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# HORIZONS

*Peter W. Prellwitz*

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## Dedication

To Daniel L. White;

my friend, fan, and muse (and official “coffe-getter” at signings) without whom I would have  
despaired of my writing ability long since.

Horizons

By

Peter W. Prellwitz

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## Table of Contents

[Chapter One](#)  
[Chapter Two](#)  
[Chapter Three](#)  
[Chapter Four](#)  
[Chapter Five](#)  
[Chapter Six](#)  
[Chapter Seven](#)  
[Chapter Eight](#)  
[Chapter Nine](#)  
[Chapter Ten](#)  
[Chapter Eleven](#)  
[Chapter Twelve](#)  
[Chapter Thirteen](#)  
[Epilogue](#)

## Chapter One



Terran Date: February, 2259

Pretty, huh?” The private lifted his hand out toward the sun. Their open air observation tower

was twenty meters above the surrounding buildings and gave them an unobstructed view of the Gulf of Mexico and the sunset. As it had for the past two months, the sun painted the canvas of dark blue sky with pinks, reds, and yellows. Mendez, his fellow guard, glanced at the vast panorama and shrugged her shoulders. The action caused her diamond cross necklace to glitter briefly in the fading light.

"Yeah, if you get off on that kind of stuff."

"Hey," Hansen countered, "it sure beats the other insertion point." They both laughed.

"I won't argue that," she conceded. "I've been on six of these in the last twelve years, and I don't ever want to see the Himalayas again." She glanced at the vanishing sun, now dropping below the horizon, pulling its celestial artwork with it. "You're right, Hansen. It is a pretty sunset."

They watched it quietly for a few minutes, then Hansen shook himself out of his reverie and lifted a hand to his ear. Mendez saw a small light flickering behind his lobe, meaning he'd been contacted by Sergeant Karumoto, undoubtedly to notify them of the arriving workers. Mendez turned her attention to the viewer at her right display, and sure enough, there were three hovs approaching from the northeast.

"Command gives fourth level clearance for transponder units 43-H784J, 43-H711R, and 44-D292R," Hansen said in a monotone, clearly relaying the message word for word.

"Acknowledged," Mendez responded. "Three bogies just passing the Hammer Point tower, 65 kilometers distant, approaching at 120 kph. Transponder identities..." she paused while the decoder received the multi-tone signal, then flashed white, "are verified. All three hovs are registered to Harting Enterprises."

"We have them, Sergeant," Hansen spoke aloud to his invisible superior. "Arrival in just over twenty minutes."

"Make that ten," Mendez interrupted. "They just accelerated to 250."

"Make that ten, Sergeant." He listened a moment longer, nodding absently, then signed off. He took his hand away and turned toward Mendez.

"Time to move to the launch point. Karumoto wants us down there in five."

"Got it." With skilled hands, Mendez shut down the display while Hansen armed the autosentry. They descended eighty meters by eledisc, then, since there was just enough light to see the ground, they slid the final twenty meters down the ladder railing, using their gloved hands for braking. Hansen hit first, then leaped back as Mendez plummeted toward him, nearly landing on top of him. She laughed at him as he stumbled out of the way. He brushed himself off.

"Geez, Mendez! Can't wait an extra five seconds?"

"Sure I can," she laughed again. "I just don't want to."

Hansen shook his head in disgust and annoyance. He'd worked with Connie for six years now, and she was always pushing. Pushing the rules, pushing the risks, pushing him. It irked him because he usually got into the same hot water she did. On the other hand, her risks often paid off, and he reaped the benefits as well. And she was one of the best looking partners he'd

ever had.

He punched in the ladder lock down codes, then ran after Mendez, who was already walking toward Boot Key Harbor, where the hovs were due to dock. Marathon was one of the larger towns on one of the larger pieces of islands that made up Cuba's Florida Keys. Several kilometers long, the island was less than 200 meters wide from west shore to east shore. They were on the upper arm of the key, heading south. On their left, to the southeast, was Vaca Key Bight, but because of the huge factories and narrow, twisting alleys, it was impossible to see from ground level.

They wove their way quickly toward a massive, dark building and approached the only lit doorway. Outside stood a guard, dressed in the trappings of a Harting Enterprises shock goon. Hansen didn't particularly like working with Harting goons—they tended to be rude and unprofessional—but this was who the Colonel had contracted out to, so he followed orders and got his paycreds. It was a large enough sum to hold his tongue. Mendez felt no such inhibition.

"Check it out, Hansen," she pointed at the goon. "They look almost like people when they're dressed." The guard flushed and stood, towering over them. Mendez laughed at the bravado. "He can stand, too!" she exclaimed with mock surprise.

"Lousy rental creeps." He shoved a tabinal at them. "Sign in and go in. I can't stand your the smell any longer."

Hansen said nothing but took off his glove and pressed his thumb against the tabinal silver face. It flashed green. Mendez did the same and they both entered, Mendez giving a parting insult.

Inside was a fully operational freighter facility. Massive hovships, capable of carrying thousands of metric tons, were lying in dry dock, waiting for repairs. Others were in the midst of construction. There were even a few upper atmosphere jobs, able to dock with the orbital stations.

Making their way to the southern end of the building, the two arrived as the first of the three hovs entered the large indoor bay. Mendez led Hansen to the front of the small crowd, their red-splashed gray uniforms alone in a sea of Harting dark purple. Mendez tolerated several crude remarks—Harting employed only men in their private army—then abruptly drew her pistol. Everyone pulled back, surprised. A faint smile on her lips, Mendez held the pistol straight up in a ready position, as was her and Hansen's duty while the hovs unloaded personnel. Hansen was unable to contain a smirk as he drew his slug gun as well. Although outnumbered and despised as contract warriors, the Colonel's army had the grudging respect of nearly everyone who employed them. Even in jobs like this one, where the only three were he, Mendez and Sergeant Karumoto, there was an element of fear. Fear of their individual abilities and fear because it was a well known fact that the Colonel was a very loyal and very vengeful man. The price of harming one of his people was far beyond what any sane person was willing to pay.

The last of the hovs pulled up onto the platform and opened its rear hatch. From each of the three hovs came nine people; a single Harting officer in purple followed by eight people dressed in plain gray, loose uniforms. All were in a festive and buoyant mood. Flanking the loose column of twenty-four, Mendez and Hansen escorted them to the insertion launch point, guarding against the impossible event that any of them might try to escape. Apart from the

friction he had to put up with from the Harting muscle, this was the easiest of all details.

“Are we going to be starting soon?” A bearded man walking near him asked. Hansen glanced at him and nodded with a smile, marvelling at the enthusiasm.

“Yeah. I think the insertion is in about an hour. I don’t know exactly.”

The man nodded in return. “I understand. I hear it’s very difficult to calculate the exact moment to initiate the temporal field.”

“Really?” Hansen was a little surprised at both the man’s calm and his seeming knowledge.

“Yes. As I gather, they can only perform the final computations within a six minute window. The relay station on Mercury is able to send the Sun’s gravitational variance data to us using a faster than light subspace carrier signal, but since it takes only eight minutes for variances from the Sun to affect Earth, that’s the maximum time. The other two minutes are lost in both compiling and sending the data, and from the time used for the variances to reach Mercury.”

A woman walking beside the man joined in the conversation.

“That’s what I heard, too. I wish they could increase that time, though. I’d hate to look forward to spending a wonderful life trapped in a cavern digging stone and designing machinery and circuits, then get a one-way trip into solid rock.” She made a face.

“But you’re willing to take the risk?” Hansen asked, surprised at their placid demeanor.

“Of course,” the man answered, giving Hansen an odd look. “This is a once in a lifetime chance to get buried under two hundred kilometers of rock and work myself to death digging out the cavern. Who wouldn’t jump at an opportunity like that?”

“Are you coming along?” the woman asked.

“Me?” Hansen shook his head. Being used to hearing the question, he was able to make his voice sound gloomy. “Not this time. I have to stay up here and make sure you all get off okay.” At their disappointed look, he added, “Maybe next time.”

That seemed to satisfy them, for their attention drifted off to others in the group. Hansen looked at them in amazement. These people were soon going to be buried forever deep inside a cavern that had no entrance and no exit. They would spend the rest of their lives scabbling the hard bedrock with inefficient tools, working, slaving and building something they would never see completed. After several years of being worked to exhaustion daily, they would be summarily executed and replaced by new workers.

And they couldn’t wait to get there.

The launch point was located in an open area of the warehouse nearly two hundred meters from the hovs. As the riped worker had alluded to, hundreds of variables affecting Earth’s absolute movement through space made selection of the optimum launch time more difficult, and while the general time was known to happen twice each year, it could be pinpointed only three to four hours in advance. Since both the insertions and the method used were extremely secret, the insertion area was always in a Harting facility, either here on the Keys or in the Himalayas. The equipment was fairly portable and simple to setup, but needed to be done

quickly, so Harting kept a sizable crew on standby. As the general launch point approached, the supplies were gathered for transport. Every two years, the latest group of riped workers was shipped down. When the optimum time and location was determined, the Harting crews set up the insertion equipment and Mendez and Hansen were called down.

They approached the insertion area and he pulled open the loose canvas flap to let the ripes in. Mendez did the same for the other flap. A wall of simple canvas cordoned the area to keep it out of sight. The entire Harting Enterprises complex had a vague idea of what was going on, but no one had the details. Although ripes were very common in society, seeing a group of people go into an area and not come out would raise more than a few eyebrows. So the warehouse personnel were given an unexpected three day paid vacation and the massive building was empty save for those who were going to use the equipment and those it was going to be used on.

Once inside, the ripes formed a single line to be issued their work clothes, exchanging the loose grey shirts for similar ones that had the date stamped on them, as well as a number assignment. They excitedly changed their shirts, giving no attention to modesty, and marvelled at the broad, black numbers that all started with 2259, the year, then followed by a numbered designation. The woman who had spoken to Hansen earlier saw him looking at her. She smiled and walked over.

"I've got a name now," she said proudly, showing off the 2259-18 that was stamped on her shirt. "I'm 918." Since no one lived longer than six years, and ripe insertions were only done every two years, only the last digit of the year and the designation were needed to differentiate everyone.

"So I see," Hansen answered, but found it more difficult to keep a smile on his face. In less than an hour, this woman, in her mid-twenties with short blond hair and brown eyes, would never again see the sunlight. "You'd better get with the rest of your people. You don't want to miss transport."

A flash of fear came across the woman's face at his comment, and she hurriedly stepped back with the others, who had begun to gather in the center of the area.

The center was marked by a stand that stood a meter high and was mounted on a heavy metal base. On top of the narrow stem sat a blue black sphere that was about one meter in diameter. Though he didn't know what the exact measurement was, Hansen knew it did have one. The ratios between that sphere's mass and diameter and the Earth's were precisely calculated, a requirement when performing a temporal transport. To that was added the size of the temporal field and all mass inside it. An error of less than one thousandth of a percentage point could shift the arrival point by one hundred meters. Although the cavern was large, and some of margin of error would seem acceptable, it wasn't. For while it was possible to transport safely to a different location inside the cavern, it could be fifty meters in the air. And even a fraction of a meter into the floor of the cavern would be crippling at best and fatal at worst.

"Yo! Earth to Hansen!" Mendez's voice cut through his musings. She was walking up from the other side of the temporal transport zone, grinning at him. She had exchanged her projectile pistol for the laser. "How about we up the brain voltage a little and get with the program?"

Hansen shook his head and grinned sheepishly. He holstered his slug gun, drew his energy

weapon and snapped on the charging cycle. If it was necessary to shoot one of the ripes, it had to be with energy since the weight of even a single slug could throw off the computations. He took position just outside the zone and raised the gun to ready position. The ten second charge completed and the indicator flashed green and yellow for heavy stun.

The flap on the far side moved back and three people entered. They were all marked as high level psitechs by the interface plug embedded in their temples. One had a portable interface unit, the others carried the access grid. The Harting officer in charge stepped up to them.

“About time!” he barked. “Temporal shift’s in less than fifteen minutes.”

The closest psitech glanced at him, then continued working.

“Fifteen minutes is plenty of time,” she said coldly, “As long as we’re not distracted by idiots who feel compelled to make obvious and useless statements.” The Harting goon fumed but fell silent. Talking to psitechs was hard enough. Reasoning with them was impossible.

They quietly and efficiently set up the grids, ignoring everything and everyone else. Within three minutes, one of them was seated in the middle of the grid, the access panels emitting a low hum. He pulled a plug from one panel and inserted it into his right temple. Immediately, his body became rigid.

A second psitech—the woman—sat just outside the grid, paying close attention to a hologram composed of seemingly random lines and planes of light. She made several adjustments and the planes floated together to form a box. There was a loud popping behind Hansen and he turned back to his charges. A blue mist hung between him and them, marking the boundaries of the temporal zone. They were only minutes from insertion.

The third psitech leaned over the shoulder of the female psitech and began nodding in agreement. They were connected via temple cable and were communicating silently. He nodded and turned to the Harting officer.

“Your organic and non-organic mass reports are within acceptable tolerances. You will now clear the area for five meters beyond the canvas screens.” He did not wait for a reply but instead turned back to the other psitech.

The officer looked like he was going to blow a blood vessel, but did as he was told. Soon the area was vacant except for the psitechs, Hansen and Mendez. The psitech looked at them icily, and opened his mouth. Mendez stared right back and gave a short laugh. Hansen saw the pale blue eyes flicker briefly and rest on her insignia. He closed his mouth and returned to work. The Colonel’s reach extended even into the high levels of the puterverse. Nobody messed with his people.

“Ten minutes to insertion point. Begin initialization process.”

Hansen turned toward the shift zone. Taking up the edge of the perimeter were large mounds of food and equipment, intended to maintain the workers until the next supply insertion six months from now. Forming a loose circle were the ripes themselves. Through the blue haze, he noticed that all of the ripes were staring at the orb, which had come to life and was flashing a brilliant green, sending out thin tendrils of ionized vapor. In its flickering, otherworldly light, the ripes moved back and forth, reaching out excitedly as a tendril passed

close beside. It was mesmerizing, a savage dance of corrupted innocence.

“You take the far side, Hansen,” Connie said.

“Geez! I always get the far side!” he complained. He pulled his eyes away from the scene and skirted the zone, moving to one flank. The view was considerably poorer from there, the center area being cut off from sight by the backs of many of the ripes. To the left of them, the zone was marked by the high pile of supplies. In the event of trouble, Hansen would cover the rear while Mendez guarded the front. It was a poorly thought out arrangement. How were Hansen and Mendez supposed to know what the other was doing if line of sight was blocked? Nothing ever happened. But that wasn’t the point; something *might* happen.

“Eight minutes,” he heard announced over the atmospeakers. He double checked that his gun had retained its charge—the latest technology in energy weapons allowed for guns to fully charge in half the time but could on occasion bleed off that charge into the air—and was satisfied it was still at full power. If everything went as planned—and had gone as planned for countless years—Hansen could now take a nap; he was that useless. He never would, though. The whole process would be over in a few minutes and he and Connie would be released from duty, report back to the Colonel, then take a couple weeks furlough. He was going to head up to the Alaskan Commonwealth for some fishing and relaxation in a cabin he owned north of Fairbanks. He’d decided to ask Connie to come, and was hoping she’d—

“What’s she doing? Stop her!”

Hansen heard a loud commotion coming from the midst of the ripes. Several of them stepped back quickly, acting as though there was a struggle going on. He heard a woman’s shout and thought for a moment it was Connie, then realized it was too hysterical to be her.

He stood there, rooted to his spot, undecided. To step into the zone was a risk he wasn’t sure he wanted to make, but he had to find out what going on. He shifted position closer to the crates, stepping to the very edge of the zone. Just as he did, several more ripes stepped away from the power ion globe.

He caught a brief glimpse of a woman yanking free from someone. She spun in a circle as though to get her bearings. Seeing the three open ways occupied by people, she ran toward the crates. She was one of the ripes—the woman he had spoken to—and she was trying to escape!

Moving quickly to head her off, Hansen ran behind the supplies. The top crate tipped over and the woman’s head and shoulders suddenly appeared. Her face was a contortion of fear and confusion. Damn! he thought savagely. The ripe hadn’t held and she was a different persona, maybe even the original. She probably didn’t know what was going on but he wasn’t taking any chances. Hansen holstered his pistol and stepped up quickly, grabbing her in a headlock. He felt a stab of guilt and pity, knowing this woman would have to spend the rest of her life in a place she no longer wanted to be, but he had his orders. The mass was very finely tuned for each insertion, and she would have to be placed back into the temporal zone for transport.

Securing his hold on the woman, he had began twisting to pull her free when he was suddenly and brutally hit in the head. His vision became blurry and he was thrown back, dragging the woman with him. Mendez had fired her weapon just as he’d stepped up. Instead of hitting the woman, the beam had hit him.



He fell to his knees, still trying to hold the woman, but his coordination and strength were gone. She wriggled free, then slugged him in the jaw, knocking him unconscious. He fell soundlessly, landing heavily on the glassmac.

Mendez swore and started after the woman. Behind her, a cold voice called out.

“This is unacceptable! You have failed in your duties and will be reported!”

Ignoring them, she ran straight into the zone. The others were still looking after the now vanished woman, talking excitedly. She shoved two of them aside and jumped over the crates, using the path the woman had made. Landing like a cat, she quickly looked around. To one side, she noticed Hansen fallen over and unconscious. Other than that there was no one. She ran for the canvas flap and dove through it.

Empty. There were several hobs nearby, but they were only framed hulls, and could be seen through easily enough to tell the woman wasn't cowering behind them. Connie lifted her gaze across the open area and saw a figure racing for an outside door thirty meters away. It seemed impossible the woman could run that far that quickly, but fear could be a great motivator. The woman hit the door on a full run, slammed it open, and disappeared into the night. Connie broke into a run, knowing there were less than seven minutes remaining.

Wild with fear, the woman burst outside and into the night. She didn't know where she was, but she knew where she didn't want to be. Looking quickly around, she could make out a long, thin alley branching in both directions. Overhead, several lights mounted high on the walls provided a feeble light.

Left or right? Panic nearly overwhelmed her, but she knew there was no way to figure out the correct direction in the few seconds she had remaining. With a sob, she turned to her right and began running.

She had run fifty meters when she heard the boom of the door behind her as it crashed back on its hinges. Someone was chasing her! Panic did overwhelm her now, and she ran even faster, her breath coming in ragged gasps.

She heard a woman's shout behind her, but ignored it. Suddenly, a metal container on her left gave out a massive boom as something slammed against it. She was being shot at! She continued running, dodging around the many large bins, hoping for any form of cover. The temptation to look behind her burned, but she continued on.

The alley ended after one hundred meters and by then she could hear the footsteps of her pursuer. She burst out of the alley and cut to her left, all but exhausted. Before her was a vast darkness, made deeper by the quiet crumbling of waves upon the shore. An ocean? she thought in even greater confusion. It didn't matter, the nameless dread in her screamed. There was a pier less than fifty meters in front of her. Running toward it, she glanced behind her quickly. A woman about her size had stopped and was looking in the wrong direction, giving her a few seconds.

She reached the pier and began running up its length. Another beam of energy slammed into the boards just in front of her, the discharge field numbing her lower right leg. She fell with a scream, but quickly rose to her feet and continued, limping badly.

She staggered for another hundred meters, but then stopped. She had to, because it was the end of the pier. Feeling terror rising in her, she faced her attacker.

The other woman was quickly closing and had to brake hard to stop about three meters away. She brought up her gun. With her free hand, she tapped a finger behind her ear.

"This is Mendez. I've got her on the end of the pier. Send a couple of your apes over to give her a ride back." She nodded. "Very well. Mendez out." She smiled at the woman and shrugged her shoulders.

"Sorry, lady, but orders are orders. We've got only five minutes to insertion, and you are going to be on that ride."

"You've no right! I was taken against my will and you can't do this to me!" Her voice was broken and rasping. Mendez shrugged a second time.

"It's not my place. I just get paid to prevent things like this. The people you want to talk to work for Harting Enterprises. Take it up with them." She motioned with her gun. "Now, c'mon. Let's get back."

Fearing the unknown more than the gun, the woman stepped back, then jerked forward when her foot stepped into empty air. She was at the end of the pier. She turned around and stared into the deep, dark waters. The light of a small hover vehicle illuminated them as it turned up the pier and moved toward them.

"Don't even think it, lady!" Mendez spoke sharply. Her gun gave off a high whine. "I've just set my gun to lethal. You don't have to be alive when they transport you." Then, with a more pleasant tone, she continued. "Look, it doesn't have to be this way, but I will shoot. Let's just go back and you can talk it over with Harting. They can always push the insertion off a couple extra hours to clear this up."

Here was her chance. Knowing she could make them understand, the woman smiled a little and took a step toward Mendez.

"That's all I ask. I only want to know what happened, and I'm willing to not press charges. I just want to..."

She screamed suddenly and stumbled. Something had grabbed her ankle! In the glow of the approaching hov's head lamp, to Mendez it looked like a human hand, but the coloration was different, and the fingers seemed too long.

The woman fell to the pier and was being dragged off the edge. She threw her hand out at Mendez, who moved forward to grab it. Their fingers touched, and then she was gone, disappearing beneath the surface of the ocean.

Mendez stood up and looked into the depths. She was sure of what she had seen; she'd been a little girl up in New York the last time she'd seen such a hand. But she was also sure nobody would believe her. They never came this far south, nor this close to shore, without good reason.

"Geez! Did you see that?" One of the Harting men jumped out of the hov and stared into the water. "Didja see who it was?" When Mendez shook her head, he snorted in disgust, more at the situation than at her. "Gotta be some local boys. I don't know how they find out, but

they know we bring ripes here, and not just for the transport. One of 'em musta been under the pier and took advantage. If he's got gear on, we'll never find them. No time, anyway. We got orders to get back right now."

Mendez said nothing, but returned to the open hov and took a seat. The craft turned toward the right and sped across the water to a large bay door two hundred meters distant. Fortunately, the men getting out of the small hov had seen someone grab her as well, so Mendez was off the hook for the woman's escape. They could report that another person, hidden in the waters, had pulled the woman under. Mendez saw no point in complicating things further by telling Harting that their ripe had been abducted by a Pisces.

\* \* \*

The water was very warm, but Emily still felt the chill of terror shooting through her. Only minutes ago, she was returning home from her position at Ghan Digital, where she was an advanced press operator. She'd picked up a six pack of Wondaire and was entering her home when she suddenly appeared in the warehouse, surrounded by people dressed in rough clothing and staring at an ionic power globe. At least that's what she thought it was. In that moment of confusion before fear set in, she remembered thinking that it looked very different from a standard globe. Then the terror had overtaken her and she could only think to run.

After disabling a guard with a lucky punch, she'd run to the pier, where she'd been grabbed and pulled under the water. Whoever had seized her shifted his grip and held her securely around her chest. Her head was tight against his stomach and he was contorting his body violently as he swam through the water at high speed.

Her breath exhausted, she began to struggle with him, hoping the creature would release her, or at least understand that she needed to breathe. She felt his other hand come down and begin squeezing her throat. There was a sharp stab in her neck, just below the Adams apple, as she tried to fight him off. He didn't seem to notice her feeble attacks and continued to swim on, his powerful legs and lower body occasionally striking her in the stomach.

Finally, unable to fight the urge to inhale, she gasped and sucked in a huge lung full of water, waiting for the darkness of death to replace the darkness of the deep, black sea.

Instead of choking on the sea water, she felt a deep satisfaction as her body accepted the water and her lungs began drawing the oxygen. From her neck she felt a machine like pulsing. She realized only then that the being holding her was a Pisces—a human capable of breathing both water and air. She'd seen them of course, whenever their congress met on land and the events were holoized, but had never actually touched one. She'd expected their skin to be cold and clammy, like a sea creature's, but it was very warm and comforting.

She took another tentative breath, and felt relief at being able to breathe. She understood now what had happened. He'd attached a device to her neck that allowed her to temporarily breathe water. The sensation was very alien.

They continued on, going deeper into the water, and Emily felt the extreme emotions and exertions of the past thirty minutes catch up to her, and she slipped into a peaceful unconsciousness.

\* \* \*

The hov returned to the insertion area in silence. Mendez jumped out before it came to a stop and ducked under the canvas.

Hansen was on his feet, but was clearly still more out than up. He was standing near a psitech who was coldly explaining something to him. From his glazed eyes, it seemed unlikely he understood what was being said. She approached the two.

"Sorry, but she was grabbed by someone in the water. We looked but couldn't find a trace of either of them. Guess the insertion is off, huh?" There was a murmur of discontent from the zone where the ripes were listening in. The psitech turned toward her and stared.

"Just because you have failed does not mean we have failed. Two minutes to transport." His eyes shifted slightly to behind her, and the awful realization hit her.

She moved to her right, her hand dropping for her pistol, when one of the Harting goons slammed into her. Her gun flew free and they fell to the ground. The struggle was brief and one-sided, with Connie being the victor. But her attacker was quickly joined by three others, and they soon had her pinned and stripped her of her second gun. Hansen, though still too groggy to be effective, was also being held by two Harting men. The psitech stepped up over her and smiled coldly.

"We have your last registered mass measurement on verse and were able to make the proper adjustments. Although your weight will have varied some since the last measurement, we should still be able to insert the majority of the transport safely."

"You bastard!" she yelled. "When the Colonel finds out about this..."

"He already has and has approved the substitution for the purposes of maintaining his contract. He wishes to inform you that your name will be lazed onto the Plaque, and he will honor your name each year on this day. A waste of time, if you ask me, but I nonetheless fulfill my pact and relay the message to you." He motioned and she was hauled to her feet and taken to the zone. The psitech stopped just outside and addressed the ripes.

"You will listen. One of your own has escaped and this woman has been chosen to replace her. Her mass is similar to the escaped ripe, but does not precisely match it. As a consequence, a number of you will no doubt be killed at the conclusion of your transport. Those surviving will be able to begin work immediately." He waited a few seconds for the group to understand. They nodded their heads in complete agreement. The psitech smiled. "Good. We need you to hold this woman in the zone until the transport is initiated. Her presence greatly increases the chances of you surviving."

Again they agreed and Mendez was carried into the zone. Many hands held onto her and the Harting men cleared the zone. The psitech took his position near the others and reconnected.

"Thirty seconds."

Hansen looked on helplessly, still being held by two Harting soldiers and the effects of the stun, which were fading very slowly. He watched in numbed fascination as the field slowly

built up around those inside the zone. Connie was now twisting and straining against those holding her, but there were too many. Her screams had become hysterical. Still Hansen could not move. His eyes fixed on her diamond cross necklace, incapable of anything else. Only dimly aware of what was happening, he heard the female psitech speak in a clipped voice that was edged with hard satisfaction.

“Transport was successful, with 54% survival.”

“Excellent,” replied her partner. “Transport.”

The field expanded suddenly, then collapsed in on itself and its cargo. The zone was clear, leaving behind only the fading echo of a despairing scream.

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## Chapter Two



**Terran Date: May 9, 2259**

“Pretty, huh?” The private lifted his hand out toward the engine room portal. Huge streamers of ignited plasma were shooting out from the number five spike as the *Horizon* slowly burned off her black hole mass in preparation for system entry.

Mahlon Stewart politely looked out the portal, but soon returned to his work. As the ship’s third class stellar drive engineer, it was his duty to maintain consistent mass conversion to all six spikes, and the task required most of his attention. Besides, he had been stationed on the bridge when he was Chief, and had seen five spikes radiating. Still, for a recruit on his first deep space chase, this would be very impressive.

