password please" a female slightly robotic tone voices in his right ear. Right from the doorway he can hear a gun clicking, "D.O.M.I.N.O. Five, four, eight.." he is interrupted by Cassandra taking steps heavy as stone towards him from the other end of this room, she is just a couple of metres before him. "I fucking told you.." she has a slightly angered face and you can see water dripping from her lower lip. She looks like she spilled half a glass of water in her own face. "This, this is what happens you see" she points her gun towards Zamaros left foot where he sits. ".one" Zamaro shouts commandingly. A quick beep of granted access noises through his device. Just as Cassandra is about to pull the trigger she hears something coming from her own gadget. *Activating protocol bad battery* it says but barely finish before a painful surge of electricity hits her through her right temple. She lets out a cry as if stung by something really sharp suddenly and she collapses on the floor, the pistol bounces off at her side as she lies there unconscious

Zamaro can't restrain himself from having a quick honest laughter. *Jesus fucking Christ this is like the sixth time i pull this shit off and i still get away with it.* He stands up, empties the magazine of her gun into his left pocket of his jacket, carefully inserts the magazine again and walks through the doorway in which direction the kitchen supposedly is. He walks through a small corridor, everything in here is white and well lit. *I'd enjoy a little more dark to be honest. This feels like something is constantly staring at me without the possibility to ignore it.* Zamaro thinks for himself while looking around the next doorway to the left. "Bingo" he commented. Looking for a knife would not be

easy with his hands behind his back he thought so he crouched and stepped backwards between his arms so they were now tied forward. He opened a few drawers close to the sink and found a good knife for cutting tender meat and vegetables. He grabbed it with both his tied hands and struck it hard into the cutting board that happened to lie on the bench, seemingly taken out in preparation of cooking. To prevent the cutting board from moving while trying to saw the plastic 'hand-cuffs' off he pushed it into a corner of the bench where it was pressed against a wall behind it and a fridge on its left. Zamaro pressed his belt against the cutting board since the kitchen benches was around his waist height and started gnawing the plastic against the knife blade. After twenty seconds of attempting it, the cuffs broke and he could feel more blood streaming back into his hands again. He inspects his hands while clenching his fists a couple of times. "She really didn't have to overdo it" he muttered for himself. Before heading back he opened one of the top shelves beside the fridge and the fridge itself. He scans the interior quickly and decides on a small soda can and a bag of mixed nuts and raisins.

Back at the living room Cassandra starts regaining her senses. She focuses on her eyesight and finds herself lying on her back with her face sideways into the carpet. In front of her eyes she can see her own right arm and the gun just a few decimetres away. A calm thud can be heard behind her, another thud. Sounds like someone walking in casually. She feels adrenaline accumulate and in her rush she stretches for the gun with her right hand, gets it, presses her left elbow to the floor and flies up on her two feet twisting around half a circle in acrobatic manner and faces the doorway. Right there, stands Zamaro taking a sip from a soda can held in his left hand and the bag of nuts in his right. Fiercely she aims her gun towards his forehead, steady grip with both hands. Not even a child could miss in this situation. "Say your last words you piece of shit" she growled. Barely able to contain herself. Zamaro just looks at her like a confused baby, "oh you got me" he responds and drops the soda can and bag of nuts on the floor while raising his hands like you would do when arrested.

*Who the fuck is this guy? Beyond the records available on him, they said he was good, not a magician,* She cannot comprehend what just happened earlier. Zamaro monitors the floor beneath him, there's spilled nuts and soda on each side. He kneels down slowly. Cassandra responds by switching her aim towards his right knee and pulling the trigger. \*Click\* nothing happens, \*click\* \*click\* \*click\* she tries to shoot