“Yeah, it sure is, Keane. Grab that tabinal and punch in the latest readouts, okay?” The private tore himself away from the awesome sight and called up the diagnostics routine on the tabinal. He aligned the core memory with the ship’s and nodded. Mal nodded in approval.

“That was a real quick alignment, kid. You’re getting pretty good.”

“I’ve had a good teacher, Mal.”

“Yeah? Well, buy me a beer when we pull into Vermilion, and we’ll call it even.” His eyes glanced over the multiple readouts and he made a slight adjustment to the containment field bulging around spike two. “Okay. Calibration in five—four—three—two—one...” The tabinal and display toned as one and quickly numbers began shooting through. There were no discrepancies and they toned off less than forty seconds after starting. Mal nodded again. Stewart was a taciturn man, and Keane understood the engineer’s nod as being the equivalent of someone else’s jumping around and shouting wildly.

“All right. Everything’s on the beam. The ball’s at 34% mass with maximum extension and bleed through will be complete at just over one hundred au from Pluto’s orbit. After that, we glide in.” Keane frowned.

"A hundred au from the system? Maybe we should bring the ball in closer. That's a pretty long glide, Mal, just for system re-entry."

"Sure is. We might even need to fire up all engines, instead of just number one. Better that, though, than ripping up Pluto. Look at your charts, Bobby. Pluto's almost in our way, less than 75 million kilometers from our system re-entry point. Even a ball at fifteen percent mass would tear up the planet's crust pretty bad."

"But we'll be at zero mass long before then," Keane corrected, "if nothing goes wrong."

"We *plan* to be at zero mass. Kid, something always goes wrong. If your engineer ever believes different, it's time to get a new engineer. So we collapse the ball further out and stroll on in from there."

There was a soft tone as the Captain called down.

"Mal?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"How's the bleed coming? The Chief seems to think we should be sloughing mass at point nine oh eight." Mal casually glanced at his numbers and gave Keane a questioning look. Keane, startled at being given a chance to handle the responsibility, nervously looked over the display. He silently pointed at the mass to energy sloughing ratio and gave the universal okay sign. Mal in turn pointed to the ship's velocity, distance from system, and the regional space debris indicators. Keane continued to stare at the numbers, his lips moving slightly as he rechecked his decision.

"Mal?"

"Sorry, ma'am. Giving my recruit a chance to answer."

"Captain?" Keane tried to keep his voice calm, but he sounded more like Mal had him by the throat.

"Yes? Private Keane, isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am. We're currently sloughing at point eight eight one. We think that..."

"I don't want what 'we' think, Private. I want what *you* think."

"Yes, ma'am." Had he a gun, Mal would have shot the young man out of pity. The Captain's voice was pleasant, but her selection of words always showed the steel and high expectations underneath, and it could be unnerving for those unprepared for it. "I recommend we maintain eight eight one. We're at FTL-18.4 and it's 412 au to the Hoboken Junkyard. Going to nine oh eight would slow us down too quickly and we'd risk going sub-light while still in the Junkyard."

"I see. The Chief says we're at 34% on the ball and even at nine oh eight we should be well clear of the Junkyard before ball collapse. Please adjust the slough to nine oh eight. Bridge out."

"But, Captain!" Keane protested, but the comlink had already gone dead. Mal groaned.

"You, Bobby my lad, just got lucky." Mal motioned Keane to the opposite console where

the two could begin adjusting the slough conversion rate. “You never argue with the Captain over a comlink. She’ll take it face to face, but you were about to pop off to her in front of the bridge crew.”

Keane swallowed hard, realizing his mistake. He pressed on nonetheless.

“But Mal, eight eight one is the optimum slough! We’ll enter the Junkyard at FTL-15.4 and exit at 12.5.” He ran his fingers over the version panel. “Nine oh eight sloughing gets us out of the Junkyard at eleven point three. If we drop below eleven point two times the speed of light in the Junkyard, the ball collapses and the ship gets the pounding of its life. That’s too close.”

“Aye, it is, kid. But nine oh eight probably won’t kill us. The Junkyard thins out the last sixty aus, so we shouldn’t have a problem even if the ball does collapse. But it’s the Captain who decides.”

“But...”

“There ain’t no but, kid! She decides and we do it. Don’t worry, we’ll be fine. She’s a sharp one, and if we drop below FTL-12 too deep in the Junkyard, she’ll go back to eight five oh or maybe even eight hundred. And she’ll keep in mind it was *you* who recommended the lower slough rate in the first place.”

“It was your recommendation though, Mal.”

Stewart snorted. “I didn’t say anything. You said it, kid. She wanted your opinion and what she heard was your opinion. She knows I agree with it, or I would have slugged you. But when I gave you over to her, it was your rep on the line. But like I said, don’t worry. For a Terran, you did fine.”

Keane was finally satisfied and concentrated on his panel. Mal and Captain Carlson had been serving together for over thirty years, even before there were ball chasers. They had bounced about the solar system on a dozen different ships, everything from old freighters to transports to the sleek, five man gunships that Earth used to patrol the system. They had been among the original crew of the *Horizon* when it had been commissioned as the first faster than light ship. She had signed on as First Officer and he’d been the Chief Engineer.

Now, fifteen years and eight missions later, they were the only remaining members of that crew—not counting Fred—and she was the Captain while Mal had stepped down to third class engineer, the lowest ranked officer on board. It was a known fact that he could have the Chief Engineer’s post in an instant—Mal had forgotten more about chasing the ball than anyone else had ever learned. But the Intersystem Transport Authority, the governing body of all twenty-four ball chasers currently commissioned, felt the best way to train new ball handlers was to demote the more accomplished Chief Engineers and use them as teachers. This allowed the new Chief to gain experience while still offering both the Chief and the ship’s captain a resource that could drop his teaching duties at a moment’s notice. Keane certainly appreciated the arrangement; he’d learned more from Mal on this two year journey to 18 Scorpii and back than he’d learned in six years attending BCU in New Jersey.

He tapped out a final sequence with a flourish and looked expectantly at Stewart for approval. After a casual glance over the figures, Mal nodded and Keane engaged his model. This was the moment Keane lived for; that instant when a crew, a one hundred and twenty

meter ship, and a singularity buried in another reality obeyed your—and only your—commands.

The ship shuddered slightly and slowed down as the mass to energy conversion ratio slipped closer to even. Keane knew it could never reach one to one, though. If it did, the *Horizon* would be venting pure energy into space instead of burning plasma, and the resulting temperature increase would melt first the spikes, then the subspace field control rod. The ship itself was safe from the heat for the very simple reason that without the subspace field constantly holding and pushing the artificial black hole less than half a meter in front of the bows, the *Horizon* would instantly “catch the ball”, and be sucked into its namesake; the event horizon. An easier and quicker death than burning alive, to be sure. But dead was still dead.

There was a flash of light from the portal as the plume coming off spike five billowed and flared. Keane’s display panel told him the other five spikes were doing the same. Anyone in the solar system that had their telescopes trained on this area of space was in for a rare treat when the light rays reached them in five or six days.

“All done! We’re drifting up to nine oh eight slough and should be there in about two minutes.”

“How long to the Junkyard?” Mal asked quietly, not looking up from his display.

“Uh—adjusted time to arrival at the Hoboken Junkyard is three hours, twenty five minutes. Time to travel through the Yard is almost exactly the same; three hours and thirty minutes. After that...” Keane’s voice drifted off with a shrug.

“After that, it depends on when the ball collapses.” Mal stood up and stretched. “Then we’ll really be on leave, cause it’ll be up to the fusion crew to handle the engines, which is fine by me. All right, it’s 1500 now. We’re out of the Junkyard around 2200 hours. Show up at 1930 hours and we’ll nurse it in from there. ‘Til then, you’ve got a little free time, Bobby. Catch some shuteye. Or hit your books on bridge etiquette. Just be ready to get back here on the bounce if I holler. See ya.”

Mal coded off the control panel and made for the forward lift. The engine room took up the aft portion of decks three through five—there being ten decks plus the bridge on the *Horizon*—and he was getting too old to use the ladders for fun.

The antigravity eledisc quietly took him up to deck two, the first complete deck above engineering, and he strolled aft down the tight corridor to his quarters. The light came on, simulating a misty New England morning, and he could hear the all but muted pounding of the surf just beyond the far bulkhead. He’d never been to the actual coast, being born and raised on Mars, but the thrill of ocean going ships still appealed to him greatly. He closed his eyes and imagined he could feel the ship rocking gently as it made its way to port, going into a slight head wind. The seas would be running about two meters, not enough to be dangerous, but enough to put a little bite in the bows, and make one feel alive.

He took a deep breath, but the ocean scent he’d brought had played out three months ago, and now he had only the lighting and sound to take him to the rocky coasts. And his whiskey. Smiling with anticipation, Mal took down a glass from his shelf, checking to be sure it was fairly clean. He poured in three fingers of whiskey from his last bottle. The *Horizon* was not a dry ship—it was just a little stupid to send a crew on a two year journey without the creature



comforts—and Mal always stocked a fine supply of both Terran and Martian whiskey.

He carried the glass over to his hammock and flopped down, an action that truly marked him for the experienced ball chaser that he was; anyone trying to flop onto a hammock without a great deal of experience doing it was in for a rude landing on the deck and months of ridicule if anyone ever found out—which they always did. Even in the simulated Martian gravity, the hammock barely swayed, and Mal lay there, contemplating both the ceiling and his future. Both looked quite barren.

He was finishing his eighth voyage on the *Horizon*—every one she had logged—and was also concluding his fortieth year as an engineer. He didn't know how many more years he had left in him officially; ITA never forced anyone into retirement but the fact was that no engineering officer had served past the age of sixty. And Mal was fifty-six. Worse, he looked every year his age. His sinewy body was still in good shape, but the seams on his face were deep, and his once toner black hair was somewhere between gray and silver. His ears and nose were thick from too many fights when in port during his younger days, and he had about him that gnarled, grizzled look he swore he'd never have.

It was his eyes that betrayed him the most, though. He'd been told more than once that his hazel eyes always reflected his experience. Still sharp and clear, he nevertheless could not keep them from showing the knowledge he had acquired over the decades; knowledge that had never and could never be recorded in a book or on the net. Mal was considered by all to be the best engineer in any fleet, military, corporate or civilian.

And what would it ultimately get him? Free passage throughout space for life and a modest pension that should keep him pleasantly drunk in some of the less seedy bars in most ports around the system. There had been a time in the past when that kind of worry free retirement appealed to him. Now that it was fast becoming a reality, he knew he needed more.

He shook his head to clear it, and stared at his empty glass. Nothing like a shot of aged one hundred proof to start a pity party. He knew that part of his melancholy was the letdown that always happened at the conclusion of a long mission, but before the euphoria of getting into port hit him. That this had been a successful tour, with the establishment of a small colony on 18 Scorpii's third planet, only deepened his gloom. What he needed was some company.

"Computer, what's the time?"

"It is 1537 hours," replied a soft female voice. ITA, always looking for ways to improve morale, had voiced the computer like this for the voyage. He'd liked that voice a lot when this trip started; the computer sounded like she was trying her best to seduce him. After two years, though, she'd become very tiresome, being only a one trick pony, and he was going to personally throttle the idiot who'd coded that voice. Either that or put him on a two year voyage with this voice. He'd probably end up throttling himself.

He slipped easily out of his hammock. He really did need company, and he knew Pam would be taking off for a few hours. She was always on the bridge when the *Horizon* dropped below the safe zone of FTL-20 and she'd certainly be back in the chair when they entered the Junkyard, and would remain there until the ball had collapsed and the switch over to the fusion engines was complete. That meant she'd been on duty for sixteen hours, and would be on for at least another six before long. He snatched a second glass and the bottle and made his way for the lift.

He passed by about a dozen enlisted on his way to the Captain's Quarters, and each one saluted. He either gave them scowls or ignored them, and they continued on, quite used to this from him. Despite his sometimes grouchy exterior, Mahlon was genuinely liked by nearly everyone on board because he listened, and people trusted what he had to say and they trusted what he wouldn't say to others.

He stepped onto the lift and requested the bridge. The disc soundlessly raised him up the two decks to his destination. It stopped and he stepped off. Not wanting to really talk to anyone but Pam, he quickly turned to his right, then right again, hoping to get off the bridge and to the Captain's quarters without comment.

"Stewart?"

Mal shuddered. Chief Engineer Soldano's voice always carried the smallest hint of superiority in it. It was probably unintentional—he was a good man and a fair engineer—but it still grated. He thought about ignoring it, but decided against it. No point in getting the Chief upset. He turned back, conscious of the whiskey bottle in his hand, but not really caring what anyone thought.

He eyed the Chief carefully. He was seated at his station, on the forward starboard bulkhead, dressed in his still crisp green and gold uniform, complete with the deep gold shoulder tassel that marked his rank. Behind him, Mal could see the billowing plumes of spikes six, one and two, and in front of that, the massive, cone shaped forward shields. The entire bridge hull was composed of aligned titanium and was crystal clear, allowing an unobstructed view into space.

"Yes, sir?" Mal always put respect in his tone, which the Chief deserved both because of his station and because of his skill.

"I notice that the slough is at nine oh eight and deceleration is going nicely. Good work." Mal made no reply to the lame compliment. Soldano's eyes glanced down at the bottle and glasses in Mal's hand. "I'm not sure that the Captain is up to receiving visitors. She just went off duty and will be going back on in three hours."

"Yes, sir. If you don't mind, sir, I'll ask her myself."

Soldano's face tightened slightly. Mal could only just suppress a smile. He really did respect the man and his rank, but this was Soldano's first voyage as the Chief, and even after two years, he still hadn't mastered the relationship between the Chief and the unique position of the third engineer. There were some privileges that could never be taken from Mal, and one of them was his unrestricted access to Captain Carlson.

Not wanting to force the Chief into an uncomfortable position in front of the eight other bridge crew, Mal chose to interpret the Chief's silence as dismissal. He saluted and turned back down the short corridor. He reached the end and knocked on Pam's door, the weird thoom! of the energy door giving a small echo.

"Come in," came a muffled voice. Mal stepped through the ghost door's planed simulated matter field and entered the Captain's quarters.

Taking up the aft portion of the bridge module attached to the top of the *Horizon's* main cabin, the Captain's quarters was a combination living area and meeting room. The starboard

section, which Mal was in now, contained a beautiful polished maple conference table and a dozen chairs. The center of the oval table had a suspended holo occupying nearly half the table. It could display virtually anything, from standard ship readouts to holoized communications to generated images. Currently it displayed the positions of the Junkyard and the Sol system. Small pinpoints of light marked the individual planets and their moons, with a cottony haze showing the position of the Junkyard and the asteroid belt. On the outer edge of the holo the *Horizon* was marked by a flashing green light, moving slowly toward the Junkyard.

Scattered about the remainder of the room were comfortable chairs and small tables. Except for the aft bulkhead, the wall was covered by various paintings and sculptures. The aft bulkhead itself was aligned titanium, and the view was stunning. For a dozen kilometers off the stern of the ship, all six plumes could be seen, burning bright and huge. Because the plumes were slowing down faster than the ship, they were bright yellow close on to the stern, but dropped through the prism quickly to deep red. At only twenty kilometers they disappeared entirely as the still burning plasma dropped below the speed of light and were left far, far, behind.

The port side of the quarters, on Mal's right as he faced aft, were the Captain's private rooms. Containing only a bedroom, study and bathroom, they were still larger than any other quarters on the ship. And since her aft wall was part of the clear hull, the view was unmatched. Mal couldn't actually see into the rooms, they were divided from the section he was in by a standard wall, but he had been there many times before. As he looked toward the doorway, Pam came out.

They'd known each other for thirty four years, ever since the day she'd signed on at the Vermilion space port at the age of sixteen, a runaway from a home she rarely spoke of. They served their first four years together on the freighter *McFarland*, a piece of ancient, overworked metal that struggled to make the Mars/Earth/Moon run in less than a month. He'd been the Chief, and Pam the ship's astronomer's assistant, a useless position for the most part—the astronomer himself spent most of his time arranging contraband deals for the ship's twenty crewmen. He soon turned even his nominal duties over to the wide eyed Pamela, and with Mal's guidance, she was soon learning everything there was to know about pushing an eighty year old freighter through space. And when the navigator came up three tons and one blaster shot short on his last deal, Pam was the natural selection for his vacancy.

Now, all these years later, she was the Captain of Earth's first faster than light ship, and was the best officer Mal had ever seen. Just past fifty, she and Mal were very similar. Her once blond hair had slowly drifted to gray, and her once beautiful face would now be called handsome. Of average build, she nonetheless could still throw anyone in two out of three matches, you choose the terrain, and then sit down and be the perfect lady in the most formal of settings. That she preferred to toss a liter back with her shipmates at the closest bar came as a surprise to anyone who had the pleasure to finish a mission with her.

They'd both come a long way, she further than him, and they were inseparable, fixtures in every spaceway in the solar system, and now branching out to the stars. For thirty-four years, Mal had known Pam. And for thirty-four years, he'd been in love with her. He held up the two glasses, giving them an inviting clink.

"I've got about half a bottle of whiskey left, and I wonder if the Captain might want some of it."

She laughed and plopped down onto the nearest comfortable chair.

"How thoughtful! I was beginning to wonder if I had to come down to your quarters and beat you up to get my share."

"Yeah, well, the Chief slowed me down a little."

She picked up the glass Mal had poured out for her and held it up, the amber liquid sending sparkles onto the small table top. There was only a swallow in each glass, as according to their custom.

"To the *Horizon*," she said.

"To the *Horizon's* engines," Mal countered. They tossed them off and banged down the glasses. Mal poured out a more generous amount in each glass. Pam picked up her glass and smacked her lips appreciatively.

"Good stuff, Mal. Martian, six year old, right?"

Mal nodded. "Yup. Save the best for last. We can always catch the ball on the lousy stuff when we pull into port." Pam laughed.

"Yeah, I've been putting together my list of things to do when we put in next week, and going to Jonesy's with you and the crew is number one."

"So we are going to Vermilion?" Mal asked. Vermilion, Mars' second largest city and most active spaceport, was almost always the put in port for ball chasers, but the word was never official until the last couple of weeks.

"No, we're not. Orders came through this morning. Vermilion for a week, then Earth." Pam looked at Mal to get his reaction. Anyone else might have been disappointed, but she took his raised eyebrows as near shock.

"Earth? Why would ITA want us at Earth? Most of the crew's from Mars, so they won't want to go. And we can't be making another run so soon after a 2 year trip, can we?" Pam shrugged.

"That's what I asked. ITA said only that we were to retain the original crew, resupply at the *Bearden*, then head to Earth. I'm supposed to be hearing from a Reed Matheson of Harting Enterprises."

"Harting? They're the hov freighter builder. The only vacuum ships they have are the shuttles and tugs. Why would they be interested in a ball chaser?"

"Don't ask me," Pam said with a trace of irritation. The tone wasn't aimed at Mal but at the frustration of not being told enough to suit her. "I'm just the Captain. Anyway, he's coming on board shortly after we achieve Terran orbit."

"Terran orbit?" Mal was even more surprised. "Not lunar?"

"I know. Go figure. But that's what they said. Keep it to yourself, by the way, Mal. There's a few members of the crew that aren't going to be too happy about having their tour of duty extended, and I want to be the one to tell them." Mal nodded.

"You're the Cap'n, Cap'n. That's why I like third engineer. I don't have to break the bad news to anyone."

"Speaking of which, how's Private Keane coming along? He seemed a little high-strung earlier."

"Aw, he's doing fine. I think one more trip will qualify him for second class. He's just a little too sure of himself. He wanted to argue with you over the com."

"I know. I heard him sound off before I terminated the link. The Chief wanted to com back and let him have it."

"I wondered if you caught that," Mal chuckled. "Like I said, he's a little too sure of himself, but for good reason. The Chief had better watch his butt, 'cause Bobby'll be ordering it around in four, five years."

"Is he still giving you grief, Mal?" Pam asked, referring to the Chief Engineer.

"Not really. He just never found even keel when working with me. I don't hold it against him. It's gotta be tough. I'm glad I never had a third class engineer who knew more than me."

"Nobody knows more about the ball chasers than you, Mal." She laughed, the soft tone of her comfortable voice making Mal's heart ache. "Remember that time twelve years ago, just outside Saturn? When the subspace field jammed at one third operating volume, and Captain Tesler asked you if the mission had to be aborted? You just said, 'No, we'll just pack the ball tighter.' I thought he was going to have a stroke!"

Mal laughed. "Captain Tesler was a little jumpy. I just meant we'd be moving the ball in closer to simulate a larger size until we corrected the field."

"Uh-huh. But at the time, the *Horizon* wasn't able to adjust the distance of the ball from the ship. You took a potential problem and came up with a solution that increased the upper limits of the ship's speed by fifty percent. Pure genius."

"Pure luck. Luck and applied experience. It's what got us to where we are, girl."

Pam looked at him, suddenly thoughtful. Mal looked into her eyes, and even through the years of maturity and experience, could still see the bright, eager young woman of long ago.

She looked back at him, feeling much the same, seeing much the same. Mal had always been there to support and encourage her. He'd done everything for her. He'd been her tutor in the early years, her chief engineer during the hey day years, her sounding board in the later years, and first and always her friend. He'd taught her how to cold prime a rickety ion drive and how to cold cock an abusive drunk. He'd even cold cocked her a couple of times, when she'd taken on more than she could handle and didn't know it. He'd always been there.

"Where we are," she echoed quietly. She stared out into the black of space, completely devoid of stars, decorated only by the beautiful blossoms of the *Horizon's* black hole burn off. She noticed that spike four, the keel spike, was burning a little brighter than the others. As she watched, the color faded, and became consistent with the others. She looked back at Mal, who was also staring out the wall.

"Where are we, Mal?"

He turned his head and looked at her thoughtfully. In the windows of his soul, Pamela could see he was thinking many things. To nearly everyone, Mal was always controlled. He could be formal, friendly or fiery, but he was always controlled. He never abused the privileged position he had with the ship's Captain, but he had never denied it, either. He had a quiet confidence that all her fellow captains envied. Yet in that moment, she wondered if she saw the faint stirrings of doubt in his eyes.

"I've been wondering that myself, Pam. You're doing fine. Captain of the *Horizon* and senior officer on the line, with fifteen, twenty years of service still open to you. But I'm going to be 57 next month, and ITA never lets us engineers work past sixty. So I'll probably take one or two more trips with you, then eleven two my career."

"You're not serious, are you?" she asked, a little disappointed he hadn't addressed the question with her in mind. "I'm sure ITA will gladly overlook the age problem. At worst, you could move to command, Mal. You'd make a fine first officer."

"Me?" Mal asked, surprised. He laughed, then shook his head. "No, I don't think so. You're the chief in our little twosome. I'm just a brave."

"But it's not that so much. I'm beginning to feel restless. The *Horizon's* a good ship, but I've been on her too long. I know her too well, and that scares me, Pam. It scares me because once you know your engines too well, you begin taking them for granted. You start thinking nothing will go wrong. And that's..."

"That's when it usually does," Pam finished, understanding.

"Uh-huh. So before that happens, I'm calling it quits. At least for the ball chasers. I don't know what I'll do, but I've a tidy sum set aside. And ITA gives me free passage to anywhere, as well as a generous pension. It's just that I didn't think this day would ever come."

"And it still hasn't," she said firmly. "You've still got this mission to finish, as well as one or two more. We've still plenty of time to think about what we're going to do."

Mal's head jerked up at her inclusion and he saw her sparkling eyes and faint smile. He'd never thought...

"Pamela! You can't..." his voice broke off at the sound of the comlink tone.

"Captain?" Duane Stoddard, the First Officer called through quietly.

"Yes, Duane?"

"The Chief thinks that we're sloughing a little too fast, and that we'll drop out of FTL while still in the Junkyard. Since we'll be in the less dense section for only about ten minutes, his opinion is that nothing will go wrong."

Pam and Mal looked at each other quietly. Mal began gathering the glasses. With a sigh, Pam stood up and straightened her captain's blouse. She gave Mal a last quick smile and began walking toward the bridge.

"All right, Duane. Let's take a look, shall we?"

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## Chapter Three



Terran Date: May 16, 2259

Mars Date: Jan 10, 112

Twenty seconds.”

“Increase reverse thrust to thirty percent. Activate power umbilical system. Open docking clamps, disengage on board filtering systems, and access puterverse download protocols.” Pamela’s steady voice was smooth, reassuring, and the perfect salve for the majority of the crew, few of whom had actually participated in docking the massive ball chaser to a space station module only a quarter the size of the ship itself. The module, located dead ahead and getting closer far too fast for far too many of the crew viewing its approach via monitor. It was connected by releasable guidance rods, power couplings and flexible gangway to Mars’ primary orbital station, the *Bearden*, one hundred and fifty meters off the starboard bow. In the event of catastrophic docking, only the station’s single module—and the *Horizon*—needed to be sacrificed, saving the lives of over fifty thousand people on the station.

“Reverse thrust thirty percent, aye, aye,” the helmsman’s voice affirming she needed to draw from the Captain’s calm. Ensign M’boula had been piloting for ten years, but this was her first ball chaser docking. Lieutenant Borders stood by to relieve her if necessary, but she was determined to dock her ship perfectly.

She glanced over the navigator’s panel at the viewer being projected onto the forward bulkhead. Because the massive duranium cone shield that made up the forward third of the ship had an eighty meter diameter, the actual line of sight was completely blocked, so the viewer was required. Both instrumental and visual inspection confirmed that only ten meters in front of the ship’s three subspace prongs loomed the station module docking clamps. “Fifteen seconds.”

“Sound imminent docking alarm. Initiate atmospheric certification routines.”

First Officer Stoddard activated a soft chime that filled the ship and notified the crew to prepare for final docking.

“Reverse thrust to fifty percent.”

“Reverse thrust fifty percent, aye, aye.” The nose of the *Horizon* looked to be nearly three meters off line with the targeting buoy located in the dead center of the dock, but M’boula ignored the optical illusion and continued her course. Certain she had exactly what she wanted, she gave the only command that superseded the Captain’s.

“All stop. Five seconds.” Her fingers danced gracefully over the smooth console and cut all thrusters. Five very long seconds later, there was the softest of shivers as the *Horizon* gently kissed the docking rings, perfectly nestled in its new, if temporary, home. There was a second slight jar as the retractable guidance rods began drawing the module and ship in toward the *Bearden*’s main hub. Grace gave a deep sigh of relief, then nearly screamed as Captain Carlson slapped her on the shoulder. Thoughtfully, in the heavier gravity, the Captain had been careful

not to slap too hard. It still felt as though her shoulder was broken.

“Excellent job, Ensign! You get to pick the poison for the first round tonight.” Like the crew, Pamela was feeling the giddiness of returning to port. It wouldn’t last long, they had to get underway in only three days. And since they needed to continue conditioning to function in Earth gravity, the entire crew was required to sleep on board, an annoying and possibly debilitating feat since the ship was kept at the more normal Martian gravity during the voyage. Worse, ITA had contacted Pamela only thirty hours before and informed her their stay at Mars would be only three days, not seven, forcing her to step up gravity acclimation procedures.