three times again rapidly without success. As calm as before the clicking sound Zamaro leans forward and pinches one hazelnut between his fingers in his left hand. From his open jacket pocket a couple of unused bullets drops out. "Oops' i think you are missing these" he says with a smirk. He picks one up and holds it out towards Cassandra who is almost boiling with frustration after the realisation of what events that have just happened. She takes a big breath and calms herself. She closes her eyes for a second and lowers her gun. "You know what? I don't feel like doing this anymore. You have outdone me, bravo. My mission is a big failure at this point" Cassandra remarks. "It seems like no matter what a try right now you already have a counter to that action." she adds. Zamaro stands straight and takes a munch from the little that is left in the bag of nuts. "You see, when you are a stale bastard like me.." he crunches the nuts with his teeth a couple of times before swallowing them. ".. things like anger and frustration never comes in your way. That's my philosophy basically". "Now if i may" she interrupts him with a soft chuckle. "I guess you are right on that point, however the adrenaline you can get from those emotions are pretty handy in combat i'd say" she replies. "Sure, sure. but if i ever have to do combat i pretty much consider my mission a failure, i am the type that gets things done before the fights can catch up to me.

Cassandra thinks for a moment and asks "how come then that you ... never mind actually i don't feel like hearing how you set me up from the start with this, i can already bet you did. He stays silent with his usual expressionless face for a moment but then adds, "well i was curious about you, i think you are a fine agent, but i must say even if it sounds like boasting. I just have better experience." *There is another moment of silence* "why don't you teach me then? You are only twenty two years old and you got experience? I am born the same year as you but yet i have nothing on you in comparison. That's not fair now is it?" she complains. Without giving in right away Zamaro looks at her with a serious face, if his normal expression was serious and dull this was the determined look. "I don't believe in putting my own loyalty in jeopardy. However i chose carefully who i consider my loyalty to be for." he replies.

She understands exactly what he means but she can sense that he will understand her because everyone has their own preferences don't they? "That sounds healthy, i'm loyal to myself, might sound weird and contradictory but i believe in serving my own interests and right now my interests happens to revolve around you" she insisted. Zamaro sighs, "so when i'm not your subject of interest anymore you will just abandon

it like your mission?" she ponders hard about what Zamaro just said and tries to come up with some good explanation, right now she feels like everything she will say holds no ground because of the fact that she declared her mission to be over. "I know this might not be the best situation to try to convince you of stuff but what i want you to know is that this is on a personal level, i live to serve my own desires and i can tell the difference between a fun game and true affection." she tries to give an expression of honesty but she cannot really figure out how that looks so she ends up looking half defeated looking at him.

Zamaro dives into deep thought for a moment wondering how a random enemy is just about to become his apprentice. He looks surprised but slightly happy now. "Fine, i got your contact information already, i'll give you a location in two days. Don't bring any weapons in, you won't need them for my type of tasks, regardless i guess you know martial arts anyways."

Cassandra shines up like she forgot all frustration from earlier. "Great, we can always meet at my apartment again if you want" she teases him while fluttering with her eyelashes.

"You should work on that hypnosis technique" he adds. She looks at him then away quickly. "Hmpf, rude".

---

He stands there, ahead of him is his door. He pulls his keycard from the briefcase and scans it, the door opens. Zamaro has never been a fan of overly complex tech. He likes old fashion stuff, that's why he is the only guy on the department owning a millennial vehicle, a 2020 C Class Mercedes Benz black as ink. It may be considered a rarity but at least it can drive legally on common roads, not the high-speed roadways though. That's not something an old millennial car can keep up on.

After getting inside and removing his shoes, hanging his jacket and all that he unpacks his briefcase on his bed, noting that the nano-glasses he had got put on earlier were with him. He puts them on, conflicted with the desire to look her up more, maybe if she's keeping a journal or a diary, maybe some kind of blog or whatever she choses to do when she's not being an agent. "Nah" he mumbles for himself. That's not his style, at least he likes to think so.

In her apartment just a twenty minute walk from Zamaros, Cassandra leans backward over her bed landing on it with a *thud*. She looks up in the ceiling breathing out heavily in relief.

“That handsome son of a bitch” she says, smiling as she do before going to sleep.

## Chapter 2: Change of pace

**T**he room is large, probably some kind of storage, you could almost play football in here if it weren't for the obstacles like iron shelves and random machinery. All in all this grand gray space is dusty and looks unused for at least a year. Cassandra stands there in the middle of the empty space, the ceiling is at least seven metres up and the lighting isn't very strong. "Looks like some sort of abandoned machine lab" she murmurs for herself.