“Sound stand down, Duane. Let’s see,” she consulted the overhead chronometer. “It’s 1720 hours now. First two shifts are permitted to disembark. Lock down and docking crews to maintain watch until 0630 tomorrow morning, ship time, then first shift back to relieve them.”

“Aye, Captain. What time for the ceremony?” Mal smiled to himself, knowing Duane was on the docking shift, and he wasn’t going to let the Captain forget it. Pamela smiled, too, knowing no one—absolutely no one—ever missed the voyage completed ceremony.

“You tell me, Duane. How soon can you get us settled in and have a station crew here to stand watch for a few hours?”

“Lock down in one hour,” Duane ticked off his fingers, “Docking settle in the same hour plus an additional hour. Data download will take ninety minutes.”

“And the standby crew?”

Duane cracked a huge grin. “I’ve already got them waiting, Captain. I arranged for this a month before we left.”

Pam laughed. “I’m not going to ask what you paid. All right. Two hours to put the *Horizon* to bed, then another two hours to shuttle everyone to Vermilion. Let’s meet at Jonesy’s at 2130.” She reached back to her Captain’s chair and flipped on the ship wide intercom.

“This is Captain Carlson. Good work and good voyage, people. I’m proud of the bunch of you. Shore duty rosters and schedules will be posted within the hour. Anyone not at Jonesy’s by 2130 will never hear the end of it. And remember, don’t get used to Martian time, again. The ship will remain on Terran until the extended tour ends, so we still have only twenty-four hours in a day. Captain out.” She turned to Mal, who was leaning against the console that monitored the long since deactivated ball drive. He glanced occasionally at the all but dead display, as required by ITA. This was one silly regulation he liked, though, because it meant he could be on the bridge for docking.

“Stop wasting your time, Mal, and go get Fred. See you at Jonesy’s. Duane, the bridge is yours.” She walked toward her cabin, trudging slightly from the increased weight.

Mal grinned and stepped onto the bridge’s starboard eledisc. It sensed his presence and began its descent. As he passed each deck, he could see people scurrying around—if the heavy footed trod that everyone was afflicted with could be called scurrying—performing final lock down duties and gladly finishing personal business needed prior to going ashore. Everywhere was a sense of joy and release that filled the ship. They were only in port for three days, and they had had their duty extended and were required to sleep on board, but they were home.



He stepped off at deck nine and headed forward, the huge keel rod blocking all view of the port side of the ship. Standing six meters overall in diameter, the keel rod took up the center portion of decks nine and ten. The upper two and half meters were visible on deck nine, with less than a meter clearance between the ceiling and the top of the rod. The huge duranium shaft ran the entire length of the *Horizon's* cabin and was embedded deep in the forward shields. It served only two purposes; to hold the ship straight when the incredible torque of faster than light travel tried to bend the ship, and to provide access to the forward shields via a tight, one meter tube that ran from the forward loading bay to the shield. To Mal's knowledge, only one person had ever used the tube when the ship was not in port, and that person was Fred.

Having neither rank nor a last name, Fred was the *Horizon's* ripe; a human being who's original persona had been shut off and his mind completely rewritten to act as a living puter. Capable of performing at an enhanced level, Fred was a thousand times faster than a normal human and a million times slower than a normal puter. What he had that a puter never could, however, was judgment. And if the *Horizon's* main puter or navigational systems were ever damaged dozens of light-years from home, Fred was their best and last chance of ever getting back. Mal reached the com panel located beside the tube entrance, and punched the call button.

"Hey, Fred! We're in dock. Slide on down."

"Yes, sir. I am concluding final lock down sequences and engaging the puterverse link. I will complete these tasks in one hundred and forty-one seconds and will then depart. I shall be at your location in an estimated two hundred and—"

"Just say you'll be here in a few minutes," Mal cut in. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Yes, sir. I will be there in a few minutes. Fred out."

Leaning against the keel—Mal had long since mastered the art of leaning whenever possible—he looked around the large starboard hold. Like its twin on the port side, the huge, spacious area consumed the forward sections of decks six through ten. Separated by the keel rod and a massive load bearing wall that held four control rooms, either hold was configurable to handle shuttles, landing equipment, colonists, scientists and any number of other "ists" and all their gear. They were even capable of being fitted with high output particle guns for bombarding the surface of a planet, although that had never happened. To accommodate large vehicles and facilitate the shifting of cargo on and off ship, decks seven through ten had been cut back at a fairly shallow angle. As a result, while deck six was the same length as one through five, deck nine was thirty meters shorter. Deck ten, the bottom deck, was only two thirds the length of deck one.

Except for the three shuttle craft, both holds were empty now, their contents having been deposited on the third planet in the 18 Scorpii system. Like her two previous trips, the *Horizon* was dropping off colonists on planets she had investigated earlier. Overall, Earth had begun settling six planets in various systems. Humankind had begun spreading out of their own neighborhood. And while all six planets had ideal atmospheres, weather conditions and plant and animal life, so far, no neighbors had been found. Perhaps none ever would.

There was a dim hum and the transport tube opened. There'd been no tell tale vibration of

the keel, but then when a rod is six meters thick and made of solid duranium, Mal thought, there'd better *not* be a vibration. He reached over and helped Fred out.

Fred sat up, then climbed out of the tube, blinking rapidly in the bright light of the hold. He was fairly tall, just at two meters, and very gaunt. He had pitch black hair, and bright blue eyes. He was clean shaven and in uniform, his shoes gleaming with the most perfect of spit shines. Across his forehead, from temple to temple, was embedded a solid gold access bar. Less than one centimeter wide, it was attached permanently to his skull, penetrating it and ending inside his brain case, allowing for extreme high speed interfacing with any puter equipped to handle his input. Similar to the plug that psitechs used, it was far superior, and also marked him for a ship's ripe. He shook his head a final time and came to attention, saluting crisply.

"Good evening, sir. I am ready to be escorted to ITA's Vermilion Processing Center for debriefing, download and system reset."

Mal grudgingly saluted back. Unlike the crew, Fred would continue saluting.

"Geez, Fred! Lighten up. We're on leave!"

"Yes, sir. That's to say, no, sir. I am not on leave. Leave has no importance to me."

"Yeah, I know. It's the same way all the time. Okay, c'mon." They began walking aft to the deck nine airlock. At the conclusion of every voyage, a bridge officer was required to escort the ship ripe to ITA. Mal had taken that duty from the onset, being fascinated by this strange half-person. Over the years, Fred had sensed the interest and seemed to enjoy it slightly.

The airlock was still vacant, none of the crew having yet gotten free to disembark. Mal verified that the gangway was properly attached and pressurized, then opened the inner door with his officer's code. Though the lowest ranked officer on the ship, Mal's codes were still among the most comprehensive, an acknowledgment of his unique position. Inside the comfortably sized airlock, Fred sealed the inner hatch while Mal again verified gangway status. Satisfied he wouldn't suddenly be sucking vacuum, he opened the outer hatch. Mal stepped out, feeling his weight fall off him as he came free of the *Horizon's* gravity field.

The passage was glowing brightly, flooded with the internal lighting systems. The occasional ports that decorated the sides of the long, flexible tube were dark, though the port side showed a little glow from the coming Martian dawn. Fifty meters distant, at the far end of the gangway was the station airlock. The tube itself was deserted.

Reaching back into the airlock, Mal hailed the bridge.

"Bridge here," came Duane's voice over the com.

"This is Stewart. Permission to escort Fred to ITA."

"Permission granted. How's it look out there, Mal?"

"Empty, sir. Either nobody's up or nobody cares."

"Hard to believe ball chasers have become routine. All right, drop off Fred and we'll see you at Jonesy's. Bridge out."

With Fred as quiet as a shadow beside him, they moved down the long gangway. On Mal's

right, he could see into space and saw stars for the first time in six months, just before they'd generated the ball outside the Scorpii system. The *Horizon* had been under light speed ever since the Junkyard, but this was the first time Mal had bothered to look. Another sign of his advancing years, he thought morosely; the sight of the stars no longer thrilled him the way it used to.

The view on the port side, however, gently reminded Mal that perhaps he did have a few years left. Draped against the background of Mars were the *Horizon's* massive bow shields. Pitch black against the dim red of the planet's approaching dawn, it still made his heart jump. She was a great ship, the first and best in the fleet. ITA had already gone to the second generation ball chaser, and were talking about the third, but here in front of Mal was perfection. Neither sleek like the system gunships nor bulky like a freighter, the *Horizon* was a handsome craft, with purposeful lines and deliberate curves. She could be mistaken for no other craft ever made. As he watched, the sun peeked over the planet's horizon and threw the first shots of light onto his *Horizon*. As though understanding and acknowledging this achievement of man, the sunlight sought out the ship's name, emblazoned with fiery red raised letters on the starboard quarter.

"She's a beauty, isn't she?" Mal said with appreciation in his voice.

"The *Horizon*?" Fred asked. He looked out the portal and made his appraisal. "The ship is functional. It has a design that well suits its duties. To that extent, I can agree with your assessment. I'm afraid I can't see the beauty in it, though."

"I feel for you, Fred," Mal said with a sad shake of his head. Fred seemed surprised.

"Really? I don't think you need to, sir."

"Call me Mal."

"No, sir. That would be inappropriate. As I was saying, I don't think you need to feel for me, sir. I'm quite content being what I am." They continued walking toward the airlock.

"I suppose," Mal replied. "But to not have any emotion—"

"I do have emotion, sir. I wouldn't be of much use otherwise. Without emotion, there is a lack of personal involvement. And without a vested interest in a scenario, judgment is impaired, and my primary function is to provide judgment in a binary platform. But my focus is deliberately tight, and anything outside those parameters holds little interest for me."

They reached the far hatch and entered the airlock. Since the atmosphere in the *Horizon* had been scanned during the time the module was retracting, only a cursory scan was required now. There was the all clear tone, and the inner hatch opened, allowing them access to the main station. Mal stepped over the coaming and into the main complex of orbital station *Bearden*.

The *Bearden* was nearly two hundred years old now, but it remained a top notch station. A combination repair dock, way station for passengers changing ships or preparing to descend to Mars, and a holding facility for cargoes awaiting trans-shipment, its design was still very functional. A large open space that comprised two dozen ten meter primary decks, the *Bearden* was unique in that its entire hull was made of layered, reinforced iron, nearly a meter thick,

mined from the planet it served. Composed of alternating layers of solid iron and iron honeycombed with structured air pockets only a millimeter in size, the solid layers protected the interior from the rigors of space, space ships and space travel, while the honeycombed layers protected the living areas from radiation, deflecting the harmful rays toward the top of the station, where four converter stations displaced it harmlessly into space. It was so effective that it blocked out all radiation to every part of the station save the command area, four small bulges located on the bottom of the station, closest to the planet's surface.

A behemoth, the *Bearden* was second in size only to Earth's Gamma orbital station, and in fact had more habitable space. Each deck circled the outside hull and reached in one hundred and twenty meters toward the center. With a diameter of three hundred and sixty meters, the interior was a hollow cylinder one hundred and twenty meters in diameter and running the entire length of the station, with huge locks at each end. Within this interior space, in some places separated from the bordering decks by only a short one and half meter railing, all gravity had been cancelled, and there floated multiple ships, all in various stages of repair or readiness. At any given moment, the *Bearden* boasted a population of nearly fifty thousand and could support four times that if needed.

Most of whom must have been asleep, Mal assessed with a quick glance around the disembarkment platform. The large seating and processing area before them was vacant. The multiple corridors that branched out on either side of them were also empty. A floating holosign, twenty meters in front of them, flashed a welcome to the crew and officers of the *Horizon*. It was the only thing acknowledging their arrival. For as far as they could see, the place was theirs.

Mal's trifle annoyance that there was absolutely no one there to greet them was quashed by his satisfaction that he could get to the planet's surface without bother. They walked unhindered to the slidewalk and were quickly whisked along to the porter pads, large platforms similar to the elediscs on the ship. Since protocol had all ball chasers docking on the lower decks, they only needed to ascend a single deck to the shuttle bays. Stepping off the platform, Mal took off to his right, heading for a large counter manned by a single clerk. At least his presence ruled out plague, Mal thought. He was beginning to wonder if this was a ghost station. The clerk, sporting a slightly disinterested look that didn't go well with his position, greeted them.

"Good morning, gentlemen. What may I do for you?" His eyes flickered over to the gold plate on Fred's forehead. His eyes came back to Mal and he could tell that the clerk had mentally written off Fred as a gentleman. "My mistake. You're from the *Horizon*, yes?" he offered Mal a thumbprint tabinal.

"Yup," Mal replied, pressing his thumb against the cool, gray surface. The image of his print remained and was quickly digitized into the tabinal. "Just docked. I'm Mahlon Stewart, the third engineer. Fred and I need a shuttle to ITA, Vermilion."

"Not New L.A.?" the clerk replied with vague surprise. His tone had cooled slightly when he heard Mal's rank.

"No. To Vermilion. All ball chasers report to Vermilion."

The clerk had a pained look on his face. He shrugged. "I've just transferred over from

comtech, and I'm still easing into my new position." Which meant he'd been demoted, not transferred. He began processing the request. "So that will be one passenger and one cargo to Vermilion. I have a shuttle leaving in two hours that..."

"Cargo?" Mal barked. "I don't have any cargo. And there's two passengers, not one."

"I'm sorry, but all ripes are considered cargo. If you want, you can pay..."

"That's crazy. Since when has that been true?"

"Since last Tujun." He nodded in sudden understanding. "Of course, you wouldn't know. You were still on mission. Yes, the ruling came through about six months ago. Tujun is the second June in the Martian calendar."

"Geez! I'm from Mars. I know what Tujun is!" Mal was quickly losing patience. "So who passed this regulation?"

"I imagine it was the Terran congress. Anyway, ITA regulations say I'm required to book, er... Fred as cargo. Don't worry, though. We've modified our animal transport areas to accommodate human size cargo now. I've heard it's fairly comfortable."

"How thoughtful," Mal said acidly.

"I'm sorry," The clerk seemed to be losing his patience as well, "but there's nothing I can do. Unless you want to pay for a second seat, you cannot take it aboard."

Mal counted four slowly. He'd never been able to get to ten, and had long since cut back. "Listen close. I just spent a year flying to 18 Scorpii and back. After I drop off my friend here, I'm going to a bar and get ripping drunk. Then I'm going to start a fight that will hopefully last until I have to report for duty tomorrow. You are about to make me readjust my schedule and start the fight now." He reached out his hand. "Here. Gimme that tabinal back."

He snatched the tabinal from the countertop, banged in his officer code, then tossed it back to the blustering clerk. "Now, tell me what you're going to do."

The clerk glanced at the display Mal's code had retrieved and blanched.

"I—I—I'm sorry, sir!" He began working his panel furiously. "I've got a shuttle with room for two passengers leaving for Vermilion in twenty minutes. You and your friend are cleared for boarding, sir!"

"Thanks. Make sure you treat the rest of the crew the same way, or I'll report for duty early and look you up."

"Yes, sir!" He snapped to attention and saluted. Mal ignored him and walked toward the slidewalk. Once out of earshot, Fred, who had been silent until then, spoke up.

"I'm not sure what happened there, sir. I don't mind riding as cargo. I had anticipated such an action would occur during my lifetime."

"Maybe you don't mind, Fred, but I do. You may have a controlled mind with an artificial persona, but you're still human. It's bad enough that we make ripes, but we've really hit bottom when we start taking away their rights and humanity."

"I see. Thank-you, then. Tell me, though, sir. What was it that so motivated the clerk to alter his perception of the situation?"

Mal chuckled. "I banged in my old codes from when I was ITA's Fleet Chief Engineer. They let me keep 'em when I went over to the *Horizon*. There was a lot of politics and useless flotsam that came with the job, but it had its perks. One was that you could yank the spine out of just about any moron with a room temperature IQ and a rat's ass attitude."

\* \* \*

"So if you do have emotion, Fred, what gets you excited?" Mal and Fred were seated in first class on the starboard side of the forty passenger shuttle, which was full. Far below them, the rusty surface was in full daylight. Mal could make out two or three puffs of hexagonal cloud that indicated cities with geothermal gravity domes.

"I don't know if excited is quite the term for it, sir," Fred responded with a shrug. His voice was a curious mix of clipped computer tone and warm, living human timbre. Mal liked to imagine that Fred's original persona was struggling to get out, but knew that was a near impossibility. For all Mal knew, Fred had been riped many times, with the person he really was having lived a hundred or more years ago. And if it actually did surface, it would be as a shard, and dissolution of Fred's mind was inevitable.

"I feel satisfaction with completing missions," Fred continued, not noticing Mal's wanderings. "And I feel tension when a critical point in the navigation of the ship is approaching. And, of course, I have a constant feeling of contentment, which is the basic emotion in all ripes."

Mal shook his head in wonder. "We've talked this through three or four times over the years, Fred, and it always amazes me how calm you are about what you are. I think I'd go nuts, knowing someone's messed with my mind."

"No offense, sir, but you can't understand. You say I've been other personas, including the soulner. I know that..."

"Soulner?" Mal interrupted.

"Yes, sir. That is the original persona. The one who owns the soul that we share. As I was saying, I know I've been other personas. But it's only a knowledge that comes from being told. There are no emotions associated with that knowledge. I have no remembrance of them, nor any wish to seek them out. What I am now is what I was made to be and what I want to be. If you were riped, you would feel exactly the same way."

Mal shuddered and turned toward the portal. In just the few minutes they'd been talking, the craft had already covered half the distance to Vermilion. The *Bearden* was in synchronous equatorial orbit on the same longitude as New LA., located on the Tharsis Bulge, just north of Ascraeus Mons. Though closer to New LA, the *Bearden* primarily served Vermilion, using the planet's rotation to provide easy glide paths. Its counterpart, the *Armstrong*, orbited over the equator on the same longitude as Vermilion, and served New LA. Heading east and south, their shuttlecraft was quickly passing through the Martian day, and the terminator was already visible with only the most western edge of the Hellas impact basin still in daylight. As he

watched, the craft gave a small jolt as it entered what passed for the lower atmosphere of Mars. There was a small tone as the intercom came on.

“This is Captain Wills. We’re beginning our final approach into Vermilion space port, where the local time is just past 9:00 PM. If you look out the starboard side, you’ll see the city lights in just a moment. We’ll be landing in five minutes and thank-you for flying Ares.” Mal winced as the captain drew out the word into “air” and “ease” in an effort to show off the play on the God of War’s name. A man intelligent enough to pilot space craft should avoid bad puns if possible, he thought. The stewardess must have a gun to his head, Mal concluded.

The com clicked off and Mal again looked out the window. Sure enough, just coming over the planet’s black horizon was a splash of white on the surface. In the thin Martian atmosphere, Vermilion was like a brilliant star that had somehow become embedded in the rusty soil of Mars.

Twenty minutes later, walking along the bustling, crowded transparent surface tube that serviced several of the port’s many shuttle landing pads, Vermilion looked less a brilliant star and more a beating heart. With travel tubes tracing and crisscrossing the surface of the space port, either interconnecting or leading to the main concourse, they seemed to be veins, pumping passengers and cargo to the city, giving it the living fuel it required to exist. The hard, red glassmac that the tubes ran along glistened and reflected light, both artificial and real. And the concourse dome itself pulsed with light, giving the illusion of actual movement. Of the four major cities on Mars, Vermilion had always been Mal’s favorite. For his entire life, he had always counted it as home.

They came to a restricted access tube and Mal punched in his code. A small figure, no more than a meter in height, appeared in midair at eye level.

“Good evening, sir,” the holo attendant toned. “This is an access tube restricted to official ITA use only. Please state the reason for your access to this tube.” It sounded like it really wanted to grant access, it was so painfully polite.

“Official ITA use,” Mal replied, shaking his head at having to give such an obvious response. ITA was a good outfit, but sometimes it did seem as though it was run by committee. Either that or a well trained chimpanzee.

“Yes, sir. Access granted,” it replied, relieved it could comply. The holo flashed off and access indicator lights flashed on. Fred and Mal passed through the sentry port and into a small circular room containing three ground shuttle hovs. Taking the smallest, a two person runabout no more than three meters long and one and a half meters wide, Mal announced the location—again a silly redundancy since there was only one place the tube went—and the hov moved north quickly down the long, carpeted tube. Once underway, Mal again struck up the conversation.

“So, what are your plans for the next three days, Fred?”

“I should imagine that ITA will decide them for me, sir. The mission download process will require only twenty-one hours. Verification of data transfer will require fourteen minutes, and organic core memory wipe an additional three hours, leaving forty-seven hours and forty-six

minutes usable remaining time, assuming departure exactly seventy-two hours from now.”

“So, do you wanna come on over? We’ll tour the town. I’ve got a few friends to look up, an’ I wanna get the apartment on-line for when we get back.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Fred said with a shake of his head. “I do appreciate the offer, but I’m certain that ITA will require at least 90% of the remaining time for organic and cybernetic diagnostics and upgrade.”

“And the remaining ten percent?” Mal pressed.

“Sleep,” Fred replied simply. That was a solid conversation stopper, so they traveled the remaining distance in silence.

Mal eased back and put his feet up on the console, against the low windshield. The hov toned disapprovingly, but Mal ignored it. Looking west out of the clear tube at the passing landscape, toward the Thom Depression Terran suburbs, Mal could make out the soft glow of clouds, sitting low on the horizon. One of a dozen terra-formed pockets on Mars, the Thom community had a breathable atmosphere, rainfall, even snow during the winter. It was all possible by using huge generators that created a gravity dome over the thirty-six square kilometer area, increasing the gravity and keeping in both moisture and atmosphere. Thom was a prototype area of what all the Martian cities would be like one day in the distant future. Presently, it was inhabited by ten thousand people, most of them affluent Terran transplants wanting the exotic life of living on another planet but unwilling to give up the conveniences of a breathable atmosphere. Since the price they paid for lighter gravity and brilliant skies was Earth type gravity and Earth type clouds, to Mal it was just proof that idiocy was not discriminatory; anyone could get the stupids. His focus returned to the immediate area when the tunnel dipped into the ground and the sight was cut off.

Five minutes later, the hov slowed down as it sensed the approaching zone was more congested. They exited the tunnel and entered the ITA complex. Buried in the rock, as was the custom of the older structures, ITA still had a breathable “outdoors”, a large, sealed cavern that had multiple access tubes and even an open area of sea grass, one of the few Terran plants capable of growing in treated Martian soil. A hundred meters up, across the smoothed and sealed roof of the cavern, were large sun lights, used to bathe the area in natural light. It was dimmed now, to simulate night, but was still bright enough to see the entire area. Around them, people were moving about, lolling around on the sand, or otherwise enjoying the late evening. With a steady cavern temperature of twenty-six degrees, it was pleasantly warm.

The hov, its goal firmly planted in its tiny brain, didn’t linger but made for the ITA entrance, a large building set toward the back of the cavern and made entirely of Martian red glass. Autosensors, having identified both Mal and Fred, guided it to the right side of the building, to the ball chaser division. They got out—with Mal taking a moment to stretch—then headed inside. The hov quietly thanked them for letting it serve them, then headed back empty to its stall at the space port.

Directly in front of them was the reception area with a large counter top made of marble. Beyond it was the access door, guarded by an armed and attentive ITA soldier. Overhead, from the high ten meter ceiling, hung a huge Martian colonies flag, the pitch black background nicely offsetting the brilliant gold stars scattered on the field and the hard red planet symbol in the center. There was a silver haired receptionist waiting for them, a cheerful smile on her face.



“Why look who’s back from his gallivanting! Mal, it’s good to see you!”

“Hiya, Margaret. It’s good to be back. How’s Tony and the little ones?”

She laughed. “You haven’t been gone that long, Mal! Both my little ones are in college now. Brian’s at MCU in New LA, working on his planetary engineering Ph.D. and little Nicky—who’s eleven now—is in her second year at the VCU campus, down in Heinlein.” She glanced over at Fred, standing beside and behind Mal.

“And hello to you, too, Fred. I hope your trip was satisfactory and pleasant.” Her greeting was less enthusiastic toward Fred, but only because of her long association with Mal and her knowledge of ship ripes. Fred gave a small smile and a short bow, visibly appreciating the properly worded greeting.

“The trip was very satisfactory and successful. Thank-you, Mrs. Harbreath. I am now available for proper end of tour duties.”

“Straight to the point, aren’t you, Fred?” Margaret said with a cheerful laugh.

“It is the way of my kind, Mrs. Harbreath.”

“Okay, then, let’s get you processed.” She tapped on her console for a few seconds then looked up with surprise. Surprise? On second thought, Mal sensed something more. “I see they’ve extended your tour, Mal.”

“Yeah, they’re sending us to Earth for who knows what reason.” He looked at Margaret thoughtfully. “It seems to me, Margaret, that you might be one of those ‘who knows’ people. Know anything?”

She paused a brief moment and pursed her lips, then shook her head. “Sorry, Mal. I think it has something to do with the Terran government, because they’re the only ones other than ITA who can send the *Horizon* anywhere, and there’s nothing in the ITA data pool that says they’re doing it.” Mal knew she had more to say, but didn’t want to say it here. He nodded slowly. She looked down as her console sounded. She consulted it quickly and turned her attention to Fred.

“You’re officially transferred to ITA command, Vermilion, Fred. Go on in, Central Deprocessing will be waiting for you.”

Fred nodded his thanks and walked around the desk to the guarded door. He placed his forehead against the access panel, conversed with the ITA core system at a level beyond understanding, and was granted admittance. He passed through, then stopped and turned, looking back toward Mal.

“Thank-you for your escort, sir, and the company. I regret I’ll be unable to join you and the crew this evening and look forward to serving with you again.” As farewells went, for a ripe it was a heart warming and tearful good-bye. He turned back and proceeded down the hallway, the door sliding quietly closed behind him. Mal leaned on the desk.

“So, what time are you off, Margaret? The crew’s headin’ over to Jonesy’s in about two hours. Maybe you could join us.”

“Why, thank-you, Mal! I’d love to come, but I’m afraid I have to pass. I am getting off in

three hours, but I'm expecting a call from Brian and I don't want to miss it. I'll catch you when you get back from Earth."

"Fair enough," Mal said agreeably, not wanting to press the invitation where others might hear. He pushed of the desk and turned toward the door, waving. Margaret raised a hand and gave him a smile.

It was a smile that gave Mal a sudden chill.

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## Chapter Four



Mars Date: Jan 10, 112

Terran Date: May 16, 2259

The heavy man sitting in the gravchair snorted with disgust.

"Just when you think you've finally built up a decent clientele who don't start fights and always pay their bar bills, in walks hoboken." He laughed and moved his chair toward the door, holding out his hand. "Mal! How you doin'?"

"Hiya, Jonesy!" The old friends shook hands, gripping each other's forearms, as was the Martian custom. Mal looked around at the hazy, elegantly seedy interior of The Chamber Pot, universally known as Jonesy's. A single room of twenty meters by thirty, it had a loose scattering of round wooden tables and chairs. With booths along one side and in the rear, Jonesy could fit a hundred patrons comfortably and twice that if warranted, which it often was. There was a bar of twenty meters length against the longer far wall behind which a half dozen bartenders were kept very busy during peak hours. Behind the bar, in the tradition of the saloons of the previous century and the saloons of Earth's Wild West of the 19th century, there was a massive display. It could display either of Mars' public puterverse information holocasts, any combination of thousands of lurid portraits that resided in Jonesy's private data pool, or act as a mirror, which was its current condition. At the far corner was a door way which led to the kitchen and Jonesy's private room, the one where at least one of everything on the planet had once been sold.

Other than themselves and the employees—a combination of bartenders, luridly dressed waitresses and three professional gamblers, it was empty. "So where's this non-fighting, bar tab paying clientele? I don't see anyone."

"That's cause Duane called about an hour ago to let me know your scow had pulled in. I musta missed it on the HV. I tried to keep it to myself, but word got out and the place has been empty for half an hour." Both knew that Jonesy always emptied the place before the crew came in and gave them exclusive service for a short time. "Don't worry, it'll pick up after the crew gets their first round. An' it let's us catch up." He waved a hand at the nearest table, and Mal eased into the chair gratefully. Jonesy leaned back and yelled over his shoulder.

"Hey! Somebody wake up back there an' fetch a couple coffees. Solid black and hot!" Until

the first toast with Pam and the crew, Mal laid off the alcohol and Jonesy knew it. Quickly, two steaming mugs were in front of them, a large pot between them. Jonesy cut power on the chair and it settled to the ground.

Aluiscous Heather Jones—no more than a dozen people knew his first name and exactly three knew his middle—was a story of despise. He started out as a failure and worked his way down. Abandoned on Mars at the age of three by parents who couldn't afford being tied down by responsibility, Jonesy quickly learned the trades of the tunnel, from theft to prostitution. Despite his young age, he survived. His life was an endless nightmare of crime and punishment, with a moment of peace coming only when eating a meal he had stolen or traded his body and pride for.

When Jonesy was old enough to pass for nine—like most space faring Martians, Mal had acquired the habit of thinking in normal time when on Mars and Terran time everywhere else—he had joined ITA. Despite his past, they signed him. Fortunately—at least for Jonesy—the Troid Piracy War was just heating up and ITA needed copious amounts of laser fodder. He was buried in the armory of a derelict medium cruiser, where he spent hours constantly cleaning and refining the ship's personnel armaments.

Later, in 98, when ITA initiated its infamous total response warfare, Jonesy found himself the possessor of two indispensable commodities; total ruthlessness and a comprehensive knowledge of weaponry. Despite his inglorious service to date, his hard bitten attitude earned him a commission on one of the new gunships that chased the pirates into the asteroid field and to their bases. There, despite heavy loss of ITA forces, Jonesy and his ship survived the war, despite a laser shot to the spine that cost him the use of his legs. Because the very existence of Mars had been threatened by the constant piracy, Jonesy returned to Mars a hero.

Upon his return, however, despite being a hero, he quickly slipped back into his old tunnel ways. Instead of stealing though, he fenced. And instead of selling himself, he sold others. He continued this way for several years, until Linda.

She'd been one of his girls who'd conducted business at the huge space dock on the *Bearden*, but despite their distance and relationship, she had fallen in love with him. With a head of deep red hair and flashing green eyes, Linda was one of the favorites. Despite her obvious physical charms—she had a figure that allowed her to charge a hefty premium on top of the normal rates—she also had a warmth and strength of character that was not for sale. She gave it freely, however, to Jonesy, seeing something in him that she wanted. Looking for some comfort, he'd brought her back to Vermilion, then shocked everyone by marrying her, after only a few months.

Within two years, he'd dumped his theft and prostitution ring and opened The Chamber Pot. Constant scrutiny by the local officials and the police force proved him to be completely legitimate—even to the point that he'd used no money from his criminal activities to fund the business. They stopped investigating after two more years and now he was a respected member of the lower section of Vermilion.

The location of his ill gotten gains remained a mystery, but it was occasionally whispered that the investigation had been called off for two reasons. The first was that he'd worked over mainly Terran tourists and transplants and had always been a loyal local son. The second was that despite the near poverty conditions of the immediate neighborhoods, the playgrounds

were always in good shape, and there always seemed to be just enough food and clothing available to help the more destitute families. Jonesy's past life went into the records as an unwritten, never spoken of, unsolved solved case.

All this because of Linda and despite himself.

"So, how was 18 Scorpii?" Jonesy asked, a hint of envy in his voice. He'd always wanted to chase the ball, but while ITA respected his skill and service within the Sol system, he knew he was never going to get on their big interstellar ships.

Mal nodded his head in remembrance. "It went smooth, Jonesy. We took out a scouting/science party with enough gear to start up a little town on the third planet. We set 'em down on a rocky coast on the planet's largest ocean. They decided to name the town Stinger and the planet Sameold, which pretty much..."

"Call it what?" Jonesy interrupted.

"Sameold, as in the phrase 'same old, same old'."

Jonesy let out a short, derisive laugh, "What a stupid name! How do they expect to draw people to a planet named Sameold? Or a town named Stinger? I'm tellin' you, Mal, you want a successful planet, you start with a good name. These groups you haul out there should be required to take along a poet, or someone with a sense of romanticism. Let him name everything."

Mal shrugged, "Maybe. But the name Sameold does pretty much sum up the place. Weather's pretty standard all year round, since the planet stands straight up and has a dead circle orbit."

"How many moons?"

"None, so the tides are pretty weak. In fact, the planet's pretty sterile. The plant life is simplistic and there aren't a whole lot of species. Same for the animals. Even still, it'll take years to even begin cataloging the life there, especially with just the first batch. There were only a hundred and eighty of them, but I heard a couple of the second generation ball chasers were going to be hightailing it out there about twelve months after we left with some real colonists."

Jonesy nodded. "Yeah, the *Wisconsin* and the *Duster* headed out last Tunov. They're supposed to do the run in twenty weeks."

"Twenty weeks!?" Mal said in surprise. "They'd have to do FTL 140 or better to get there that fast."

"That's nothing." He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "I've heard a few other things from my sources on Earth. I think it has something to do with you, Mal."

"Me?" Mal was very surprised now. "Jonesy, I'm just a third class engin..."

"Not you personally, Mal. I mean you as in the *Horizon* and her crew. It's not been released to the public yet, but like I said, I've got my spies. I'm out of the business now, but I always keep up to date. Tell me, have you ever heard of hyperspace?"

"Sure. Who hasn't?" Mal said with a shrug. "Hyperspace was discovered in theory way

back in the 2180's, Earth time. Then they proved its existence in 2214, in ITA's R&D division in Portland. It was what triggered the Oregon firestorm, when their safety precautions weren't good enough."

"That's pretty much what we were told, all right. But that's not the real story. Their precautions were good enough, Mal. And the Terran government's been fiddling with hyperspace in secret for twenty-five years, ever since the firestorm. My sources say that they've discovered a way to insert an entire ship into hyperspace."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Mal waved his hands in disbelief. "You've been drinking too much of that rot-gut you sell, Jonesy. Why in the world would Earth keep development of hyperspace a secret? A secret so tight I haven't heard about it? I admit that I'm out of the loop now, but I have *my* sources and I haven't heard anything."

"You've been gone."

"What? You're saying this came to a head in one year? And they're ready to experiment on this new type of travel? With the *Horizon*? That air's just a bit too thin to breathe, Jonesy."

Jonesy stared at him with thoughtful eyes. "Maybe. But it would explain why the *Horizon*'s return hasn't been holoized like normal, and why you're heading to Earth in a few days. And there's others who think like me. One of 'em is a Pisces that's been hangin' around here for the past month asking for you." Jonesy looked at him with narrowed eyes. "An' this time I *do* mean you personally, Mal."

\* \* \*

"Uhh... to the... uhh..." Ensign M'boula lowered her mug for a moment and collected her thoughts. All around her, as she stood on the bar counter at Jonesy's, the entire crew of the *Horizon* waited expectantly. Giving a toast was a great deal harder than she'd imagined. It might have been better to have just rammed the ship into the docking module and saved the embarrassment of choking now. She decided to go with the standard lame one. She raised her mug, as did everyone in the jammed bar.

"To the crew of the *Horizon*. We're the best in the service." A loud cheer rang out and she raised her mug higher and looked up toward the ceiling. "And to the *Horizon* herself, the best ship ever built." A sudden flash of inspiration hit her and she smiled. "She's just like my boyfriend. Kinda big 'n bulky, but when you know where to put your fingers, they can dance a jig on a microchip."

There was a thunderous roar of laughter that made the bar vibrate, then everyone drank their toast. Feeling much better, Grace climbed down off the bar, feeling Captain Carlson grab her by the elbow to help. She was smiling hugely.

"Great toast, Ensign! Grace, isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am." Grace swallowed hard, taken slightly aback by this boisterous side of her captain. Pamela laughed.

"Hey, call me Pamela tonight, Grace. We're on duty tomorrow, and it's back to Captain and Ensign, but here at Jonesy's we're comrades. Got it?"

"Yes, ma... er, Pamela." She looked nervous and Pamela laughed again.

"I know. It takes some getting used to. Don't worry, Grace. Next trip we finish, you'll do better. I don't think you can top that toast though. Now if you'll excuse me, I gotta go find Mal."

Grace nodded and started to salute out of habit. Fortunately, she had her mug in that hand, so she just changed direction and took a swallow instead. Pamela, her eyes sparkling with humor, slapped her shoulder once, then went off, working her way easily through the packed bar. Grace followed her with her eyes, then smiled after her. She now personally knew why Captain Calr... no, Pamela, was *the* Captain.

Pamela made her way toward the far corner, where Mal had a permanently reserved table. She stopped many times to congratulate her individual crew members, responding to the veterans who knew her and spoke first, and starting the exchange with the newer crew members who had just become veterans. Though she could move fairly easily with no jostling, it still took her five minutes to reach the table. Mal was sitting there quietly with Jonesy and Jonesy's wife, Linda. She pulled up a chair and sat with them, not bothering to ask permission, knowing she was a founding member of their little cohort.

"Evening, gents! Hiya, Linda!" Pamela's voice held only respect for this couple that had crawled from the sewage of their former lives to build what they had now. She raised her mug, which contained only a swallow of Martian ale. "To the *Horizon* and a voyage well done!"

They clanked their mugs and polished them all. Linda refilled each from the table pitcher with a deft hand, bringing the head above the rim just enough to cause a tempting trail of foam to glide slowly down the still frozen solid brass mugs.

"Not completely done, Pam," Mal started. "We still gotta side trip to Earth to take care of." He looked at her with eyes that said he knew something she didn't. "Any more word on the why of this extra tour?"

"They haven't said anything, Mal," Pam said with an indifferent shrug that matched neither her loud carrying on of a moment ago nor the slight edge of frustration in her voice now. "I thought when I submitted the mission log at ITA that they'd open up. They didn't, so I asked point blank. Sanderson just said he had no idea, either." Sanderson was ITA's Martian Fleet Admiral, the real authority of the ball chasers, but still only a lower official in ITA's heavily Terran makeup. "I know he's just as pissed as I am. But I don't have to like it, and neither does he. If ITA wants me to take my ship to Earth, I take her to Earth."

"Hmm," Mal leaned forward and to Pamela, the noise of the exuberant crowd seemed to fade. "Jonesy here has an idea we're going to be guinea pigs."

"Guinea pigs?" Pamela's voice took on a distinctly cooler tone.

"Uh-huh. The *Horizon* was the first ship to chase a ball. Now ITA—or someone else—wants us to be the first one to enter a hyperidor."

"A hyperidor?" she set her mug down with a bang, her face going hard. For all the true joy of life that was in Pamela, she was also gifted in the darker merits of command, not the least of these being a fiercely protective nature of those under her authority, with a harsh attitude towards those who would put them in harm's way without just cause. The implication in Mal's

statement settled in and she looked at him. "What do you mean, 'or someone else'?"

"I don't know yet," Mal replied, his eyes drifting toward the entrance of the bar, "but I think we're going to find out real quick."

Looking over her shoulder, Pamela looked back into the crowd. Though she'd only tuned out the noise earlier, this time it did actually fade in volume. The Chamber Pot had just received a very special guest. Standing head and shoulders above everyone, his eyes fixed on their table, was a Pisces.

He made his way deliberately toward them, gliding in a straight line as those in his way receded, staring. All but a few of the crew were from Mars, so they knew and accepted these dignified amphibious humans, many who made their home here on the lighter gravity frontier. A few greeted him with both palms out, snapping quickly at the waist. The Pisces returned each with a similar gesture, adding to the sharp bow a fluidity that stopped the heart with its beauty. Others, those less familiar with their race, ignored him or stole curious looks, avoiding his steel gray, watery eyes. No one, Pamela proudly noted, called out after him or showed him disgrace by intentionally touching him. She could tell by the slight vibration of his gills, located behind and below his ears, that he was as pleased. He came and stopped in front of them. They all rose as one, palms out, except Jonesy of course, who also raised his hands, lifting them to the same height as the others, demonstrating he had no weapon in his chair that he would use against the Pisces. The Pisces looked at their outstretched palms, then snapped deeply at the waist. He straightened and addressed Pam.

"Your honor ripples sweetly from your crew. I acknowledge proudly that I know you. Discussion is needful, but secrecy is more. For the sake of my children and yours, I request your acknowledgment by acceding to me your mate, Mahlon Stewart."

"That you acknowledge me honors my family and my race. Discussion is agreeable and needful." Pamela slipped easily into the straightforward yet flowery speech of the Pisces. "Our children will benefit greatly from our meeting, for I joyously accede my mate Mahlon Stewart to your kind attentions." By referring to Mahlon as her mate, there was clear understanding that he was responsible to report to her fully the conversation that would take place between them. The Pisces tilted his head slightly, allowing Mahlon to enter his field of vision.

"We will begin needful discussion immediately. Does either mate wish to build upon the foundation of our dialogue?"

"I shall build upon our foundation," Pamela stated. "If it will help our children, I request that our discussion include possible unspeakables to be identified, so that their unbreathable deeds can be fully salted." To the Pisces, dark did not equate with evil, for the waters they thrived in were dark. Rather, they referred to evil as being unbreathable, made right by adding breathable salt water. His gills flipped slightly at her proper use. Very tolerant of those who didn't know their grammar structure, Pisces deeply appreciated those who understood and spoke the language of the waters.

"Three twenty-six," he replied with a slow head bow. No one knew why they used the term—other than it coincided with the date of celebration for them—but to a Pisces, three twenty-six meant complete agreement. He turned and made his way toward the door, knowing Mal would follow at his pleasure. To many unschooled in the practices of their race, it would seem to be an arrogant move, meant to belittle the air breathing human into following

them. It instead meant that the human had their complete trust, for only a friend could guard your back. Mal took a last swallow and made for the door. As he passed, Pamela reached out and grabbed Mal's arm.

"Careful, third engineer," she said with a small smile. "Pisces don't talk in secrecy unless it's serious."

"Hey, I'm the one who taught you that, lady. I may have to miss my shift tomorrow. If he's got live information for me, I'll want to follow up on it before we shove off. You can reach me at my place." Pamela nodded and Mal turned toward Jonesy. "By the way, Jonesy. Margaret Harbreath from ITA will be stopping by in a couple of hours. Make sure she talks to you or Pam. I think she's got a little more to add. I don't know what it is, but at this point, we need to know as much as possible."

"All right," Jonesy replied. "An' like Pam said, be careful."

Mal laughed. "Keep the coffee on, Aluiscous. We'll be talkin'."

"He ain't goin' anywhere, Mal," Linda piped in.

"I coulda said that, woman," Jonesy complained with love in his eyes.

Mal hurried after the Pisces, who had already passed outside into the large dim tunnel. Once clear of the bar, it was easy to spot the tall figure as he swooped gracefully among the rushes planted in the Martian soil along the nearest edge of the tunnel. Though gravity anchored him as firmly to the ground as Mal, he still looked as though he could suddenly shake free of its grip and glide to the tunnel's ceiling, one hundred meters above them.

Mal jogged up to him, then fell into step to one side and a little behind. Again, not a position of service but one of honor. As they walked, Mal looked at his new acquaintance. Tall, as were nearly all Pisces, he looked very much human. He had a long, angular face, its edges softened by a frame of long blonde hair and a pale skin that glimmered ever so slightly translucent. He was thin, almost gangly, but had powerful, sinewy leg muscles that could propel him quickly through water or let him appear to float across dry ground. Other than his gill slits and his faded, watery eyes—another common trait—the only other feature that marked his race were long fingers, half again the length of their air breathing cousins. Stories that they were slowly mutating to be completely marine were nonsense, as were equally unfounded rumors that they were a blend of two species; human and something else. He was as human as Mal was, with the hereditary features of all Pisces having been programmed into the original volunteers two Earth centuries prior by some unknown, since forgotten, source.

Although their race had existed for only two centuries, however, their strides in colonizing the oceans had been rapid. By founding their capital city only 50 kilometers off the New York Long Island coast, and since settling a half dozen smaller towns close to the shores of England, Egypt and Japan, they established early on that they intended to be active members of Earth's peoples. Numbering nearly two hundred thousand now, they were a sovereign people with no country, the oceans having long since been declared universal property. There were two thousand Pisces on Mars, the lighter gravity and the need to contribute to society being the key reasons for their presence. No Pisces served on ships; they had very clear ideas on where they would and would not seek employment. The criteria that determined those guidelines were very unclear, however, to everybody who was not a Pisces.



They continued a brisk walk through the lower section of Vermilion. It was the oldest section of the century old city, and the poorest. As is often the case, the inner city had been built with older technologies, being the center of activity until new industries and the passage of time demanded better, more advanced conditions. It was easier to construct from virgin solid rock while still using the existing structures in a lesser capacity, while also allowing Vermilion to expand. Originally a colony of three hundred, it now filled the towering cliffs of the Reull Vallis delta where it emptied into the eastern edge of the Hellas Impact basin, the largest feature in the Martian southern hemisphere. Once only this single main tunnel plus a dozen offshoots, Vermilion had expanded to an area of sixteen hundred square kilometers in order to support its half-million population. Now on the outskirts of the modern city, Old Vermilion had drifted further and further from its place of glory to what it was today; the run down, poverty stricken eyesore that all the tourist brochures tastefully neglected to mention.

But to Mal, this was home. For unlike Jonesy, who had been abandoned here by heartless parents, Mal had been born and raised in these tunnels by a loving family. The third child of eight, Mal had quickly become the adventurer, exploring the tunnels and the people, dodging in and out of the hov traffic, running errands, and hanging around Mr. Billups' shop, learning the science and art of the engine. Before he was able to legally drive, he was tearing apart the antigrav drives of Mr. Billups' wrecks, making them work with a just-off-the-lot hum that caught Mr. Billups' ear. He'd hired Mal when he was only five and half, a boy still in elementary school, and made him his apprentice. Mr. Billups died of a heart attack only three years later, and when his brother came in to claim the shop, he sold it for what he could and closed it down. Having just reached nine years, the age of enlistment, Mal joined up, and his career had started. He came back now only very infrequently, as his ship put in, but he still maintained a small two room apartment here, and considered it as much his home as the engine room of the *Horizon*.

He wanderings came to a halt just his escort did. The Pisces—Mal would never think of asking for his name, but would wait until told—stopped in front of a small house that was set apart from the street by means of a tall, two meter stone wall. Though still not a castle, it was one of the better residences in the tunnel, and very much in keeping with the likes of a Pisces home. The Pisces slid his hand into a small recessed area mounted into the wall near the ghost door that would accept only their long fingers, and was identified as a resident. The planed energy barrier did not turn off, but did make a small tone, indicating passage was allowed. The Pisces stepped quickly through the seemingly solid surface, his form being eerily swallowed up. Mal followed, feeling the tingle of the planed edges that were less than a millimeter from his skin.

Once inside the wall, the house looked even more like a Pisces home. In the front, open area was a landscape of hollowed rocks flowing with water that tickled the air with the scent of salt. Though it looked to be entirely ornamental, Mal quickly spotted the small rise of red rock that indicated a sleeping area. In an odd contradiction, Pisces did not like the confinement of a house when sleeping, yet slept in these snug compartments under the water. He saw only one such mound and, not wanting to be rude by openly searching for them, did not look for any more. He instead followed the Pisces over a small stone bridge that spanned the narrow but deep stream, and came to the entrance of the tunnel home.

Many homes in Vermilion were now free standing structures. But when the city was originally founded, before reinforced tunnel carving had been perfected, most residences were

built straight into the tunnel wall and were self sufficient. This house was one such. They stepped through the ghost door—no special entrance code was needed this time—and into the dim main room. There were two more Pisces waiting for them, standing and facing their direction. Behind them, Mal could barely make out two dark hallways. He stepped around his new friend and stood directly in front of him, putting his back to him and holding out his palms. As the visitor, he had to demonstrate total trust by making himself as vulnerable as possible.

“My children, both born and yet to be born, rejoice that we have chosen discussion. My honor is satisfied and enriched that I am here at the foundation.”

The taller of the two was a male in his mid-thirties. His face still carried the smooth skin of youth, but even in this darker room, Mal could tell his eyes were almost completely devoid of color, and his blond hair with tinged with gray-green. This man would be an elder, a position of respect accorded to many but not all Pisces over the age of thirty. There were probably no more than twenty elders on Mars.

He pulled out his weapon, armed it, released the safety and handed it to Mal. The other, a young female Pisces of tender proportions—probably the elder’s daughter—extended her palms and bowed. Mal accepted the weapon, pointed it at the head of the girl briefly, then re-engaged the safety and turned off the sonic charger, which had been set to lethal. Pisces went in big for trust. He handed it back.

“Your lives belong to me.”

“And your life belongs to us,” said the elder. He nodded with a slow, graceful twist, and the Pisces behind Mal showed him the energy blade that had no doubt been placed close to his back. Mal acknowledged his debt and the Pisces turned the knife off and sheathed it. There were many forms of greeting among the Pisces, and Mal had just taken part in the most extreme one. While honored, he felt the first twinge of sincere worry. This exchange meant that what he was about to hear was life or death for either the Pisces or he and the crew. Perhaps both.

The formalities concluded, the elder Pisces fixed his watery eyes on Mal and began the discussion.

“You know the ways, which please us. You know not the unbreathable ways to be forced upon you, Mal Stewart, and we are not pleased. You will be told the way of the salt.”

“I am shamed to not know the ways to be forced on us by the unspeakable, and am grateful to taste the salt. Continue construction.” Mal was not offended by their abrupt way of getting to the point; his own nature leaned the same way.

“One power causes pain, but is necessary. Many powers cause too much pain, and is unwanted.” He said this so as to make it seem obvious. The Pisces way of discussion tended to work in reverse. The conclusion was stated immediately, with all proofs and side issues coming afterward. Since there was no reference point, it was often the case that they seemed to make no sense, but as long as one kept in mind the original statement, and pointed all conversation toward it, discussions could be very focused and informative, despite their brevity. Mal therefore nodded at the odd statement, knowing it to be the main point, with explanation to follow.

"You are building, and I watch with great intent," he said.

"The governments of the Ground are many, but they are one power. There is necessary pain. There are other powers." The Pisces paused and looked for comprehension in Mal's face. It appeared quickly.

"There are other powers," Mal replied. "There are the Red Ground Powers. There are ITA Powers." He stopped, waiting. The Pisces nodded his head, his hair forming soft waves along the sides of his head and onto his shoulders.

"You know this," he stated flatly, indicating there was more. "There are other powers. We have for you an infant members of those powers." He extended his hand and the girl hurried into one of the dark hallways. There was a moment of quiet conversation, then she returned, leading by the hand another woman.

She was human. Though she had blond hair similar to the Pisces, it was short. She was of average build and had brown eyes. Eyes that looked more than a little confused and frightened and... in the dim lit, Mal wasn't sure, but they also had the look of a hunted animal. She saw Mal and tried to pull away from the girl. The younger Pisces was taller than the woman, but had a far slighter build. Yet she held on without effort. Their genetic makeup gave the entire race great strength, to better swim the deep waters of the Earth's oceans. The woman continued to struggle, much to the embarrassment of the young Pisces girl, so Mal spoke up.

"Knock it off, lady! You're shaming her and me! These people are our friends. They're probably the best friends you can have. Now settle down." She stared hard at him, but stopped struggling. Mal turned to the elder.

"I am shamed by this one's behavior. I extend all apologies to your child and wish to have that time back, that I may make aright." The Pisces flipped his gills. His daughter flashed a smile of relief and bowed her head to gratefully accept the apology.

"I give you my child's time and she thanks you. Her children and yours will be friends, as my children are your children's friends. This woman is yours. She are the rebellious fragments, she is the key." Mal wondered briefly why the elder was mixing up his singular and plural grammar. Without movement or sound, the two Pisces exchanged a communication and the girl released the woman, who ran over to Mal. He snatched her arm and pulled her close, not so much to comfort her as to prevent her from further embarrassing them. He leaned his mouth close to her ear.

"You're going to be fine, but we gotta do these things the salt way. Just be patient."

"The... the... salt way?" she whispered back.

"Uh-huh. The correct way. Now keep quiet." Mal looked back to the Pisces. "I am grateful for the fragment, for the key. The unspeakables will be salted. The discussion continues."

"The discussion continues," the Pisces nodded, "there will be in twenty eight tides an action against the Power that is necessary, against the other Power that is good. Your ship and the crew that honors her are to be given over to those Powers as a false sacrifice, so that the unneeded Power who owns this members, can arise and seize our children."

Mal blinked from what he'd heard. Though the details were still to come, the Pisces had

just told him that the *Horizon's* crew was to be killed. He wanted to scream and demand the details, but refrained.

"Continue construction," he said as calmly as possible.

"There will be in twenty eight tides a..." his head jerked up, snapping to attention, just as the other two did. They became motionless. Mal started at this completely foreign behavior, then suddenly cocked his head, for he now heard what they did; the sound of hovs screaming in on the attack.

He twisted around and made for the home's only window. Staring out at the top of the wall, he saw nothing at first. Then a small glimmer made him lift his head toward the tunnel's ceiling. Coming in tight formation were eight heavy attack hovs. Just as he spotted them, the lead hov opened fire.

The bolt flickered across the half-kilometer of space in an instant and smashed into the ghost door of the home. Solidified by a twining field, the energy plane shattered into a thousand slivers of razor sharp charged matter, flooding the interior with deadly shrapnel. Since Mal was close to the wall, the woman having been dragged there with him, they escaped the deadly bombardment. The others were not so lucky.

The Pisces that Mal had walked with was standing closest to the door and took the brunt of the blast. His clothes, face, and body were instantly shredded. He didn't bleed; he became blood, as the micron thick solid energy literally skinned him alive. As horrible and as agonizing as it looked, he mercifully died unknowing in a brutally abrupt snuffing of life.

There was another teeth jarring blast, followed immediately by a third. Within seconds, the front wall of the home was shattered and crumbling, their only protection now a pile of rubble and a curtain of fine, red dust.

"Come!" The elder motioned to the second dark hallway. Mal quickly followed, the numbed woman he was holding stumbling along. As they entered the hallway, Mal looked down to his right and saw the young girl lying against the back wall, her eyes staring out sightlessly while blood ebbed slowly from a dozen tears in her body. Another shock wave bucked against them as the hovs pressed their attack.

The three went back only three or four meters, and then the hallway ended in a small pool. The Pisces turned toward them, pulling his weapon and snapping it on.

"The foundation is laid. Seek no vengeance, for it is not yours. Nor is it mine."

Mal stood tall and looked him in the eyes. The Pisces was clearly bleeding to death, but would still harbor no hatred against his killers. Though Mal would dearly love to retaliate, he had never broken a promise to a Pisces. He nodded.

"No vengeance will be sought. The foundation is laid. My children and your children will be friends."