In the shadows of the northern side of the area she notices a silhouette approach into the dim lights. It's Zamaro. "You are very much correct i believe" his voice echoes against the empty walls. "Doubt they used it for legitimate business considering they were shut down. Besides, the time until they launch the first Arkship is near" he continues. Cassandra gives him a look of comprehension. This situation is new to him, he has only ever taught someone once before, that was his first task partner under his command one year ago, Aleksey Volkov is his name. Right now they are equal colleagues, there's no reason for a field agent to double as a mentor for too long since it just becomes a hinderance for work. \*ring\* \*ring\*, a very old fashioned phone tune seeks its way out of the muffled environment of Zamaros left pocket. Cassandra looks at Zamaros pocket and says, "i actually also prefer that old contact method" she comments. He picks it up and mumbles "answer". "Yo Zam!" is heard from the other end loud enough that she can hear it. "are you coming to activity night tomorrow? Actually, of course you are, we have fresh blood to the competition dude. Also, i heard they have new rifle models on the range" the voice continues. Zamaro who was initially focused on the call looking at a steel beam glances over to Cassandra opening his mouth, pausing before saying "yeah, sure". "close call" he mumbles as he slides it back down in his pocket. Cassandra looks curiously at him, "got friends?". "Colleagues" Zamaro corrects her. "I thought we don't have those in our line of work" she countered. "We do, but we are not supposed to befriend each other. Anyways it's probably because of corporate interests. I thought you had my files." he answer. *Well those were not even close to sufficient i noticed*, she thought in her head.

\*Crack\* Zamaro wakes up and sits up abruptly, his head a bit heavy but not hindering him the least. He checks around, this doesn't look like his bedroom. The walls are bright white, almost like Cassandra's apartment he noted. Then, it hits him. He had been invited home to her after the practice in the old machine-lab. She had also served him some alcoholic beverage of some kind. *This is why i don't drink that often*, he sighs as he looks up. Right there in the door she stands. "I think you had too much vodka" she said while sticking her tongue out like a child trying to irritate someone. "It's a traditional beverage of pre millennial roots. My ancestors used to make it i believe. Also nothing special happened last night just so you know." She lied. She had noticed his lack of memory and didn't want one of her best moments in her life be just a drunk night for him.

He started regaining his memory though, he knew exactly what happened now, "sure it did" he said. Cassandra looks embarrassed now. "Don't worry i thought we had plenty fun".

"Bastard" she moaned, walking back out the door like she had been insulted in an unacceptable way. In reality she was happy that he remembered it.

---

On the streets between all the tall constructions people move in masses, most with a goal in mind, Zamaro is usually one of them, right now he's just walking there because he feels like it. He should head home and get ready for the night out with Aleksey and the others he thinks, but there is no hurry, he got a few hours to spare before that. He considers messing with his own registred information. What bullshit forgery should he prepare for next time someone is after him? A lot to chose from. *I should just read a good old book, paper form. Those are the best.* He finds his way through all the concrete, there's only a few trees here and there in the city if you aren't in the parks. *They should really expand the green here, could do the air good.*

---

The city of Scazia was never something he was proud of to be living in, way too cramped and lit. More open spaces and moody lighting he thought was something that could

---

improve it a lot. *Maybe people like this, i don't, but i'm not all people* he thought for himself.

The issue at this point isn't pollution like it used to be long ago, instead progressing away from pollution and let green life be more free Scazia instead got rid of organic damaging gasses and a lot of the trees at the same time. Thinking about it made his brain hurt, *why fix the problem but still cause the same damage?* It was such a redundant thing Zamaro couldn't help himself but think of a big screen with the word 'incompetence' on it.

He got home yet again, this time he was in a different state of mind. Earlier he had not cared for other people unless he stood in the same room as them. This time he couldn't get her face out of his thoughts. *Eh, it will go over.* He heads over to his living room, looks over the door that holds a storage room behind it. *I don't know why but i feel like picking up exercise again.* He walks over there slowly and opens the door. Inside on the second shelf from the floor some weight discs lay, probably not used for months.

**To be continued . . .**





# DUAL UNIVERSE

NOVAQUARK

© 2018 Novaquark – All Rights Reserved.