"Three twenty-six," the Pisces replied. He broke out into a cough, an eerie combination of sound as it escaped both his throat and gills, blood coating his lips and neck. He stumbled down the hall, then turned back to face them. In the floodlights and explosions of the hovs in the background, Mal could see only his black form, stark against the glare and dust.

"I am Darkly Softide. Tell your children." He coughed once more. The gun's ready to fire light flickered yellow, then green. "And tell my children."

And then he was gone.

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## Chapter Five



Mars Date: Jan 10, 112

Terran Date: May 16, 2259

Mal looked after him for a moment, but made no move to help him. He was already dead, and if his death was to have meaning, Mal and the woman must escape.

He looked down at the small pool at their feet. It was a passage to the sleeping pools that were scattered about the front yard. He hoped that they held some air. Otherwise they would either drown or be forced to return to this room, where they'd be either shot or buried alive. He put a hand on the back of the woman and pressed.

"In you go," he said simply.

"What?" she said disbelievingly. "I—I—can't..."

"Yes, you can." Despite the urgency of the moment, Mal remained calm. He would get much further by encouraging this clearly distraught woman. "This pool goes down about two meters, then opens up to an underwater tunnel that heads toward the front yard. There will be at least two or three tunnels branching off in either direction. Ignore them and keep going straight until the tunnel opens above you. That will be one of their sleeping quarters and you'll find a pocket of air there." He thought it best to not voice the doubt in his mind that there might not be a pocket. "I'll be right behind you." She looked about to protest, so Mal took her by the shoulders and looked in her eyes.

"Lady, I have no idea who you are. We'll worry about that later. Right now, I do know that you are the key to keeping my friends alive. You're the most important person in the world to me, and I'll die before seeing you come to harm. You must believe me. Now go."

She nodded silently, then jumped into the pool. From the living area, the firing was continuing, but was more sporadic. They were probably winding down the attack and readying the ground thrust. He couldn't chance being spotted on thermals, so he jumped the instant he saw the woman's shadowy form disappear into the tunnel.

The water closed over him as he sank slowly to the bottom. Too slowly for his tastes, so he grabbed the upper edge of the tunnel and pulled himself down. Then, to aid his forward movement, he pushed off with his arms to the back of the pool wall. His feet came against the curved wall and he coiled his legs. Ahead, the tunnel was pitch black. He snapped his legs straight and propelled himself into the tunnel.

The week of Earth type gravity aboard the *Horizon* aided him here, for the extra strength

he'd built up let him thrust harder. He shot through the passageway, letting his hands glide gently along the circular walls. He continued to stare ahead but could still see nothing in the pitch blackness. His momentum was nearly gone, so he began pulling himself along with his hands, using his legs only when he felt another tunnel open up on either side of him. He was only just beginning to feel the burning in his lungs when the water took on a slight purple tint and he could make out the legs of the woman. She was at least a meter above the floor of the tunnel, and her legs were kicking very slowly, indicating she'd reached the air pocket. Gratefully, he pushed off the tunnel floor and made for the woman.

He surfaced and gave out a small gasp, sucking in the sweet air. Too sweet, it turned out, for the richly scented air made him cough. He choked it back, not knowing how soundproof the outer walls were. He took another cautious breath and looked around.

They were on a sleeping shelf that lay a half meter underwater. Above the water line was an air pocket about one meter in height. The top of the chamber was covered with three holsters of a popular singer and another of Mount Olympus that was placed along the water's edge and seemed almost real. The purple light was coming from several scented light balls—all the rage among teenagers for several years now—that were floating on the water. Beside them was a net with girl's clothing. The woman pulled a piece of clothing that was hanging loosely from the net and stared at it. Then the reality of what had happened seemed to touch her and she began sobbing. Mal pulled her close and let her cry into his shoulder, partly to comfort her and partly to muffle her quiet crying.

From outside their room came muffled thuds as the attack craft continued to pour energy blasts into the tunnel home. He fervently hoped no one in the attacking cohort understood Pisces culture enough to recognize the small mounds for what they were. No point worrying about that. He'd know pretty quick if they did.

The woman's crying slowed down, then stopped, and she looked up at him. A change seemed to come over her, with resolution replacing most of her fear.

"I'm sorry. The Pisces people have been treating me very well for the past two months, but I guess I didn't think of them as... as..."

"Real people?" Mal prompted quietly. She flinched at the harsh sound of the words, then nodded.

"Yes. I hadn't thought of them as real people until now. It's so easy to disassociate them from normal life, to think of them as outsiders." She waved at room. "But this room suddenly brought it home that it was a teenage girl who just died."

"Yeah, I understand. Their ways are different, but they're regular people, just like you and me." He looked at her thoughtfully. "So you're from Earth, then?"

"How did you know?"

"On Mars, the term is 'tenager', not teenager. Ten Martian years works out to 18 Terran years, so we call kids from 7 to 11 'tenagers'.

"Oh," she said quietly.

"So, you're from Earth?" Mal prompted gently a second time.

"I'm sorry. Yes. My name is Emily O'Brien. I live in Columbus, Ohio and work for Ghan Digital. At least I used to. I haven't been back since February."

"So what happened?"

"What do you mean?" she replied defensively.

"I don't think a Pisces went to Columbus, Ohio, wherever that is, just to grab you and bring you to Mars. And I really doubt that Ghan Digital are the 'unneeded Powers' the elder was talking about. Ghan Digital makes great com panels—they're all over the ship—but a threat to world order they ain't."

"No, no you're right." She took a deep breath. "I don't know what happened to me, Mr. ... Mr. ..."

"Stewart. But call me Mal."

"Okay, Mal. I don't know what happened. I was coming home from work one night when suddenly I was standing with a group of people, staring at an ion power globe. I got away, but was chased. I was about to be sent back to the group when I was grabbed by a Pisces."

"Where were you?"

"I'm not sure, but it was definitely near the ocean. And the water was warm, so I imagine I was south of Columbus."

"And just where is Columbus?"

"Like I said, in Ohio." At Mal's pained expression, Emily hurried on, "That's in the middle of the USNA," she offered. At Mal's nod, she asked, "You mean you don't know where Ohio is?"

"Why should I?" Mal said with a shrug. "I've only been to Earth four times in my life and it's just not that important. Besides, do *you* know what province we're in?" She shook her head. "See? We're from two different worlds. Literally. So, you just suddenly appeared near the ocean? Were you drugged? Knocked unconscious? What?"

"I'm sorry," she answered with a shake of her head.

"We've got to figure out where you were. I'll bet that your location is key to figuring out why you're a key." He rubbed his chin with a dripping hand. "Did you hear any names?"

"Well... the name of the soldier who chased me said her name was Mendez. I didn't hear any other names because I was in such a hurry... wait. Yes, there was another name. We were on a pier. She had me cornered and had a gun. When I started to argue with her, saying I'd been taken against my will, she said she was just following orders, that I should take it up with her company. Just after that, the Pisces grabbed me and pulled me into the water."

"What was the name of the company?" The bombardment had stopped, and the room was quiet, with only the gentle slap of water against the walls to accent the silence.

"It was Harting. Harting Enterprises."

\* \* \*

"We can dock here for the night." Mal punched in his access code and the magnetic seal of his apartment door clicked off. He pushed the metal door open and stepped inside. The room lights came on, bathing the efficiency apartment in a soft glow.

"Welcome back, Mal," the pleasant voice of the computer toned. "You've been gone from your home for one year, four months and six days. Restoring full power to systems. Complete load in twenty-five seconds. Due to recent upgrades, your puterverse link is being rewritten and will be available to you in three hours. You have four thousand, four hundred and seventeen messages waiting for you."

"Delete 'em all." Anyone who didn't know he'd been gone was no one he wanted to talk to. "How long for hot water?"

"I will require six minutes, thirty-two seconds to bring the water reservoir to fifty-five degrees. However bathing facilities are immediately available."

"Great. Oh, one last thing. Expand access control to Emily O'Brien."

"Certainly. Opening access control. Please speak your name clearly."

"Emily O'Brien," Emily stated.

"Thank-you," the computer replied. "Access control initiation successful. Welcome, Emily."

"Okay, that's all set up," Mal said. "You have full access to the utilities and such, once they're back on line. And the computer will let you out and in anytime, but after what's happened, I don't suppose I need to tell you to stay put. I've got one more trip to make, but I should be back in twenty minutes."

"Where are you going?" Emily's asked in a worried tone.

"Gotta get some food. I also wanna try to contact the Captain. While I'm gone, help yourself to the shower. An' the dryer's in the kitchen for your clothes." He pointed to the back room where the kitchen was, then to the living room, which also served as a bedroom. "You can put on one of my shirts from the dresser here, meantime. See you in twenty." The frightened look was back in her eyes, though not as strongly. There was nothing else he could say, so he closed the door quietly behind him.

\* \* \*

Emily felt her heart pounding as Mal closed the door. She was alone again.

"This is different," she said out loud. Hearing it seemed to help. She looked around the small apartment. The main room was both a bedroom and living room. The small room in the back left was the kitchen, the smaller room in the back right the bathroom. Despite having spent the past two and half hours sitting in water, a hot shower sounded very appealing.

"Computer, lock the door, please." There was a snap as the field came on. Emily went over to the dresser, and after a moment's hesitation, opened a drawer. She pulled out a shirt and



closed the drawer. She looked at the other two drawers, feeling the temptation to peek. After all, she knew nothing about the man, other than he was trusted by the Pisces and she was somehow important to the safety of him and his crew mates. She shrugged off her guilt and opened the second drawer.

There was little of interest. A few more articles of clothing and several books, all from Mars and about Mars. One book, entitled *The Bombala Mines Fast Draw*, seemed to be a fictional adventure of the frontier days of Martian settlers, called westerns because of their similarity to the Earth genre. She closed the second drawer and opened the bottom one.

This drawer held some personal possessions. Most notable was a diploma from Martian Colonies University in New LA, dated Tuoct, 105. Emily frowned at the date, then remembered that Mars used a different calendar, with one of their years equalling just under two real years. Tuoct was the second October in a Martian year. She didn't know what year it was on the Martian calendar, but she noticed the diploma was an honorary doctorate, awarded to Mahlon Stewart for his many years as an engineer with ITA and for his service as the *Horizon's* chief engineer. That meant the diploma was less than fifteen years old. Of course she knew the *Horizon*, mankind's first faster than light ship. Everyone knew the *Horizon*. Emily had had a detailed model of the ship when she was a schoolgirl. She'd once known the name of every officer on the ship. Had dreamed of one day...

Mahlon Stewart.

Her eyes opened wide with realization. His name was suddenly familiar. This man who's care she was under was the *Horizon's* chief engineer!

She calmly placed the diploma back and slowly closed the drawer. Though her shame of having invaded someone's privacy had returned, she was glad she had. She now felt a calmness she'd thought she'd never have again. To Emily, that diploma was the same as a suit of armor. Mal Stewart had been, maybe still was, the chief engineer of the pinnacle of technology, man's greatest achievement ever. He was the person who activated the ball, that compelling force that the *Horizon* chased across space, its romantic mystery as powerful as the singularity of oblivion that was forever hidden within its dark sphere. If ever a man could be trusted with others' lives, it would be Mahlon Stewart.

And he had told her she was the most important person in the world to him. She held the key to saving the lives of the crew of the *Horizon*. No. She *was* the key.

Reeling slightly from the revelation of the enormity of her importance, Emily rose shakily to her feet. Picking up Mal's shirt, she walked to the bathroom, holding the wall for support. The light came on and she called for the shower. The water started and she undressed, still a little dazed from her new found knowledge.

The water was hot and wonderful. Soaping herself up, she continued to think through the mess her life had become. It didn't even seem to be her life any longer, she was just a helpless bystander caught in the backwash of this madly careening adventure. Why? What made her so important to the Pisces and to Mal? It had to be connected to her abduction by Harting Enterprises, and to the place where she'd appeared two months ago. She frowned and tried to recall as many details as she could about the night. She'd been with a group of people, all of whom had been staring into an ionic power sphere. All around were supplies. After she'd

broken away, she...

No, she should think about what happened before then, since her escape couldn't have been anticipated. She began rinsing off. While the escape was what made her important, it was what happened prior to that that was the key. She probed her mind for other details of that eerie, green light bathed scene.

There seemed to be fifteen or twenty people, some men and some women. She tried to remember their faces, but couldn't. They had all been dressed the same way, she remembered. She had, too, but the Pisces had removed her clothes some time after their escape, and she had awoken wearing a set of their skin tight clothing. Was it something about the clothes then? There'd been writing on them. Words? Names? Her head cocked as she tried to picture the shirts. Not words. Numbers. They were numbers. The year's date, followed by a hyphen and a two digit number. Then she had it. In that brief second before panic set in, she'd woken up staring at a number on a man's shirt. It was 2259-06...

918 looked around, confused. There was no rock anywhere. She was in a shower, wasting her time. And her body felt strange, as though it had lost a great deal of weight. She looked down at herself and realized with shame that she didn't have her shirt on. Without her shirt, how would anyone know her name was 918 and that she belonged in the dark, digging at rock?

She got out of the shower, leaving the water running, and walked to the door. Every step propelled her further than her body was prepared, and she thumped against the wall. Holding onto it, 918 groped along to the adjoining large bedroom. Nothing looked familiar.

"Hello?" she called out tentatively.

"Yes?" the computer responded. "How may I help you, Miss O'Brien?"

"My name is 918," 918 corrected.

"Very well, Miss O'Brien," the computer conceded. "How may I help you, 918?"

"Where's the insertion point?"

"I beg your pardon, ma'am?"

"I asked, 'Where's the insertion point?' I have to start digging."

"I'm sorry, 918, but your statements are non sequitur. I can find no correlating references that apply the terms 'insertion point' and 'digging' in the context you have used them. Please rephrase the question."

"You don't understand," 918 said, a note of hysteria creeping into her voice. "I must get to the digging place."

"If you will tell me where this place is located, I will gladly direct you there."

"I don't *know* where it is! Just that it's in a cavern. That's why I need to go to the insertion point first. Then, six minutes after they get the sun's gravity variances, we get to go to the cavern."

"Your comments would be consistent with a position located on Terra. You are currently on

Mars. I will need further information to refine the location of either the insertion point or the cavern.”

Mars?! 918’s mind reeled. What was she doing on Mars? Was the cavern on Mars? Maybe the insertion had worked and she was supposed to be here. She staggered to the bed and sat down, trying to think it through. Only when she felt the cool sheets under her did she remember she was naked.

There was a dresser there, and a quick search uncovered a shirt and a pair of underpants. Both were too big for her, but the gray color of the cloth gave her a measure of comfort. She put on the shorts, holding them up with one hand. Looking around, she saw nothing to fasten them. She saw another room and stumbled to it, her legs feeling far too powerful for her slight weight. The room was a kitchen, and the computer told her where she could find an izer. She installed it onto the shorts after bunching up the material to greatly decrease the waist size. The sides closed together seamlessly and she could let go of her shorts. Looking in the drawer further, she found a black marker. Taking it, she returned to the bedroom—there seemed to be no living room—and used the marker to proudly write 918 in bold numbers across the chest of her shirt. Dropping the marker, she pulled on the shirt and went to the door.

It opened under her hand and she stepped outside. She was on a narrow walkway, at least a hundred meters above the ground. All around her was glorious rock. This was where she was supposed to be! With a sigh of deep contentment, she began exploring for a way to get to the tunnel rock and find the person who would tell her where to begin digging. With luck, she could start in only a few minutes.

She found an eledisc and descended to the floor of the cavern. There was a young man at the bottom. He must have been waiting for her. She smiled and walked up to him. He seemed surprised to see her, and stared at the number on her chest.

“I’m sorry I’m late. Where do I start?” she asked with breathless excitement.

“Wh—what?” he choked out, swallowing hard.

“Where do I start digging?” she repeated anxiously.

“Ummm...” he seemed to be struggling with an answer, and 918 wondered if he really knew where she was supposed to be. She didn’t think he did, because he kept staring at her number, as though he didn’t know what to do. No matter, she thought. If he didn’t know where she was supposed to be, he’d know where the person was that did know where she was supposed to be.

“Ummm...” he repeated. He was still staring at her number when there was a loud noise above them. 918 turned and looked up to see a craft near the top of the cavern several hundred meters up come racing toward the rooms above her. There was a flash from the hov and some rooms exploded.

918 bolted in fear. If the falling debris hit her, she might get killed and then she wouldn’t be able to work herself to death. Leaving the man to look after himself, she ran toward another cavern wall, fifty meters away. She would first escape the falling rock, and then she’d find someone to tell her where to dig.

\* \* \*

"Sir? You'll need to pay for that."

Mal turned back irritably toward the clerk, then realized he was in the wrong. It was amazing how even the little habits of civilization faded after a year on board. He went back to the counter.

"Sorry, kid. My mistake." He passed the bag of items over the scanner and the total quickly appeared.

"That's all right, sir," the young man's eyes had become excited. "I understand. You're from the *Horizon*, right? You're Mahlon Stewart, the chief engineer!"

Mal sighed and nodded. Anywhere outside of this corner of Vermilion, he would have denied it, but here he accepted—grudgingly—the burden of fame that came with having a high profile job.

"Yeah, that's me. Only I'm the third engineer now." From the kid's knowing nod, Mal brightened a little. "We put in earlier today and I'm picking up stuff for a few days." He stabbed his thumb at the anchored tabinal, and the purchase was complete. He started toward the door, noticing a com booth just outside. "You take care, kid."

"Wait!" the clerk called after him. He couldn't have been over nine. "Commander Stewart? Could I ask you a question?"

"You just did."

"Huh? Oh, yeah," he laughed nervously. "I know you're from around here. I am, too, and I was just wondering if you could offer any... you know... advice. You know, to help me, you know... get ahead."

"Sure can, kid. Always try again, and always try harder."

Mal left the store and stepped into the com booth. The ubiquitous computer voice, a blend of male and female with just a trace of a New LA accent, came on.

"Call destination, please?"

"Gimme The Chamber Pot. Captain Pamela Carlson. Audio circuit only." That way Pam could take the call from anywhere in Jonesy's without having to go to his only com booth.

"Thank-you. One moment please. One moment please. One mo... completing circuit."

"Mal?" Pamela's voice held a mixture of relief and worry.

"Yeah, it's me. We gotta talk, an' fast. Can you get free?"

"Of course. But we've had some problems here. Mal, Margaret Harbreath is dead. A couple of the crew found her about a block from here. She'd been murdered. I'm so sorry. She was a good woman and a good friend."

Mal's head began spinning. It couldn't be a coincidence.

“Something’s wrong, Pam. I can’t talk over an open circuit, but my escort and his two friends went home the hard way about three hours ago. They did give me their gift, though.”

“I see,” Pamela said with a quiet voice, understanding the veiled statements. There was a pause, and when she spoke again, her commanding presence had reasserted itself.

“This is getting too hot, Third. As much as we need to talk, it has to wait. You are officially transferred off the *Horizon*, and are released from duty. I’ll speak to you again in one week.” That meant she wanted him to travel to Earth on his own. The *Horizon* could make the Martian/Terran run in only two days, but she had high level clearances and optimum flight paths. A freighter like the one Mal would have to take would be assigned lower grade flight paths and have inferior acceleration and braking allowances, and would require about six days to make the journey. Fortunately, the two planets were approaching opposition, or the time would be even greater.

“Understood, Captain.”

“Mal, be careful.”

“Only way to be, Captain. We’ll be talking.” He terminated the circuit, leaving unsaid many things he needed to say but couldn’t. Pamela could take care of herself and her crew. She wasn’t the Captain by accident.

His problem now lay in getting transportation to Earth. He had an idea, but wanted to talk to the girl first. Judging by the attack, either she or he were becoming hot property, and he wanted to determine which one it was. He also needed to find out who wanted them dead and why. He left the com booth and made his way toward home. It was well past midnight and this section of the neighborhood was deserted, so Mal could let his thoughts wander as he walked.

The Pisces were not easily alarmed people. If they felt the lives of the *Horizon*’s crew were in danger, and being endangered by the wrong powers, then it was true. But why? What point was there? The only answer he could think of was that the ship itself was the target, and the sacrifice of the crew was only a side issue to whomever was manipulating events.

And who would that be? From their conversation, the Pisces were sure it was neither the Martian nor Terran governments, nor ITA. The elder—even though he now knew his name, Mal stuck to tradition and neither thought nor spoke it—had said that there were other powers, and that Emily was a fragment of those powers. And Emily had been snatched—illegally, Mal was certain—by Harting Enterprises for reasons unknown. And Harting Enterprises was somehow involved with the *Horizon* going to Earth. That seemed to make them the other, unneeded powers the elder had spoken about. Coupled with Jonesy’s suspicions about using the ship for a hyperspace experiment, everything pointed to that voyage being a trap.

But again, why? Mal could think of no possible good coming from destroying a legendary ship on a fool’s mission. Harting’s name would be ruined, the government’s reputation tarnished, and the continued development of using hyperspace set back by decades. So who would benefit?

That there was someone who felt they would benefit was only too clear. And that someone had a power that reached to Mars. The craft that had taken out the Pisces home had

undoubtedly been top flight mercenaries. Mars had been settled for over a century—over two centuries by Earth reckoning—but was in many ways still a wide open frontier.

And while it could have been a coincidence, Mal had a gut feeling that Margaret's killing was related. She'd clearly had information she wanted to give to Mal, information she could have gotten only through her position at ITA. So that meant that ITA was somehow involved. It was all too confusing.

His thoughts were broken by a soft whoosh far above his head. He looked up and saw a hov in flight mode racing along the top of the tunnel. Its navigational lights were off and it was traveling at high speed. As he watched, it zipped around a bend in the tunnel in front of him.

A sense of dread washed over Mal. Emily! Dropping the groceries, he ran toward his apartment, still a half-kilometer distant.

He'd nearly reached the turn when he heard a dull explosion. His mood blackened and despair swept a cold hand over him as he turned the corner and could see his apartment wall. Fifteen floors up, and in the center of the manmade cliff, a huge, burning hole poured smoke out toward the top of the tunnel. As he watched, the ship fired again, sending another bolt into the gaping maw that had once been his home.

Forcing himself to a walk to avoid being spotted, Mal continued toward the wall, staying close to the tunnel's side. The ship fired twice more, then turned and raced back the way it had come. If it noticed him as it passed, it ignored him. It disappeared around the bend and Mal began running toward the apartment wall, knowing he was wasting his energy.

There were a dozen people at the foot of the wall, none of them Emily. He looked up to be certain that it had been his apartment that had been destroyed. It was. He looked around at the people and approached the closest one, a woman in her late thirties, with graying hair and wrinkled face.

"Excuse me, ma'am," he asked in as calm a voice as could be mustered. "But did you see a young woman around here by chance?" Mal's only hope was that Emily had somehow gotten out before the attack; she could not have survived otherwise. "Short blonde hair, brown eyes, about one and a half meters, maybe eighteen kilos?" At a silent shake of her head, Mal passed on to the next bystander.

His hope was nearly gone when he came to a young man wearing a blue exercise suit and several earrings.

"Yeah, I saw her," he pointed toward the eledisc. "She got off from there and tried to hit on me. She had on baggy gray shorts and a huge shirt with some numbers written on them."

"Numbers?" Mal frowned. He didn't own any shirts like that. "What were the numbers?"

"I dunno," the man said with a shrug.

"What happened to her?"

"Hey, I know you!" the man was suddenly excited. "You're Mahlon Stewart, ain't you?"

Mal felt a vein pound on his forehead, but the news that she had gotten out before the attack helped him keep his civility.

“Yeah. How about we stick to the subject, okay? What happened to the girl?”

“You’re the *Horizon’s* chief engineer! I didn’t hear she’d come in. Hey, do you suppose you could...”

“Where the hell is she, you idiot?!” Mal abandoned civility for the more direct approach. The man stared at him dumbly, then pointed toward a small tunnel branching off the main wall.

Mal ran off at full speed, shifting to the more reckless bounding leaps to cover more ground. He misjudged his last one slightly and landed hard against the rough wall, then ricocheted to the floor. Cursing, he picked himself up and looked all around, ignoring the stinging pain in his right hand.

She was nowhere to be seen. Not knowing why she’d run for the rock face, but assuming she would try to escape falling debris, Mal began running to his right, away from the apartments. This section of the tunnel was bare, covered only with occasional cracks, some of which stretched up a dozen meters or more. About a kilometer away was a cul-de-sac and a small housing area. Perhaps she’d run there for help, though why there and not to the more populated main tunnel, Mal again had no idea.

He was moving at a good speed when his ear caught just the slightest sound coming from one of the larger cracks on his left. He stumbled to a halt and went back. Peering inside the dark shaft, he saw nothing at first. Then, in the light coming from the main tunnel behind him, made out movement at the deepest portion of the crack, ten meters in. He stepped in and approached the figure, who was kneeling toward the end of the crack, away from him, scrabbling at something.

“Emily?” He called out quietly.

She turned suddenly, frightened, and stared at him. As she did, in the dim light Mal could see the faint reflection of glistening blood that covered her fingers and hands. She was holding a small rock she had pried loose from the crack, but dropped it and rose. She smiled at him, her eyes devoid of recognition.

“Is this where I’m supposed to be digging?” she asked.

## Chapter Six

« ^ »

Mars Date: Jan 11, 112

Terran Date: May 17, 2259

Mal?” Linda’s soft voice carried over the eternal sighing of the air builders. Mal stepped from the cover of the maintenance shack and motioned to her. She spotted him and followed him into the medium sized stone structure.

“Thanks, Linda,” Mal said simply.

"Where's Emily?" she asked, taking off the medkit slung over her shoulder.

"Back here." He led her behind a row of barrels and pointed to the far corner. Crouched there in the darkness, trembling, was Emily. She stared at them with fear, her tear filled eyes almost glowing in the dim light. Her hands were clasped and Linda could see they were bound together and a short rope held them to a patchwork of piping coming up from the floor. A brief flash of memory crossed her mind as Linda involuntarily recalled a life she had lived a decade earlier, but pushed it away. This was different, she forced herself to think, and returned to the moment.

She approached the woman and knelt beside her, opening the medkit. Emily drew back in fear, but submitted to Linda's firm grip as she took the woman's hands and inspected them. The nails were badly damaged and still oozing blood. Both her palms were cut and bloody, and one wrist had severe abrasions. Linda removed the binds on Emily's hands, but kept her tied to the piping. She began cleaning and disinfecting the wounds, the now submissive Emily giving no resistance.

"Why did you tie her up?" Linda asked quietly, no accusation in her voice. She knew Mal would have an excellent reason, and her trust was not mislaid.

"It killed me to do it, but it was that or have her bleed to death. She kept trying to dig at any rock we came to. I had to twice run her down after she made a break for a crevice. And when we finally did make it here, she tried working at the walls." He pointed to a wall beside Emily, and Linda could see bloody streaks tracing out long patterns. She shuddered and continued bandaging the woman's hands.

Finishing, she secured the bindings, fighting off the gnawing in her gut, and rose. Emily looked up at her, somewhat calmer and less afraid.

"When can I start digging again?"

"Why do you want to dig stone, Emily?" Linda asked quietly, her own eyes getting moist.

"Because that's what I want to do. And my name's 918, not Emily. See?" She straightened her shoulders and lowered her tied hands to show off the number '918' scribbled across her oversized shirt. Linda raised a hand to her mouth, stifling a gasp. She wanted to cry out loud, but managed a trembling smile.

"Sorry, 918. My mistake. You won't be able to dig until your hands are better."

"I don't want to wait," she said, inspecting her bandaged hands. "Can't I just dig with the bandages on?"

"Yes, you could, 918," Linda replied with a thoughtful nod. "But if you did that, you'd tear off the bandages and bleed to death."

"But I was made to work myself to death, so I don't mind."

"No, I'm sure that you don't. But your masters would," Linda said sternly. Mal stood behind her in stunned silence, listening to the surreal conversation. "If you can wait until your hands heal, you can dig the rock for a lot longer before you die, and that's better." Emily nodded in understanding.



"All right. That makes sense. I'll wait until my hands heal."

"Good. Now get some sleep."

"Okay," Emily agreed and laid back on the rough tarp she'd been sitting on. She closed her eyes and by the time Linda had gathered the medical supplies up, she appeared to be asleep. Linda pointed to the only door, and she and Mal went outside. She pulled the door shut behind her and sighed deeply.

"This is bad, Mal."

"I know. She's sharded, right?"

"Uh-huh. I saw this once before, on the *Bearden*, when I worked up there. We had about fifty pleasure ripes in our crowd, and about a hundred of us regulars. One night, one of the ripes, her name was Greta, suddenly freaked out. She went real stiff and fell on the floor, her arms moving around like a machine. Her john nearly had a heart attack, and we had to set him up with a few free tricks to keep him quiet."

"What happened to Greta?"

"Same as you hear. She came back after a week and was herself for another month or so, but then sharded back to that machine ripe. She came back again, but only for a few days."

"How long until dissolution?"

"Four months from the first night." She held herself and shuddered. "I'll never forget that last night. She was going back and forth every few seconds, between Greta and that machine, for hours and hours. Suddenly, she looked around and said, 'When are you serving the soup you promised us, Mr. Balliard?'. Then she drifted back into her Greta ripe and thanked us for being there with her. Then she died." Linda's voice was raising in pitch and emotion. "Then she died again and again. Oh Mal! It was horrible! She died three times, once for each of her selves, and we stood around and watched!" She started sobbing quietly and Mal pulled her close. Unlike the time he'd comforted and quieted Emily earlier that evening in the sleeping room, Mal only held Linda to comfort her.

"You didn't just stand there, Linda. Greta told you that. You were there for your friend. You know that once a ripe starts sharding, they're under a death sentence." Linda looked up at him.

"And Emily's under the same sentence."

Mal nodded.

"I know. And I know this is going to sound cold, but I still need her. And I think I need her because she's a ripe." Mal quickly covered the events of the evening, holding nothing back. Any woman who could pull herself out of the nightmare world of prostitution, and bring her man up with her, was a person worthy of respect.

"So you think that's why the Pisces referred to her in the plural? Because they knew she was a ripe?" Linda had gathered herself together, a moment of deep emotion clearing the palate of her mind. Mal nodded and Linda asked, "But which persona is the important one?" Mal shrugged.

"I dunno. My guess is that the real person, Emily, is. I talked to her, but 918 doesn't seem to know anything or want to know anything other than digging rock."

"Well, did you speak to her?"

"Of course I did," Mal said, just a trace of irritation in his voice, "I just said so."

"No, Mal. I mean did you talk to 918 *as* 918? Or did you talk to her as Emily?"

"I don't understand."

"Well, once I started talking to 918, I knew that any woman who's name is just a number must have an owner. I think all ripes think they have an owner, but I don't know. The only ones I've dealt with before Emily were the pleasure ripes, and they are all owned."

"You're right, Linda," Mal replied. "Fred, the *Horizon's* ripe, considers himself property of ITA."

"So you have to approach them that way, Mal. Did you see how much easier it was dealing with her once I brought up her masters? When I started dealing with her as 918, she responded well."

"I'll keep that in mind, Linda. Thanks. Any luck on getting us transportation to Earth?" Linda shook her head.

"I don't know. Al thought he could get something lined up, but I left only minutes after that clerk you sent showed up and told us what happened." She glanced at him. "You took a chance, trusting someone you don't know."

"I didn't have a lot of choice. We've been attacked twice tonight, and I still don't know if they—whatever they are—are after me or Emily. But my apartment was hit only minutes after I contacted Pam."

"They could have been tipped off by your activating the home system."

"I thought of that, too. So I had to use a non-communications way to get to you and Jonesy. The clerk seemed a decent enough kid, and I didn't have any other choices."

"Well, you're either lucky or can judge people, because he wouldn't talk to anyone but Pam or Al, and Pam was gone."

"What time did she leave?"

"She and the rest of the crew pulled out about twelve seventy-five, just after you called. That killing had quieted them down a lot, so I think they were glad to break up. Your messenger showed up at two, an hour and a half later." She looked at him. "So now what, Mal?"

He sagged back to the outside wall of the shaft and let out a sigh. He shook his head and sank to the ground. Linda sat beside him.

"I don't know. I'm not made for this kind of crap. I like engines. They do what they're told, and if they don't the answer's easy and straightforward. Here, I don't know what the problem is, let alone the answer."

"But you know what the stakes are," she prodded gently.

"I know what the stakes are," he agreed. He jerked a thumb back at the shed. "And I know that with Emily I have the means to find out what the problem is exactly. The only thing I really can do is take Emily back to Earth and find out more about Harting and the connection between them and Emily and the *Horizon*."

"Al and I can help some," Linda said. "After we get you off Mars, I'll start poking around in the data pools and see if..."

"No!" Mal said sharply, then softened his tone. "Thanks, but no, Linda. Every time I was with someone tonight, they either died or could have died. Margaret, the Pisces, and very nearly Emily. All of them attacked because of something associated to me. That's why Pam put me off active duty."

"To protect herself?" Linda said unbelievably.

"To protect her crew," Mal corrected. "Big difference. It also frees me up to move around and get things done without having to be in the normal structure of ship life. I have to get to Earth on my own, but hopefully no one will be able to keep tabs on me."

"But getting back to the point, Linda, I don't want you to help. Not after Jonesy gets me off planet. I don't want to risk the two of you, too." Linda made a face.

"I'm twenty-three years old, Mal. I'm all grown up now. So's Al. And we've both seen and done things that make us older than we are. We'll do what pleases us. Besides," she added with a grin, "after you're stuck on that freighter to Earth, you can't stop us. You may as well tell us what to look for."

"All right," Mal sighed, more than a little pleased at her attitude. "I won't deny I appreciate the help. I just wish I could point you in the right direction. I suppose you could check out Harting Enterprises. Maybe look into Emily's life."

"I don't think we'll find much. Emily is the more important of her two personas, I agree, but her importance seems to be tied to the fact that she is a ripe. I doubt her life before her riping will tell us much. As for Harting; if I do the kind of deep trolling needed to get anything good on them, they'll catch on. Let's try a different tack. Al told me the *Horizon* is heading to Earth to maybe be involved in some hyperidor experiment?" Mal nodded. "Then let me start trolling there. I'll look up what I can on hyperidors. Maybe see if Harting or Emily are connected to hyperidors somehow."

Mal nodded, both in agreement and with a sense of sleepiness. Linda noticed it immediately. She stood up and hauled Mal to his feet.

"Come on, it's time for you to get some sleep. You've been up all night and who knows how long you were up before putting in to port. Let's get inside and you can catch a few hours."

"What about you?" he asked.

Linda laughed and gave him a wink, her green eyes flashing even in the poor lighting.

"Hey, don't forget! I used to keep hours like this for a living!"

\* \* \*

"Private cargo craft *Gilgamesh*, this is Control," the docking controller's voice crackled over the ancient speaker.

"Yeah?" Mal said in a bored voice. "This is *Gilgamesh*. Captain Powers here."

"You have runway clearance on airplane Y-54, Captain. Have a safe flight."

"Thank-you, control. *Gilgamesh* out."

Mal took a deep breath and engaged thrusters. The dilapidated runabout considered the request for a heartbeat, then fired engines, lifting cleanly off the small pad tucked in the far corner of Vermilion spaceport.

The flight panels in front of Mal were ancient, as was everything else on board. The quartz portal in front of him gave off a disturbing hum from the vibrations of the vessel as the thrusters strained to achieve an orbit that seemed—for the *Gilgamesh*—an impossible sixteen thousand kilometers above them. It seemed even more remote because as a pilot, Mal was an excellent engineer. He banged in a command to increase power to thrusters and was promptly ignored. He tried again, altering the key order, and the ship grudgingly obeyed and the nose of the craft lifted. Either that or the back of the ship dropped as the engines made ready to cut out entirely, Mal wasn't sure. The surface of Mars dipped beneath the viewing portal, leaving a deep gray red, dotted with occasional stars. Mal could make out the bright pinpoint of the *Armstrong* orbital station, and wished he were going there instead. But the *Gilgamesh* made regular "supply" runs to the *Bearden* only, and that was where the freighter was waiting for him and Emily, so to the *Bearden* they went.

Ten minutes later, Mal had just stabilized orbit and was entering his approved flight path when the cabin door opened behind him and one of his "supplies" entered and sat in the empty copilot's seat beside him.

Tracy was a beautiful woman of indeterminate origin and indeterminate age. Pretty much everything about Tracy was indeterminate except her profession. That and the fact that she liked perfume. A lot of perfume. She leaned forward and inspected the control panels, her long, thick, not-quite-blonde, not-quite-brown, hair cascading over her bare shoulders.

"Geez!" she said with a mostly husky but partly girlish voice, "No wonder we're bumpin' and grindin' inna back! Ya gotta increase the ratio a da mass converter to make da ions happy. Yer gonna land us in New LA at about a hunnert k's if ya don't!"

Mal frowned at the display, a little miffed, but willing to listen.

"What are you talking about, Tracy?" Mal would have preferred calling her by her last name, but it was undetermined what it was. "The mix is perfect for an Investor class private yacht. I know the specs and..."

"The specs?!" Tracy laughed and moved her roughly smooth fingers over the panel, selecting commands with her long, by-and-large pinkglo nails. "Andy's modified this thing so much, it ain't *any* classa ship. Here ya' go. Try this, sweetie."

She tapped the final command entry with a flourish and the *Gilgamesh* stopped vibrating and began to smoothly accelerate.

Mal nodded, impressed. "Where'd you learn to fly, Tracy?"

"Whut?" she said with a mix of indignation and pride. "Ya don't think a whore can do anything else other than keep her john happy?"

"No, not at all," Mal said hurriedly. "I'm sure you can do a lot more."

She laughed again, "Well, you're wrong, handsome. I don't know nuthin' else! I just been on this run so many times that I been watchin' Andy do it." She laughed again, "He likes company on these trips, an I like to be company."

"How are the others?" Mal asked, turning the conversation away from the more vivid details of Andy and Tracy keeping each other company.

"My girls're fine, but they was a little pissed about the bumps. Your girl is just sittin' there, lookin' at us and askin' if we wanna dig rock, too. I tol' her, 'Sister, we ain't gonna dig no rock where we're goin, we're diggin for gold!' " She laughed at her humor. "She didn' get it, but the girls was laughin'! So what's with her? She dinged inna head or somethin'?"

"Or something," Mal replied, checking the time. It was just after one in the afternoon, Terran time. He wondered how the two hour trip to the *Bearden* could be any worse.

\* \* \*

"Captain?"

Pam turned away from the aft bulkhead where she'd been contemplating both deep space and Mal. "Yes?"

"Commander Stewart is oncom and asking for you."

"Thank-you, Ben. I'll take it in here. Secure the channel."

"Yes, ma'am."

Pamela walked over to her dressing table and nodded. The com channel opened up where the mirror was and Pamela could see a fuzzy image of someone who looked like Mal but wasn't. Without a moment's hesitation, Pam smiled.

"Mal! I'm so glad you called!" After what had occurred in the past twelve hours, she was prepared to handle whatever was going to be thrown at her. Whoever was transmitting this image—most likely Jonesy or one of his contacts—had made it foggy on purpose. Anyone but Pam would be fooled. That would have to be for Mal's benefit, so she played along.

"I'm on the run, Pam, so I can't talk. I've lost the present the fish-man gave me, but I'm still cuttin' out of here in three days. First I gotta see an architect about fixing up my apartment."

"I see," she replied, trying to decode the message as she listened to it. "Anything else?"

"Just remember that when you don't expect things to go wrong, that's when they probably

will. Take care, Pam.” The holo went blank, leaving Pam staring into her reflection, her thoughts whirling. What did this mean? She pulled the brief conversation apart in her mind.

Mal had never, would never, refer to a Pisces as a “fish-man”, so it was likely that the rest of the statement was wrong. Which meant that he hadn’t lost the present, whatever that was. The sign off warning was as good as retinal identification for message authenticity to Pam. Mal was constantly warning about becoming too complacent with engines, and this was his standard statement almost verbatim.

And what of the comment about his apartment? She’d found out through the news service that it had been Mal’s apartment that had been destroyed, though no one knew why or by whom. So it would make sense he’d want to repair it sooner or later, but not now. In any event, he wouldn’t need an architect to rebuild such a standardized... That was it.

“Computer?” she called out.

“Standing by,” it responded, in the normal male/female tone. Pam was glad they’d replaced that female voice they’d been stuck with for the last two years.

“Query. Cross reference the word ‘architect’ with the current ships that have scheduled activity on Mars for the next week.”

“Query complete. There are three ships that currently meet both criterion. The gunship *Pathfinder* is currently being overhauled in *Armstrong’s* space dock 68 alpha for...”

“Delete. Next ship.”

“The passenger ship *Drifts Along* is hosting a conference of forty-six structural architects for the purpose of refining Triton colony’s core casings. The event is to begin on...”

“Delete. Next ship.”

“The freighter *DL White* is currently docked at the *Bearden0* orbital station and is due to depart for Earth at 2115 hours, Terran standard.”

A little more than six hours from now. “How does that ship meet the criterion?” Pamela asked.

“The ship is named for Daniel White, a world renown architect of the early 21st century. White became recognized as the premier leader in his field after his revolutionary design of...”

“That’s enough. Thank-you.”

“You are welcome.” The computer toned off quietly.

So now she knew how Mal was getting to Earth. She remembered the *DL White* from her early days on the *McFarland*. The two ships competed for the business of borderline companies who needed interplanetary shipping, but couldn’t afford more modern transports. Thinking about the ship, she rose and went back to the aft bulkhead. Looking up, she could see the freighter four decks up and partly blocked from sight by the *Bearden* curvature. She was mildly surprised the ship was still space worthy; the *McFarland* had been sitting in a lunar bone yard for a decade, and it had been a least a half century younger than the *DL White*. She silently prayed that there was one more trip left in that dilapidated wreck.

\* \* \*

"What a dilapidated wreck!" Mal exclaimed, staring at the outside of the *DL White* as he eased his ship toward the docking bay on deck three. Tracy, who had remained with him for the entire trip, despite increasingly surly hints by Mal, leaned forward and peered out the portal.

"That's *Whitey*, ain't it? She's in here every month, Phobos chasin' Deimos. There's eight guys onna ship, four of 'em r'glars. She's a good ship."

Mal took little comfort in the recommendation. Tracy probably based her approval rating on the amount of personal business the crew generated on the red deck. On second glance, the ancient freighter didn't seem to have changed all that much since he'd last seen her twenty years ago. Of course, she was a hulking, rusting pile of hoboken then, too. Still, it was a better alternative than staying on Mars, waiting for some hot shot mercenary to eleven-two him.

Looking down, Mal could make out the aft portion of the *Horizon*, the bright white hull blazing in the sunlight. Once on board the *Bearden*, he would be only seven decks away from her safety. So close. It was a trap, though. Going on the *Horizon* might be perfectly safe, provided he went by himself. He was beginning to form the notion he was wanted by Harting, not ITA, and they were interested in him because Emily was with him. Since he would not abandon Emily, they would travel to Earth via freighter.

The *Gilgamesh's* auto-buoy system pinged, informing Mal it had positive lock for landing. The internal pilot kicked in and the ship floated gracefully into the hanger on the *Bearden*, the landing pads groaning as it settled onto the metal deck. It would take two or three minutes for the hanger door to close, and another three to five for pressurization, so Mal unbuckled and ducked through the small door to the back compartment.

At one time the *Gilgamesh* had been an upper class runabout, owned by a fairly wealthy Terran couple who enjoyed roaming the system for several months every year. They had died twenty years before Mal was born, though, so little remained of the simple elegance that once adorned the interior of the main cabin.

The furniture had been yanked out and the room refitted with a mishmash of seats, benches and even stools to provide the passengers with a modicum of comfort. The majority of the remaining space was reserved for legitimate cargo. Mal could tell from his lively days that the aft bulkhead was fake and undoubtedly carried on occasion a small cargo that would be worth many times the ship itself. Jonesy had gotten entirely out of that business, but that didn't mean his friends had.

There were eight passengers in the cabin, not counting Tracy who was still up front. Seven were of the same stamp, all here for a two month "business trip" as they euphemistically called it. Mal looked at them as they gathered their small bags and pulled on bright colored jackets over their equally bright colored clothing, and wondered if they wore that style of clothing to attract men or as a badge of honor. One seemed as unlikely as the other. He nodded to the ones that said hello, then walked to the rear, where 918 was huddled against the corner of the bulkhead.

“Hi,” he said with his best, reassuring voice. He seated himself beside her. “How was the trip?”

“Okay,” she said glumly, not very interested. “But I’m wasting my time here. I really should be...”

“Yes, I know. You should be digging rock. Soon, 918. Like I’ve told you, your masters are on Earth, and we’re on Mars. We’re going to be heading over to a ship that will take us to Earth.”

She brightened. “How long will it take?”

“About six days.”

“Oh.”

She wasn’t exactly a sparkling conversationalist, but Mal hadn’t thought that whoever ripped her would have bothered giving her skills that were worthless in the bottom of some mine shaft. He did need to make sure, however, that she kept to herself for the next few hours. If they were after her and not him—which seemed likely—she’d be easily spotted as a ripe on the *Bearden* and then they’d be in real trouble.

“We’ll be there in no time,” he lowered his voice. “But I have to remind you, 918, that you shouldn’t talk to anyone until the ship is on the way to Earth. Okay? No one.”

“How come?” she asked, again not very interested.

He opened his mouth to reply, then shut it. How could he explain to a false persona such as this one that she wasn’t normal? In many ways, Fred was much more human than she was in this state, and Fred saw nothing wrong with being a ripe. Mal decided to play on her indifference.

“Well, why would you? They’re not interested in digging, and you don’t care for what they’re doing. How about you just leave each other alone?”

“Okay,” she nodded agreeably, though still with little energy. He didn’t mind. If she could stay this disinterested until they got on board the *DL White*, it would be fine with him. Just so long as she came out of this ripe soon. She was useless to him and his friends like this.

He wanted to pat her hand, or offer her some comfort to cheer her up, but could think of nothing that would reach her, so he rose to get ready for disembarking.

\* \* \*

“Lieutenant?”

Lieutenant Vernon looked up from his small desk. He was ITA security chief for decks one through four on the *Bearden*, so that rated him his own office. Since decks one through four were the lower class decks, he had a lower class office. It was large enough to hold a meeting in, provided he was only talking to himself. Between himself and the private standing in the doorway, the room had achieved maximum occupancy.



“Yes, Longknife?”

“The *Gilgamesh* just put in,” the compact, stoned faced private gave no indication that he cared one way or the other; he was just following orders. “You requested to be informed whenever a non-ITA or non-military craft from Vermilion put in.”

“Thank you, Private.” Vernon looked down at the tabinal in his hands and glanced at the urgently flashing message. He sighed and stood up. “I don’t think it’s important now, though. They intercepted a transmission to the *Horizon* just moments ago. It appears that Stewart is still on Mars, and he’ll be in ITA custody soon.”

“Yes, sir,” Longknife replied. His coal black eyes showed only the faintest of emotion. “I’m sorry to hear that, sir.”

“I am, too. Well, let’s go see Andy and his cargo. The N403 order to visually inspect ships from Vermilion is still in place.”

\* \* \*

Mal was getting worried. It had been more than ten minutes since he’d landed, more than enough time for the hanger to pressurize and the hanger officer to give the clear to disembark signal. He began putting together a plan of action. Assuming the worst, ITA—or whoever it was—was now openly after either him or the girl. He was unarmed, had a sharded girl to care for, and was up against the station’s entire security staff, so his options were fairly narrow. Other than that, the problem wasn’t too bad.

The clear to disembark order came through and Mal breathed a sigh. More than likely, he’d be facing an armed contingent on the other side, but at least the wait was over. He stood in front of the hatch and smacked the release. There was a hiss and a pop as the craft’s atmosphere equalized with the hanger’s. The hatch lowered to the floor, doubling as a ramp.

There as a greeting party, and it was armed, but there were only two; the deck security chief and a private. The private had his hand on his weapon, but had not drawn it. Mal descended the three steps to the hanger deck and stopped in front of the lieutenant. He could see the look of recognition in the man’s eyes, but decided to play it through.

“Afternoon, Lieutenant,” Mal gave a sketchy, half-hearted salute. “Captain Andrew Powers, requesting permission to unload cargo.”

There was a long moment in which the air grew brittle. Mal knew that both men recognized him. The private, Quincy Longknife, had served with him on the supply ship *Gunner’s Mate* during the Troid Piracy War. He knew the quiet man; a member of one of Earth’s American Indian tribes who gave his loyalty carefully and took his duty seriously. The lieutenant he didn’t know personally, but that didn’t matter. Mal had been included in so many crew publicity holos and netcasts—there was even a set of trading cards that included him—that his face was known to the majority of those who lived on Mars.

“Lieutenant?” Mal prompted quietly, staring into his eyes. “Permission to unload?” He saw the man struggle internally, then come to a decision. Though he didn’t know how, Mal sensed it was a decision the man would be able to live with.

"Permission granted. Welcome aboard, Captain Powers. I assume you'll want your regular quarters?"

\* \* \*

"You mean he recognized you and *still* didn't do anything?" Tony Raimondo, captain of the *DL White*, asked incredulously. Although the freighter had been under way for over an hour, it was only now that Mal had been able to get to the bridge.

"Nope. I thought for a second he was going to, but he decided that an N403 order didn't have as much importance as shipmate loyalty."

"N403?"

"Yeah. That's a non-ITA request for compliance. It's officially an order, but comes from a private source, like a company or civilian. How much you follow the order depends on how tight your ass is."

Raimondo snorted. "That explains it, then. Gordy keeps his decks clean considering what he has to work with, but he doesn't bust on us either." He nodded with satisfaction. "He's regular people."

There was a sudden klaxon call, and the bridge lights flashed red. Raimondo jerked around and looked at the main viewing screen just in time to see a metallic object flash by just off the port bow. The ship gave a small shudder as the buoy's gravity anchor tugged at them as they swept by.

"Hey!" Raimondo shouted at the pilot, a heavy set man who looked as though he should have been working in the hold, which in fact he had only hours earlier. "That's too close to the corridor buoy! You tear another one loose, and they'll put us into the hoboken lane!" The pilot smirked and ignored him.

Mal laughed, feeling the relaxation of being under way come over him. "I remember the 'tag runs' from my days on the *McFarland*. At conjunction, we could to cut eight hours off our flight time by staying close to the inside buoys."

"Eight hours?" Raimondo scoffed. "I can shave off thirteen hours, providing some lunkhead pilot doesn't set the perimeter alarms off and get us pulled over. As it is, with Earth chasin' Mars pretty tight, we'll only save a couple hours." He looked over at Mal. "So, did Jonesy tell you what the price of passage was?"

"Nope. I just figured you were doing it out of the goodness of your heart, Tony."

"Ha! You made a funny." He jerked a thumb to the top corner of the bridge. "I've got some forward docking thrusters giving me hell. Every time I fire them, the crew takes bets on how much damage we do to the docking ring."

"The ring? Not the ship?"

"Are you kidding? This tub is so banged up now, there's no place left to damage."

Mal laughed and went to the ladder, feeling relaxed. He was back in space, they'd gotten

away clean, and it was time to work on the engines. Maybe—just maybe—things were improving.

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## Chapter Seven

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**Terran Date: May 18, 2259**

The *DL White* was built in orbit around Luna during the heydays of the Martian Iron Rush. Commissioned in 2075, her engines were brought on line January 15th, 2076, exactly three months after the introduction of the imploded ion drive that doubled engine efficiency and tripled freighter cruising speed. Built too soon to cancel construction, and too late to modify the engine compartment, from the moment of her birth the *DL White* was obsolete. Not wanting to throw bad creds after good, her owners hastily finished construction, using substandard parts for her secondary systems, then just as hastily sold her.

Initially, it looked as though they had miscalculated. She had a brief moment of profitability—much of it legal—at the very end of the 21st Century. The Martian iron and titanium mines were processing more high grade than even the huge modern ore freighters could handle. Efforts were made by the original builder and owner to buy the *DL White* back, at a great profit to the current owner.

Then it was announced that the next generation of tunnel carvers were a complete success and tunnel sealing could be guaranteed. Overnight, Mars turned from a mining frontier into a full refining colony, and the iron and titanium mines could turn out their own finished metals on planet. The ore freighters were no longer needed, and plans to purchase the *DL White* quietly died.

After her brief flirtation with wealth, she continued to survive nearly two hundred years, eking out a slim existence, always on the fringe of bankruptcy, but never quite crossing the line. She had had fourteen owners—Tony Raimondo being the current one—changing hands as one by one they either improved their lot in life, gave up on shipping, or died.

A moderate sized-freighter with a crew of eight, the *DL White* had a length of ninety meters, a beam of sixty, and stood thirty meters high, keel to mainsail. Looking like an ill-bred trapezoid with a severe skin problem, the once bright white hull was now dark and smudged, with multifaceted dents and dings scattered freely among various instrument, portal, and thruster bulges. Her sides had the scrapes and carbon burn scores of numerous, too close encounters with corridor buoys, and her banged corners bespoke of careless docking pilots with little on their minds beyond the upcoming weekend.

Her keel was tweaked a distinct five degrees out of kilter, the result of a poor cargo loading decision forty years earlier by the ship's bosun, who'd never quite grasped the difference between weight and mass. He had loaded the port holds with duranium ore and the starboard holds with clothing fabric, then mislabelled the manifest to read fore and aft holds. He apparently struggled with ship terminology as well. The upshot of the adventure had the bosun

permanently beached on Triton's micro-colony and the structural integrity of the *DL White* the subject of numerous bar bets throughout the system whenever she put to space. It was rumored the ship's bows actually swayed in flight, a remarkable accomplishment for such a broad-nosed freighter.

The bridge was on the forward portion of the bottom deck, the upper decks and holds stretching out, above and in front, casting the bridge into deep shadow whenever the Sun was above, behind or alongside. Though the lack of sunlight was not a problem for lighting purposes—the *DL White* had never had nor would ever have aligned titanium—it was murder on the heating systems, and it was not unusual to see frost forming on the upper hull corners of the spacious but antiquated bridge.

The inefficiency of her engines and the slipshod work of her secondary systems sentenced the *DL White* to life in the economy freighter lanes, one precarious step removed from the hoboken space lanes, which were reserved for only the worst possible craft that were still able to fly. Because of this, when she pulled away from the *Bearden* on May 17th, 2259, the plotted freighter run for the *DL White* from Mars to Earth's orbital station *Gamma* was six days, two hours and fourteen minutes.

It was on the second day of the *DL White's* voyage that 918 went to sleep and woke up as Emily.

\* \* \*

Emily's first sensation upon opening her eyes was one of startled shock. She was lying in bed, where only a heartbeat before she had been taking a shower. A tidal wave of fear crushed her as the darkened room closed in.

She sat up with a start, jerking and giving out a surprised gasp. Remembering she was naked, she instinctively pulled the bed sheet up quickly. Her hands felt like they were gloved and she looked down at them. Such was her confusion that it took several seconds to realize they were bandaged, not gloved. And she was wearing a large gray shirt, with the number 918 scribbled on it in a child's hand. What had happened? Had she been drugged? Shot? Had Mal returned and decided to...

No. She shook her head. He didn't seem to be that kind of monster, nor any kind of monster. She had to trust there was an explanation for all this. The computer would know.

"Computer?" Emily called out quietly, a small quaver in her voice. The computer ignored her, so she called out again. Still no reply. Rubbing her eyes, she looked around the room.

It wasn't Mal's room. It looked like they were on a ship. It was a small room, and there were no windows. The bed she was lying on was narrow though comfortable, and seemed to speak to the need to save space. There was a locker for clothes and personal belongings and beside it a small sink with a mirror. On the wall close to the sink was a doorway, complete with metal door, and a small control panel.

Getting carefully out of bed—and feeling a small sense of relief upon discovering she was wearing shorts—Emily stood up and walked the three steps needed to cross the room, which sensed her movement and brought up the lighting slightly, indicating it was still "night" on the

rest of the ship. She was sure now she was on a ship; the deck beneath her was vibrating. Studying the com panel, she punched the intercom hail button. It crackled and sputtered, fading once then coming back strongly.

"Hello?" she again asked.

"This is the bridge. What can I do for you, 918?" the voice sounded rough and sleepy but friendly.

"I don't understand?"

"I said, 'What can I do for you, 918?' What do you need?" he sounded as though he were speaking patiently to a small child. "Are you hungry? Breakfast isn't for another four hours, but I could drop off a sandwich or something."

"No, I mean, I don't understand 918. My name is Emily O'Brien. I was with a man by the name of Mal..."

"Emily?" Even through the crackling and popping of the intercom system, he seemed pleased and excited. "This is great! I'll buzz Mal right away, Miss O'Brien. He'll be there in a couple minutes. Hang on." The intercom sputtered and shut off, leaving Emily staring at it, hoping it would come on again and give her the answers that seemed to be drifting further and further away.

\* \* \*

It was on the third day of the *DL White's* voyage that the ball chaser *Horizon*—the pride of the fleet—pulled slowly away from her docking ring and came majestically about, pointing her huge bows—the dark blue subspace prongs cold and dead—toward Earth. Though she looked no different now than she had when she arrived only seventy hours earlier, a small piece of her soul was missing. For the first time ever, she was starting a journey without her guardian engineer.

Captain Pamela Carlson, standing directly behind the navigator's station, was in full uniform; her custom at the beginning of every voyage since being promoted to the Chair. Though she, too, looked no different, she felt the emptiness of Mal's absence. Like her ship, this was her first mission without the gruff, taciturn man she loved. She very much wanted to turn back to the ball chaser's station and see him leaning against the console, grinning at her precise and crisp way of handling her crew and his ship, but fought down the urge. This was not the time for pointless indulgence.

"Docking thrusters off, Captain," Ensign M'boula snapped, knowing her captain's no nonsense attitude when getting under way. "We are clear of the station field."

"Fire manoeuvring thrusters, all ahead full. Set course for Terran orbit; Alpha restricted lane R1."

"Thrusters ahead full, aye, aye. Course laid in."

"Very good. Chief?" This to Soldano, the Chief Engineer.

"Fusion engines are on line, Captain," he reported, his uniform even crisper and cleaner

than Pamela's. "Full power at your discretion."

"Very good. Helm, disengage thrusters. Main engines ahead 1,500 kps."

"Main engines ahead 1,500 kps, aye, aye."

There was a tingling sensation that swept through the ship's crew as the inertial dampers powered on. Almost immediately on its heels came the surge of acceleration—greatly reduced to tolerable levels by the dampers—as the *Horizon* smoothly increased speed. Ensign M'boula switched the main viewer to aft and they watched as the *Bearden* quickly fell away. In moments it was lost against the hazy backdrop of the red planet.

"Arrival time?" Pamela asked no one in particular.

"Forty-one hours, eighteen minutes, ma'am," M'boula responded. "We'll put in at the *Gamma* Sunday, May 22, at 1130, station time."

"Thank-you, Ensign. First? You have the bridge." She stepped crisply to the rear of the bridge and entered her quarters, listening for but not hearing the soft trudge of Mal's footsteps behind her.

\* \* \*

"We've got a serious problem with the engines, Captain!" Ray Prendergast, the *DL White's* chief—and only—engineer yelled into the com. Only moments earlier, the ship had started vibrating and weaving slightly. The engines had dropped in tone while increasing in volume, and their deep growling made normal conversation difficult.

"Where's Mal?" Came the loud, crackling reply over the intercom. It was impossible to be certain, but Prendergast thought he heard a touch of fear in Raimondo's voice. Four days out of Mars and two days yet to Earth put them in a tight spot as far as the *DL White's* low quality lifeboats were concerned.

"He went into the port access tube about ten minutes ago. I think he'd spotted something on the panels. I haven't heard from him since!"

The ship gave a lurch as it accelerated suddenly and the dampers kicked in, making tolerable the jolt that would have otherwise pasted everyone to the nearest aft bulkhead. Prendergast glanced at his display and broke out into a sweat.

"Geez! We just jumped 20 kps, Cap'n! I think we're getting a bubble." Fusion engines relied on an even flow of plasma along a flat power grid. Surges in the power convoluted the grid and added strain. Right now, the normally straight lines were curving and taking on a slightly spherical shape. He cut back the power to compensate, and the ship slowed down, but the ripples in the grid remained and continued bending.

"How bad?" Tony's voice crackled over the com.

"Bad enough. The manual overrides have been off line for months, and I don't think the emergency overrides can compensate. Once that bubble gets to 25% of total power consumption, it's gonna pop."

"And everyone will toast our memories," Tony finished grimly. "I'd really like to get to port, Ray. Can you control it?"

"No." The ship gave another lurch and Ray swore. "We just picked up another 30 kps, Cap'n. It's less than a minute to grid overload!"

"Okay. Grab Mal and get to the evacuation boat." The abandon ship klaxon sounded throughout the ship. "I'll get Emily and we'll meet you at..." The klaxon shut off abruptly. "What the hell?"

There was a gentle motion that seemed to envelop the ship as the dampers again came online. Fearing the worst, Ray jerked his gaze down to the control panel. He blinked his eyes and looked again.

"Captain? The bubble's gone! The grid is operating at twenty percent above norm and showing full stability. She's as flat as an omega! Stand by while I verify."

Ray began going over the displays, calling up every view possible of the power grid and the engines plasma matrix. He couldn't believe what he saw. The engines were indeed operating at an increased efficiency. The loud sound of the cleaner burning engines had dropped to a muted rumble, though the tone stayed deep. Still questioning his panels, Ray checked once more, then hailed the bridge.

"It checks, Cap'n. The engines are burning twenty-one percent better and using eighteen percent less fuel."

"Of course they are, Ray." Mal's gruff voice called from above. Ray looked up and saw the engineer's blackened face grinning down at him from the tight access vent.

"Were you messing with my engines?" Ray demanded.

"Uh-huh. You gotta crawl back there every now and then, Ray. Your internal matrix puter was pumping through fuel eighty-nine centimeters off optimum. I also found a half dozen failing regulated circuits and a compression motor that had cut out weeks ago, leaving just the smaller backup." Mal reached above his head and grabbed the thick, black rail and pulled his sinewy body out of the tunnel. His feet came free and landed firmly on the rung beneath the vent. He climbed quickly down, jumping the last meter to the floor. "On top of that, the engine burning routines hadn't been configured properly. You downloaded the upgrades, but you never installed them. You've been burning Tony's profit by the ton."

Tony's voice came over the public channel. "I heard that! Ray, you weasel! You said you recalibrated last month! You better sleep with the door locked for the rest of this trip!" The intercom clicked off and Ray gave Mal a dirty look.

"Mal, you just cost me this trip's bonus! I thought you were supposed to help out."

Mal shrugged. "Hey, I was helping out. And Tony's the guy I'm helping out. It's not my fault you haven't been doing your job. Besides," he added with a peacemaker tone, "Your increased bonuses for the next couple years will more than pay off this trip's penalty. And I can give you a few pointers on keeping that matrix dead centered."

"Yeah, yeah. I guess I been a little lazy."

“Try a lot lazy.”

“Okay,” Ray conceded with a grin. “A lot lazy. Truth is, Mal, it’s real easy to just let things slide around here. The engines are crap, the controls are worse, and it gets awfully lonely here.”

“Aw, my heart’s breaking!” Mal sympathized acidly, then slipped into a serious tone. “You’re the engineer, Ray. Do your job right and it’ll stay interesting. Let things slide, and one day that won’t be a temporary bubble on your grid. It’ll be real, and you’ll be dead.” He patted the large, warm aft bulkhead, behind which the powerful fusion engines were now rumbling smoothly. “That’s why we call ‘em ladies, Ray. Treat ‘em nice and you’re in good company. Treat ‘em mean and you’re in for a wild ride. But ignore ‘em,” he paused and shook his head. “Ignore ‘em and they’ll kill you every time.” Mal slapped him on the back and went to his cabin to clean up.

It was an odd feeling, walking through the empty, dim corridors of the freighter. So different from the *Horizon* and her brightly lit decks, Mal thought. In every way, from the ancient wiring to the cobbled together puter system, to even the stale scent of the recirculated air, *Whitey* showed her age. Mal passed by an access panel that was hanging loose, a patchwork of cabling and fiber optics that couldn’t possibly have worked but did. Had one of his people tried that on the *Horizon*, Mal would have tied him to the front of the bow shields for the duration. Two different worlds, he thought.

It was another two different worlds waiting for him in his quarters when he arrived. Emily was sitting primly on his bed, the only place other than the floor where one could sit. He gave her a warm smile, surprised at seeing her, but pleasantly so.

“Hang on a second, Em. I gotta wash off.”

“Go right ahead, Mal,” she replied quietly. Then, with a small grin, she added, “I’ll just run a few laps while I’m waiting.”

Mal laughed. “You do that. Don’t get lost on the other side of my quarters.”

He washed off quickly, tasting the rusty age of the ship again in the water. *Whitey* would never be a grand old lady, but she was an old lady, and Mal respected her tenacity and... and... well, he respected her tenacity. Drying off, he tossed the towel onto the small counter and reached for a clean shirt and slipped it on.

“What’s on your mind, Em?” he asked, leaning against the counter.

“My mind is on my mind, to be honest, Mal.” It had taken her most of the previous two days to not call him Commander Stewart, now that she knew who he was. His easy way had won her over though, and they’d become more familiar. “Is there any way to tell when I’ll next... you know...” Her voice trailed off.

“I’m sorry, Em. I don’t know. There might be. Other than Fred, I haven’t dealt with ripes that much.” She flinched and he winced at the coldness of the words. “I’m sorry, Em. That’s not what I meant. I don’t consider you a ripe.”

“But I am, aren’t I, Mal?” she asked. “I really am a ripe.”

“Not now, you aren’t,” he offered weakly.



"No? Then what am I?" she waited for an impossible answer, then rushed on in a mixture of anger and frustration. "I was taken from my life and ripped without my knowledge, but I was still ripped. I've sharded back to myself, but how long until I revert back to her? To that... that... thing that only wants to dig rock!?" She took a deep breath and visibly calmed herself.

"I'm so confused, Mal," she continued in a quieter voice. "I used to see ripes. Maids, some industrial workers, even the occasional pleasure ripe on the streets in downtown Columbus. And I think our neighborhood uplink to the puterverse is a ripe. There are enough of them that it's easy to overlook them; to see them as a part of the machinery. Now I'm a ripe."

"I wish I could say something, Em," Mal replied softly. "But I can't think of anything to say."

"What's Fred like?" she asked suddenly.

"Fred? Oh, he's a nice enough guy. I've served with him for fifteen years now. He, Pam and I were on the original crew, you know."

"Yes, I know," Emily responded quickly, eager to change the subject she'd brought up. "I used to know the name of every bridge officer. There was Captain William Tessler, First Officer Pamela Carlson—who's now the Captain. Ensign Greg Behrens was the Pilot and Ensign Brenda Jamieson the navigator. And you," she looked at him like an excited child might, "Lieutenant Commander Mahlon Stewart, were the Chief Engineer."

"Please," Mal begged, "don't look at me like that, Em. You make me feel like some holostar. I'm just an ordinary guy, doing an ordinary job."

"That's not what we thought, Mal. I remember it so well, the day the *Horizon* came out of space dock, the first ever faster than light ship. I was ten years old and in fourth grade. Our whole class met in the auditorium to see the broadcast. They had put a holocam on the bridge so it actually felt like I was there."

"I remember that thing. Ugly it was, and hard to work around. I was glad to dismantle it when we were done."

"But then," Emily continued, not having heard Mal in her excitement, "Then, as the *Horizon* got closer and closer to the speed of light, the link started breaking. Finally, I heard Captain Tessler say, 'Engage singularity drive.' and you replied, 'Aye, sir'..."

"Aye, sir. We're chasing the ball." A distant look had come on Mal's face as he relived the moment. He closed his eyes and could feel again the exciting tightness in his chest as he engaged the drive and the *Horizon* hurled into history at 11.2 times the speed of light.

"Chasing the ball," Emily repeated, Mal's companion as he wandered down his memory. "You were the one who coined the phrase, Mal. What was it like at that instant, when you broke the light barrier?"

"It can't be described, Em," Mal said softly. "The forward view was blocked, of course, and no-one on the bridge wanted to look at the monitor. We just stared out of the hull. The stars started turning into lines, but only for a second. Then the dampers kicked on and the ball formed. We went from sub-light to FTL 11.2 in a heartbeat. The whole sky turned black, with thin lines of color stretching out the aft view as we left the starlight behind. Then the color was

gone, the stars were gone, and it was just us and an empty universe, sucking us into its cold embrace.”

“Why, you’re a poet!” she exclaimed clapping her hands lightly.

“What! Me?” Mal chuckled, shaking his head. “Em, a lump of solid Martian iron ore could have been a poet if it was on the bridge at that moment. Pam had the best grasp, I think. She said...”

“‘The stars have knelt before us, and we shall gratefully reign over them,’” Emily quoted with a romantic wistfulness in her voice.

Mal laughed loudly. “No, she didn’t say that. ITA gave her that line, but she just laughed at them. They credited it to her anyway, and it’s always worth a chuckle to bug her with it. Provided she’s in a good mood. Nah, what Pam said was, ‘People, we just stepped onto the ballroom floor. Let’s not trip on our petticoats.’ ”

“I like that better,” Emily said decisively. She looked at Mal closely, “Then Captain Tessler didn’t respond with, ‘And let us reign with quiet dignity?’”

“Actually, he did. He thought the holocams were still running—we weren’t sure if there’d be an actual break or just a long delay. Once we found out it was down, the Cap’n gave her a dirty look and almost sashayed her backside off the bridge. The Cap’n was a good man. He just liked to dot his i’s and cross his t’s with ITA.” Seeing the joke in his statement, he added with a grin, “He’d also kiss their a’s if needed.”

They both had a laugh and the tension of the moment faded. Mal didn’t stroll down memory lane too often, but seeing how much Emily enjoyed it, he was willing to regale her with his and Pam’s exploits on the *Horizon*. Hearing her laugh and listening to her rattle off eager questions and tell of her childhood fantasies of being on the *Horizon*, Mal quietly reflected on the bitter circumstances that now gave Emily those past fantasies at the cost of her future.

\* \* \*

The com system quietly toned, bringing Pam out of a fitful sleep. They were now thirty-two hours out from Mars and she’d received word four hours earlier that the crew would not have to go Earthside as originally thought. She immediately ordered the return to normal Martian gravity. It was a welcome relief, but the constant strain of on again, off again Earth gravity was quickly wearing her crew and herself down. Sleep—a natural function of the human body—was greatly affected by the unnatural changes.

“Yes?” she asked expectantly. “What can I do for you, Liz?” Elizabeth Norchem was the third officer and as such had the midnight watch.

“Sorry to wake you, Captain, but we’ve picked up a bogey. He’s two hundred thousand kilometers off the starboard side and has been matching our course and speed for fifteen minutes.”

“I see.” Pam didn’t waste time asking whether they had checked sensors in case it was a sensor ghost. She gave her officers much more credit than that. “I take it standard hailing

protocols were ignored?"

"Yes, ma'am. They're running silent."

"That's odd."

"That's what I thought, so I had Ensign Mandaro run a density scan on them."

"Good thinking. And?"

"And they're armed, ma'am. Pretty heavy stuff, too. At least three plasma cannons and one hull laser."

A hull laser? Pam shuddered, thinking back briefly to the Troid Piracy War, when the fast pirate ships would appear from nowhere and begin cutting up freighters, passenger ships and even thick plated military vessels with the high powered, millimeter thick hull laser beam. It required only seconds for the million degree flash point to cause a hull breach and force the damaged ship to divert all power and resources to maintaining hull integrity and life support. As a result of those attacks, it was illegal for anyone other than ITA to arm a ship with hull lasers.

"All right," she said with a heavy voice and got out of bed, "Hail them again and tell them they just got me up and I'm not in a good mood. I'll be there in a couple minutes."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Dressing quickly, she mulled over the possibilities. There were only two. Either they were ITA or gun runners. The third possibility—that they were pirates—was an impossibility. The brutal lesson ITA had taught everyone would curtail pirating for centuries. And since there was no reason for a gun runner to stick to the *Horizon*, it had to be ITA. But why the silent treatment?

Her curiosity stirred as much as her ire, Pamela stepped onto the bridge still buttoning the top of her tunic. Lieutenant Norcham was still at the com station, a dark frown on her face.

"Any luck, Third?"

"No, ma'am. They're still running silent. And look at this." She pointed to the com display, which had the transponder ID screen showing. Pamela adopted Norcham's frown.

"That looks like a gunship code, but it's way outside the allotted registry addresses. In fact, I don't know of any..." she broke off, then nodded slowly. "I've got it now. That's a prototype ship out there. Their transponder codes are in that range."

"But why would they be pacing us, ma'am?"

"Let's ask them, shall we?" Pam hit the hail button.

"This is Pamela Carlson, captain of the ball chaser *Horizon*, hailing the unidentified ship off our starboard quarter. Please identify yourself and state the reason for your following us."

She released the button and they listened to the muted popping and hissing of space noise coming over the com link. Pamela repeated the message twice more, but was greeted with the same white sound.

"Are their communications operational?" Pamela called over her shoulder to Ensign Mabry Houston, the night watch com officer.

"Yes, ma'am," came the reply. "Vacuum sonar indicates twenty-six open and active com links, including our hailing channel."

"All right, then," Pam said resolutely. "Asking nicely didn't work. Perhaps a more pointed approach is needed." She hit the hail button again.

"This is Captain Pamela Carlson of the ball-chaser *Horizon*, hailing the ITA prototype gunship off our starboard side. You are clearly following us, which means we will eventually identify you. We have your transponder code and I have access to the prototype registry. Either you'll identify yourself in thirty seconds or I'll wait until we get to Earth, and then I'll identify you and have your ass in a sling for the next twenty years. Your choice."

It was less than three seconds later before the response came through.

"This is alpha test gunship *Revenge*. I am Captain John B. Wilkes. How may we be of assistance to you, *Horizon*?"

"You could explain your tailing us, *Revenge*. You can also alter your current course and speed and give us a little more elbow room."

"Negative, *Horizon*. My orders are to escort you into Earth orbit. *Revenge* out." The channel closed with a decisive snap.

"All channels to the *Revenge* are off line, Captain," the com officer reported.

"Well, that certainly was rude," Norcham piped in.

"Rude, but expected," Pamela replied. "ITA is pretty cagey about their prototype craft, and with good reason. Most of them are for purposes of aggressive defense and system patrol. Many also have untried technologies that will in theory give the tactical advantage but will often fail when applied."

"So why send a prototype to escort us in, ma'am?" Norcham asked.

"Good question, Third. I'd also like to know why they feel we need an escort in the first place. It doesn't look I'm going to get an answer from the *Revenge*, though." She shook her head, glancing at the now dead com panel. "All right, we'll play by the rules. Notify the First and Second Officers of the incident. Brief all bridge com and navigational officers as well." She paused, considering, then continued. "And brief the Chief Engineer. Other than those, keep the identity and presence of the *Revenge* under wraps. Tell the First Officer I'll want to see him at," she shook her head to get her thoughts in order. The touch of gravity sickness she had compounded the effects of lack of sleep. "No, never mind, I'll tell him. Good night."

"Good night, Captain."

She turned back toward her cabin, but had only gone a few steps when the com panel crackled to life.

"Incoming priority message from ITA, Captain."

"Of course there is," she sighed. "And at this time of night, it can only be bad news. All right, let's have it, Ensign."

"Uh," Ensign Houston stared at the message as it decoded. Pam knew from the drop in his shoulders what was coming.

"Let me guess. They want us back on Earth gravity, right?"

"Um, yes, Captain."

"Right. Anything else? Bad news usually comes in threes."

"Nothing else, ma'am. It just says, 'To Captain Carlson, *Horizon*: Earth rotation of crew required. Deepest regrets and apologies. Advise immediate return to Earth normal gravity. Admiral Ghunda Howbarque.' "

"Very well," Pamela replied, turning to the third officer. "How far out are we from the *Gamma* station?"

"We're on course and schedule to dock at 1130 hours, station time, Captain. Time to docking is eight hours, fifty-seven minutes."

"Okay. Notify Environmental Control that I want gravity increased starting now, with Earth normal," her tone put a set of quotes around normal, "no later than 0900 tomorrow." She walked toward her quarters, then stopped for a moment, thinking.

"Captain?" Norcham called out.

Pamela shook her head briefly, then smiled. "Sorry, Third. Collecting cobwebs. Good night."

"Good night, Captain."

Pamela stepped inside the conference room, still thinking. This didn't seem right. ITA was never indecisive. Not like this. Surely they must know these constant changes in gravity were going to knock the bulk of the crew off their feet with gravity sickness. And the gunship. What was the point? What was the point of even sending the *Horizon* to Earth in the first place? This was all starting to smack of a poorly conceived action on ITA's and Harting's part. There was also an element of impropriety and unknown risk at play here. Pam couldn't put her finger on it, but she had a captain's sense of knowing when her crew was in jeopardy. It was time to prepare for the unexpected. She reached for the conference room com panel and hailed her first officer.

"Captain?" came the sleepy reply, Stoddard having identified the Captain's private channel.

"I'm sorry to wake you, Duane. I've just gotten up myself." She quickly covered the last half-hour's activities. When Duane spoke again, there was no sleepiness in his voice.

"I don't like it, Captain. I didn't figure this to be a normal mission extension, but things are beginning to sound like a second rate murder mystery."

"My thoughts as well, Duane. And I'm not willing to let this crew be the murder victim." She hesitated, knowing the seriousness of her next order. Duane anticipated it.

"Shall I contact stellar cartography for a private response, Captain?"

"Yes. My compliments to AB Nicholas Jenkins. I'd like him transferred immediately from stellar cartography to Captain's steward."

"It's that bad then, ma'am?"

"I don't know, Duane. I just don't know. But my gut says it is, and I've learned to trust my instinct. We'll go over our course of action at our 0700 briefing. Good night."

"Good night, Captain."

\* \* \*

"So, watcha' got for me, Jonesy?" Mal sat in front of the large flat monitor. The communications room was deserted, and the only light was the screen with Jonesy's image—only slightly blurred because of the decryption process—filling it. Emily had turned in for the night, as had everyone else but the bridge crew. Mal was leaning back against the chair, half fearing his thrice normal weight would collapse the old pole mounted model. *Whitey* was docking at Gamma station the next day, and Mal wanted to get acclimated to Earth gravity again. He was not one to sit around idly—not when there was something that need doing, anyway—but his leg and back muscles had been protesting for two days now and he had to sit down. Emily had adjusted more easily, being from Earth, but she had also turned in early the past two nights.

"We got some tidbits, Mal, and it ain't too good. Linda's been busting her pretty butt trying to get something on Harting, but nuthin' solid's come up, yet. She spends most of her time dodging their snooper programs."

"Don't get caught. You're too fat to bury properly."

"Hey, it's all muscle. Anyway, she ain't been caught. But she can't wade no more than a couple layers in."

"Anything that'll help."

"That's what we figured. Here's what we got: Harting Enterprises was formed by Jonas Harting, Ha Te Jang, and Christopher Young back in..."

"Christopher Young? The puterverse creator?"

"Uh-huh. They formed the company way back in 2054. They opened up shop in the Cuban Keys—the Florida Keys back then—making cargo hover craft and related loading equipment. Ha Te provided the know how, Harting the muscle and money, and Young the marketing. He'd introduced the Net only three years earlier, so anything he did turned to aligned titanium."

"At least until he dropped from sight in '65."

"You have enough money, you do what you want. Nothing happened much for awhile. They expanded quickly, opening up shops in Phoenix, Berlin, Denver, Luna 3, places like that. They've grown pretty big, but it's always been steady. No sudden surges or anything. Now

they're 209 years old and still focus on hovs. Only now the models range from luxury craft to orbital jobs. Other interests include puterverse technologies, shuttle services from Luna to Terra via the orbital stations, and, this one's interesting, mining."

"Mining?" Mal sat forward, suddenly intent.

"Uh-huh. They've got mines in Mongolia, Arizona, Luna, and even Mars."

"Did you check them out?"

Jonesy gave a pained expression. "No, we wanted to ask you first, Daddy. 'Course we checked them out. Nothin'. They're all legitimate mines, with their profits matching up with the surrounding mines and their expenses, payroll and other activities pretty normal."

"Okay. That's a dead end. How about the hyperidors?"

"That was even tougher. There's no security on the info, but that's because there isn't any info. Not really. Remember what I told you about the Oregon Firestorm?"

"You mean about how your sources said it wasn't an accident?"

"Uh-huh. Well, I went back to those sources to double check. Only I couldn't. One was dead and the other two went on a vacation. Together. A month ago."

"Damn. I'm sorry, Al."

"Someone's gonna wake up one night to a Martian heart squeeze," Jonesy's voice had gone cold, like it used to be before Linda. "And I'm payin' for the job. I don't care who the sumbitch is. I ain't no Pisces and vengeance is mine." He gathered himself visibly, then spoke again in his normal tone.

"When we found that out, we knew we were on the right track. So Linda decided to see if anyone who had worked in the ITA Oregon lab was still alive. Turns out, there is. He's a professor at—get this—Ball Chasers U. Name of Paul Magill."

"He sounds like a person I'll want to talk to."

"Shouldn't be too hard. He's a pretty popular guy there. Has a number of women that hang out with him all the time. Even attend his classes."

"How old is this guy?" Mal asked.

"He's about forty. Make that seventy-five in Terran years." Jonesy cracked a grin. "So you might want to talk to him quick, before his hobby kills him."

"Uh-huh. We'll make that first thing. After that, I suppose a look at Harting's Cuban complex might be in order."

"How come?"

"'Cause Em said she woke up near an ocean, and the water was warm. If I remember my Earth geography right, the Cuban Keys are somewhere in a warm water ocean, just off South America."

"Close. Just off North America. All right, we'll start working on that complex a little more.

And that'll keep your travels pretty short. The Harting complex and Ball Chasers U are close, for Earth standards anyway."

"How far apart are they?"

"I looked it up. They're on the same continent, about 1900 clicks apart. I'll send along the exact locations. I'm also sending along some more fake id's and a few creds. I'll have someone slide 'em to you on *Gamma*."

"I appreciate it, Jonesy."

"Don't thank me. I'm puttin' it on your bar tab."

Mal smiled. "Fair enough. I've already paid for my trip out here working on Tony's engines. I didn't figure this to be a luxury cruise."

"I gotta go, Mal. We're gettin' up on five minutes, and they start tappin' the calls at that point. One last thing. About Margaret's killin'? We ain't found out why yet, but my people found out who. It was an import job. Some Terran goon came all the way out here just to eleven two her."

"Just to kill Margaret!?" Mal exclaimed. "Even the fastest restricted lane takes forty hours to make the run. That means it was planned before we had even put into dock. That doesn't make any sense, Jonesy."

"Then this'll make even less sense, Mal. The same goon also beamed her two kids. They're both dead. And we're not sure, but it looks like he's gone off planet, probably back to Earth."

Mal felt a chill go through him, a chill not unlike the one he'd had when he'd last seen Margaret. Of everything that had happened in the past week, these three mindless acts of violence drove home just how desperate someone was to accomplish their goal. And Mal still didn't know what it was. He looked up at Jonesy's quiet image and felt the chill slip into his voice.

"I think we'll be splitting the fee on that Martian heart squeeze, Al."

\* \* \*

It was a very achy Mal that trudged to the bridge the on the sixth day of their trip. Emily was still in bed, but Mal had never missed a docking, and even as a passenger wanted to keep the tradition.

He stepped onto the bridge and looked for a place to sit. Since a freighter bridge isn't really made to accept visitors, there were no spare seats. There was a great deal of bulkhead to lean against, though, so Mal made himself at home. Tony gave him a brief nod, then turned his attention back to his job.

"Orbital station *Gamma*? This is the *DL White*, coming into the docking lanes. We are requesting access to docking controls." Tony's hands reached lazily about the console. Having made this run hundreds of time, he and his crew could dock the ship in their sleep. Probably had, too.



“Acknowledged, *DL White*,” the *Gamma*’s main computer replied. It was a mechanical voice that had a slightly human male timbre to it. It somehow seemed more tragic to Mal now. Had its mechanical voice and cold logic circuits been real once? “Welcome to orbital station *Gamma*. The docking controls are now yours, pilot. Please note that navigational buoys *Gamma 23* and *Epsilon 24* are currently damaged and inoperative. There has also been a solar flare warning issued from 0500 until 2030 tomorrow night. I have detected a small fluctuation in port thruster six. Compensation burst from port thruster five has corrected the problem. Docking will commence in two point one minutes. Station *Gamma* has cleared platform 189 and wishes to inform you that you are authorized to land. Again, welcome to the station.”

“Acknowledged and thank-you, *Gamma*. *DL White* out.” Tony continued to guide the ship in, barking orders as needed. Despite the poor condition of the ship, Mal had decided Tony himself was a pretty good pilot and a superior captain. He would never sit in the Chair of an ITA ball-chaser, but in many ways the day to day problems of operating an antiquated freighter could be more challenging than commanding a top of the line star ship.

Tony suddenly gave out a short laugh and motioned Mal over. Groaning, Mal pushed off the wall and clomped over. Everyone else was working in the same Earth gravity as he was, so no-one felt bad for him. Indeed, it was at Mal’s request that they had such high gravity—the *Gamma* worked at only half Earth gravity, so there was little need for space based crews to adjust. No one begrudged him the request though; his work on the engines had increased everyone’s bonus at least 25%. Everyone but Ray.

Tony motioned at the console sensor array. Similar to the display in the Captain’s ready room on the *Horizon*, it was a three dimensional display showing the surrounding area. Taking up the center was the *Gamma*, of such a large size in this scale that several details were visible even in the small display.

“Look at that, Mal. Looks like she beat us, all right.” Sitting above and ahead of their current position, and moored a kilometer away from the *Gamma*, was the *Horizon*.

“I wonder why she’s not docked yet.”

“She is, Tony. Pam must’ve used Captain’s discretion and docked off the station. Any ball-chaser can perform a vacuum mooring if the Captain warrants the situation justifies it.”

“She better be careful, Mal. She doesn’t want to piss off ITA.”

“You got it backwards, Tony. ITA better be careful. They don’t want to piss off Pam.” He looked up at the bridge monitor, which now showed the image of the *Horizon* hanging in space, the *Gamma* filling the screen otherwise. “Though my guess is they’re too late.”

## Chapter Eight



The shuttle bay's fully pressurized, sir. You may enter."

"Thank you, Marty." Chief Officer Stoddard, flanked by two privates from security, punched his standard code into the com panel. There was a soft sigh as the air in the control room matched that in the shuttle bay, then the hatch swung open. Gripping his hands on the rail, Stoddard descended the twenty steps to the hanger floor carefully. In full Earth gravity, stepping down too hard could cause bone shivers. It could also cause a mess on the stairs themselves. Though an experienced officer with eighteen years in space, the on again, off again gravity changes over the past week had weakened both his constitution and his stomach. Much of the crew was worse. Reaching the hanger floor, Stoddard made his way to the small shuttle. As he neared, the rear hatch lowered and its passenger stepped out.

He was a man of average height and above average build. He had jet black hair and equally dark eyes. His suit was as sharp as his facial features, and he seemed more than a little bemused. Stoddard knew why and didn't care. Still, as First Officer, he must do his captain and ship proud and extend every courtesy.

"Mr. Matheson?" Stoddard extended his hand, partly to greet the man, partly to show he had no intention of saluting. "Welcome on board the *Horizon*. I'm Chief Officer Duane Stoddard. The Captain..."

"Where is Carlson?" he snapped, ignoring the proffered hand. "She was told to meet me personally."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Matheson," Duane's voice chilled ever so slightly. "But *Captain* Carlson is awaiting you in her ready room. If you'll be so kind as to follow me?"

"I can find it by myself, thank you, Stoddard."

"I'm sorry sir, but I will escort you. The *Horizon* is a military ship and an escort is required for all visiting persons, civilian or otherwise. Follow me, please." Giving no opportunity for debate, Duane turned on his heel and set out for the aft lift.

The eledisc trip from deck ten to the bridge was silent and awkward. It seemed even longer because of Matheson's seething. Duane found it difficult to believe the man could be so upset over protocol and assumed there was something more.

It certainly didn't seem that way upon entering the captain's ready room, however. Captain Carlson was already there, staring out the aft bulkhead up toward the bright and impossibly huge moon that orbited Earth. Duane entered first to make the formal introduction, but Matheson brushed right by him.

"Carlson, I demand to know why you broke procedure by not mooring the *Horizon* to the *Gamma*! You have made things very difficult and had better have a damned good justification."

Unable to stop himself, Duane blinked a couple of times and glanced at Matheson. He wondered briefly if Matheson was a blustering, pompous fool, but quickly decided his anger was genuine and not exaggerated. Neither was he posturing. He really did expect answers and his attitude indicated his being used to being answered. Interested to see her reaction, Duane looked toward his captain.

For as much as Matheson may have been used to underlings that jumped at his bark, Captain Carlson was not an underling. She turned slowly, placed her hands behind her and

gave Matheson a brief nod and smile.

“Welcome to the *Horizon*, Mr. Matheson. Would you care for something to drink? Perhaps a cup of tea, or...”

“Something to drink!?” Matheson interrupted. “I’m not some grunt for you to order around, Carlson! You have no idea who you’re dealing with, and I demand to know why you broke protocol! I have a mind to...”

“*Mister Matheson*,” Pamela’s voice sliced through Matheson’s protests like a surgeon’s laser, yet her tone was as cold as space. “First of all, my people are not grunts, they are crew. Second, you will address me as Captain, Captain Carlson, or ma’am. You are on board with my permission. You will show proper and required respect or I will have you removed from this ship. Third, I did not break protocol, I used captain’s discretion and chose a vacuum mooring. And finally, *Mister Matheson*, while I may not know exactly who you are, I most definitely know who you are not. You are not a command civilian official of ITA, nor are you in its Admiralty. And you are certainly not Earth’s President Winfried nor Mars’ Premier Chu Mong. You therefore have no authority over me.”

Duane stole a glance at Matheson. He expected him to be quickly approaching a massive apoplectic seizure, but was surprised to see that while he had taken the captain’s admonitions under mental advisement, he wasn’t cowed.

“Now, *Mister Matheson*,” she continued, lowering her tone and removing her pointed anger. “I have observed the niceties of a civilian visit and you have refused. Please state your business.” She motioned to a chair at the conference table, which Matheson ignored. She shrugged her shoulders and seated herself, looking at him expectantly.

“Captain Carlson, you are to avail your ship, your crew and yourself to Harting Enterprises for the next three weeks.”

“Why?”

“That information is not available to me at this time.” He smiled slightly.

“I see,” Pamela nodded slowly. “Very well, then, *Mister Matheson*, have a safe trip back to the *Gamma*.” She shifted her eyes to Stoddard. “First? Escort *Mister Matheson* and his assistant to the shuttle bay, then secure the *Horizon* for departure. Lay in a course for Mars. We’ll put to in one hour.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” Stoddard replied crisply, then turned to Matheson. “If you’ll follow me, sir, I’ll see you to...”

Matheson waved off Stoddard and stared indignantly at Pamela.

“Don’t try this with me, Carlson! I’ll have you relieved of command so fast...”

“Enough!” Pamela came to her feet and though she stood a good third meter smaller than Matheson, she spoke a full meter taller. “*Matheson*, you are either a powerless flunky or a weasel and a fool! If you have no idea what Harting has planned for my ship, then you’re too far down the food chain to even think of having sway over my command.

“And if you’re a weasel—which I’m convinced of—then you’re also a liar! That you have

the audacity to come on board my ship and say to my face that I'm to blindly put my crew into Harting's hands makes you a fool as well! You said a moment ago that I had no idea with whom I was dealing. Mr. Matheson, I would suggest you do not know whom *you* are dealing with! You have my ship ordered to Earth after returning from a two year journey, denying my crew even the simple courtesy of letting them reunite with their families. You—or Harting, rather, through ITA—force me to change the gravity on my ship so frequently that half my crew are standing solely on will and pride. Then you stand there and expect me to meekly surrender my command and sense of duty to you for no reason? I am made of far stronger stuff than you imagine. *Get off my ship!*"

"I have orders..." he broke in, his voice considerably less potent than it had been, Duane noted. Matheson had clearly underestimated the Captain, and was paying the price.

"Damn your orders, Matheson!" she shot back. "As captain of a singularity drive star ship, I have the authority to question any orders, regardless of source, if they put my crew and ship at grave risk. As the Senior Line Captain of ITA, I have the authority to countermand those orders. Consider that authority exercised. Good day!"

"All right!" Matheson barked. "All right, damn you! I'll let you win your petty little argument!" His bitter tone and sour put the lie to his words. "Harting wants to install and activate an experimental hyperidor drive. If it works, we'll be able to send ships to other planets at four times the speed of the ball chasers." He smiled again. "And put you out of a job."

"I doubt that," Pam replied coolly. "As I understand it, a hyperspace corridor must first be constructed before you can insert a ship. Ball chasers will still be needed to make the initial trip to the planet. And hyperidors are fixed objects. Travel inside the same corridor is restricted to single entry and exit points, since it is nearly impossible to navigate in hyperspace. Ball chasers are free roaming, so I imagine they'll be around a bit longer."

"How did you know that?" he demanded. He seemed good at demanding things.

"Mr. Matheson, I was traveling the space ways before you were potty trained. And ITA didn't give me this job for political reasons. I earned it." She smiled slightly, and her smile was somewhat warmer than Matheson's. "Very well. You've started to accommodate me, so it is only fair that I ease the tensions somewhat by reading your orders and hearing further mission justification. Now," she reseated herself, "I'm in the mood for an herbal tea. May I offer you some as well?"

\* \* \*

The first sensation Mal had as he and Emily stepped off the shuttle and onto the open air ramp in the Philadelphia spaceport was one of dizzying vastness. All around him there were no walls, no rock, no man made structures to protect him from the bleak atmosphere of Mars or the vacuum of space. Overhead, a massive sun blinded him and poured its heat over him, causing him to wince and blink rapidly. The sky was an eerie blue and the odd tingling of a passing breeze made him look quickly for a hull breach. He had difficulty taking his first breath, as difficult as an air breather might have inhaling water with a Pisces waterlung. And the breath he did take was tainted with flavors and sensations quite foreign to him. It was hard

to believe humankind was actually from this planet.

They made their way slowly along the ramp, heading toward the primary concourse. Emily helped as best she could, but she, too, was suffering from the effects of the heavier gravity, having become used to Martian gravity over the past weeks. They were not alone in their unsteady gait, though, Mal thought gratefully—he'd always believed misery loves company. The majority of those getting off the shuttle felt the additional pull. Though there were slidewalks readily available, most chose not to use them, realizing the more they used their muscles, the sooner they'd adapt.

Mal and Emily continued an additional hundred feet, but it was clear that Mal needed assistance. He'd worked under Earth gravity on board the *Horizon* as recently as a week ago, and on the *DL White* the past two days. But the real thing was more oppressive, as though it tugged at every cell in his body in a way artificial gravity could not duplicate. Reluctantly, he stepped onto the slidewalk. People looked at him with quick glances, indicating their pity and mild contempt, then ignored him. Twice he heard people call out "Martian!" in a voice meant to be only just heard. Mal looked around but couldn't see who said it. He turned back to Emily.

"Is it that obvious?" he asked.

"Uh... yes, it is, Mal," Emily replied with a nervous tone.

"What?"

"Nothing," she said quickly. "It's just that they're not saying you're a Martian. They're calling you a Martian."

Mal shook his head once, then winced from the effort. "Huh? Run that one by again, Em?"

She turned her head away slightly, as though ashamed. "The term 'Martian' is used as an insult, meaning you're... you're weak and ignorant." She turned back to him, still afraid to look at him directly. "Some people don't like Martians, Mal. It's not really pronounced, but there is that feeling."

Mal snorted. "Then they're idiots. Passing judgment like that on someone based on where they're from is onedee thinking." He smiled. "I'd like to see them on Mars, boosting their lunch every five minutes and staggering around like a drunk because their muscles are too dense." Emily seemed cheered by Mal's casual attitude of the insult, and they continued on, chatting lightly.

Similar to the Vermilion spaceport—and, indeed, most planetary space ports—the Philadelphia Interplanetary Port was a horseshoe shaped complex with the landing pads located on the ring and PIP itself at the bottom, with access to the atmosphere based transportations. Located forty kilometers southwest of Philadelphia, PIP was fairly modern and fairly busy. It was also located on the wide Delaware River, and as such was a more versatile port of call than the land locked ports of Newark and Debra Kennedy.

The slidewalk took them quickly to the taxi stands and they hopped a quick hov into Philadelphia. Jonesy—who'd traveled to Earth only once but had never forgotten the agony of the trip—had booked them a gravity room in the upscale Trenton section of Philadelphia. It was with a profound sense of relief that Mal collapsed on the bed. Emily, who by now was

dragging considerably herself, took the adjoining bedroom. It was going to be a quiet day.

\* \* \*

“So, people,” Pamela concluded looking around at the seven other people in the room. “That’s the mission. For the next five days, we’re to assist Harting techs with installation of the hyperspace drive adapter and navigational systems in engineering while reconfiguring our bridge controls and sensors to function in hyperspace. Training of the crew will continue through that period, and we’re to take the *Horizon* into hyperspace next week Saturday, eight days from today.”

She looked carefully at each as they absorbed the overwhelming information and unbelievable content the briefing had contained. Her audience were from varied backgrounds but all were similar in that they had slightly stunned looks on their faces. Chief Officer Duane Stoddard was nodding his head slowly, adjusting to the proposed changes in the quick yet steady method she’d come to trust. Her second and third officers were also making their mental adjustments at their pace, calculating how to best manage their new duties. Her navigational officer, Ensign M’Boula was the most dazed of them, which was understandable as this was her first senior staff meeting and she wasn’t used to such vast changes. Fred kept his opinions to himself, as did the steward, AB Jenkins. Chief Engineer Soldano seemed bemused by the whole thing and was willing to voice his feelings.

“Eight days,” Soldano said with a disbelieving shake of his head. “If I’d been told a month ago that a completely revolutionary drive system could be installed into and over an existing one in only five days, I’d wouldn’t have believed it.”

“It does seem far-fetched,” Stoddard agreed. “but it is just a prototype model, Chief, and isn’t really a drive. We’re still using our fusion engines for thrust. The new system is actually a reality interface that will open a hyperspace rift. Even then it’ll be using our subspace prongs. That’s why Harting says they chose a ball chaser; not only could we better endure the rigors of a transdimensional insertion, much of our singularity infrastructure can be used by the new interface.”

“It all smacks of being too slipshod to me,” Soldano complained. “Captain, I find it very difficult to believe we’re not wasting our time.”

“Perhaps, Chief,” Pam replied carefully. “I have some reservations too about the speed with which they’re moving forward. But ITA deems this a top priority mission; one that is time sensitive and requires the best crew. The *Horizon* and her crew fill the tabinal, so we go.”

“How long will we be in hyperspace, Captain?” Of the six senior staff, Grace M’Boula was the only ensign. Nonetheless, she felt that she was there to contribute and did.

“From what Mr. Matheson said, because the drive is only a prototype, we’re very limited in the amount of time we can remain in hyperspace. About ten minutes. But since we jump to FTL-30 the moment we enter the unmarked corridor, and peak at FTL-412 before decelerating, we should end up over 200 a.u.s outside Pluto’s orbit.”

“Just think of it,” Stoddard offered to no one in particular. “An FTL of 412! Our trip to 18 Scorpii would have taken only about eight weeks.”

“Seven point seven nine weeks, sir,” Fred piped in. Although not on the senior staff, his presence was required by Pamela during mission briefings. It was an unusual practice—most captains simply relayed transcripts of briefings to their ship ripes—but one that seemed to be appreciated by Fred. “The actual trip would be only five point two four weeks, however, since the ship would be able to attain a safe cruising speed of FTL-625 for the majority of the trip. That is assuming the current theories of hyperidor travel are valid.”

“It is going to change our perception of space travel and colonization,” Pam agreed. “But first we have to prove it can be done. Mr. Matheson has persuaded me to believe it can be done.” She made no mention of their rocky start nor the still strained relationship between her and Matheson, Duane noted. He was not surprised. Though the holder of a fiery temper and at times brutal candor, Captain Carlson had a solid awareness of her personality and kept a professional attitude whenever possible.

“I’m *hoping* it can be done, and done accurately, Captain,” Soldano added with a sour tone. “They’re having my people make a mess of the navigational control systems in both engineering and on the bridge. If their calibrations are wrong, we’ll be weeks in space repairing the guidance systems for either the singularity drive or the fusion engines.”

“What about the new navigational array they’re putting in, Chief?” asked Norcham. “Are we going to be able to adapt them to existing systems?”

“No,” he replied sourly. “The array uses an ionic power sphere and the vapor tendrils are wreaking havoc on our fusion power grids. Harting’s little toy will effectively disable all legacy navigational arrays and sensors, so we’re physically disengaging them now.”

“Wait,” Leroy Faria, the second officer said, “If it takes only five days to install the system, wouldn’t it take...”

“Five days to reinstall our arrays?” Soldano finished. “No. They need to be installed and recalibrated. That’s a six day dock job, sure, but we won’t be in dock, so it’ll be thirty plus days.”

“Excuse me sir,” Fred broke in with his flat, evenly spaced voice. “I am certain I will be able to act as the *Horizon’s* navigational array should the need arise. In my estimation, I could navigate the ship safely to either Earth or Mars within two weeks if we remain in the solar system plane, and only a week if we appear more than 20 degrees above or below the plane.”

“That’s another thing,” Soldano continued, not acknowledging Fred’s comment beyond using it as a point to pick up from. “I’m not too happy about this no course element of hyperspace travel. We have an estimation of how far we’ll travel, but no idea what direction. This whole hyperspace thing should remain on the boards until the bugs are worked out.”

“That would be the safe route, Chief,” Pam again replied quietly. She was disappointed in her Chief Engineer’s reluctance to try this new frontier, but struggled not to show it. “But that’s not the route we’ve been told to follow. I want all possible cooperation extended to the Harting staff. Duane? Insert a fourth shift and overlay engineering and bridge shifts by two hours. That will give added assistance to the overhaul while extending rest hours for the crew.”

Duane nodded. “Aye, Captain. The crew will like hearing that.” He looked her in the eyes, then flickered his sight briefly to Jenkins.

Pamela caught his glance and questioning look and gave a barely perceptible nod, meant only for Duane. She then addressed everyone. "We'll continue senior staff briefings twice a day for the duration. Next meeting at 2100 hours. In the meantime, we've got some hard work in front of us. Go to it."

\* \* \*

"It's a trick question, Professor," the third year engineering student insisted. "The laws of conservation dictate that it is not possible to have an energy bleed greater than the mass available. And the reality is even more restrictive, since a complete conversion of singularity mass to energy would melt the spikes and destroy the ship."

Mal and Emily sat in the rear of the lecture hall, where they'd been since arriving at Ball Chasers U an hour earlier. Emily was half dozing while Mal listened intently to both the lecture and answers. Listening to the student's assured tone, a small smile crept across his face. Had he been this young and inexperienced once?

"Well, we can't have that, now can we, Mr. Tompkins? I should hate to be the murderer of such a fine ship and crew, fictitious though it may be." Professor Magill's tone was both humorous and cutting, making the suddenly uncertain Mr. Tompkins squirm under the old man's gaze. "I appreciate your caring for the welfare of others, Mr. Tompkins, but such feelings are of little use in Singularity Drive Theory. Perhaps a change of degree is in order. I hear the Nursing tract is suitable for compassionate people."

Several snickers came from the crowded hall, and Tompkins ears burned, but he held his ground.

"No, thank you, Professor. I prefer engineering. And I still maintain that your question has no true solution. It is impossible to convert mass to energy at a greater than one to one ratio. That would be a form of creation; making something from nothing."

"Very well, Mr. Tompkins. I admire your tenacity, if not you're position. You are wrong. There is a true solution to the problem. But not to worry. I am not expecting you nor any of your fellow students to provide the answer." An audible sigh went up from the hall, causing Magill to give a wan smile. "I doubt there are more than five people alive who could give the correct proof. I was merely offering the possibility as a way to stretch your minds, to think along unthinkable lines. It is only in the untested areas of your intellect that creation can truly occur. Everything else is just regurgitated fact, assembled in varied ways. Class dismissed."

Like a herd of Martian Dexters spooked by rustlers, the hundred plus students acted with a single mind, rose and made for the exit doors at the back of the hall. Many looked at Emily as they passed by, far fewer looked at Mal. One or two did squint slightly, as though almost recognizing him, but a quick scowl from him averted their attention away from his face and onto his attitude, which they then avoided.

Within two minutes the hall was empty save for Mal and Emily, the professor, and two female students who lingered near him. Must be a couple of Magill's girlfriends, Mal concluded. They were busying themselves, cleaning up loose papers, chatting lightly, and gathering tabdisks of the day's tests. One was a red head, the other a blond, and they moved with an ease that made Mal look twice in appreciation. They were nice enough looking, with



well proportioned, athletic figures. Mal's taste in the female form had been spoiled, however, by a lifetime in space and on Mars, where the benefits of lighter gravity made for a quite regal improvement in the shape of all women, especially the area above the waist and below the neck.

Mal tried to out-wait them, but it was soon obvious they had no intention of leaving. Seeing no better opportunity, he rose to his feet and made his way carefully down the sloped lecture hall. Though a day's rest and acclimation had done wonders for him, Mal was still distrustful of sloped surfaces, his muscles having difficulty correctly gauging the differences in movement.

"Professor?" Mal called out as he reached the lecture platform at the bottom, Emily close behind. Magill looked up from his holo puterverse interface, which he had just activated.

"Yes? What do you want?" He frowned as Mal stepped closer. "You're not one of my students, are you? You seem familiar."

"No, I'm not a student, Professor. My name is Mark Stanton and I'm just visiting for the day." He flashed his bogus ID, as did Emily, who's card identified her as Agatha Bevins. "I wonder if I might have a moment of your time to ask you a few questions."

"I'm sorry, but I am not available to the public. If you wish to speak to me, you may try to enter the university as a student and take one of my courses." He smiled thinly. "It will take you about three years to reach the level I teach, but I'll be happy to speak to you then about singularity drive theory." He returned to his puterverse interface.

"Uh, I don't have three years, Professor. I don't even have three hours. And I don't have any questions about chasing the ball. I'm more interested in your thoughts about hyperspace corridors."

As though he'd been hit by an unseen hand, the professor jerked and pulled out of the access, turning it off. He looked at Mal closely.

"Who are you, man?"

"I told you. My name is Mark..."

"No, no! Not your name! Your occupation! What do you do for a living? There are very few people who know about hyperspace travel and even fewer who would associate it to me. I ask again, who are you?"

This was not working out the way Mal had envisioned it. He'd anticipated having to worm the information out of Magill, and had prepared accordingly. What he hadn't considered was that Magill would first make demands of Mal's identity. In a flash, Mal saw it was a foolish mistake on his part, but he wasn't used to concealing his identity. He shrugged and just followed his instincts.

"I'm an engineer, Professor, looking to do some research on hyperidors. I'm convinced it is a viable means of travel, but I want to hear from you, first."

"Why me?" The professor had taken a somewhat defensive tone, but of more concern to Mal was the touch of fear in his voice.

"My sources tell me, Professor, that you worked on hyperspace theory at ITA's R&D facility

in Oregon. My source also says that the firestorm was a result of something other than inadequate safety procedures."

Magill flinched again, and Mal's sixth sense kicked in. Something was wrong and about to get worse. Mal felt himself rocking gently forward, shifting his weight in preparation to moving quickly.

"Your sources are misinformed, Mr. Stanton," he snapped almost shrilly. "I never worked at that establishment. And I advise you to leave. Now."

"I'm sorry, Professor, but I have to have these answers. And I know you can give them to me."

"See here, Mr. Stanton! Your presumptuous..."

"The ratio is one to one point nine four six one seven times ten to the negative fifty-sixth. Proof is provided by applying quasar pulses against the event horizon of a natural singularity and plotting the altered vector of the pulse. It weighs less."

"What?" he said sharply, momentarily thrown off balance by Mal's comment.

"That's the answer to your question to Tompkins. He neglected to take into account the recombined mass of the sliding electrons in the light rays as they escaped the singularity then re-crossed the light speed threshold when being dragged back into the event horizon during singularity bleeds exceeding point nine one five."

Mal knew by responding to the question that Magill would be able to figure out his identity. What Mal didn't know was how odd Magill's response to Mal's statement would be.

"Look out!" Magill shouted, his eyes shifting behind Mal.

Mal jerked at the peculiar action, and swung around. He turned just in time to see the redheaded student slug Emily in the stomach, causing her to gasp and double over. Mal stepped up to push the girl away, then was himself slammed back as the blond fired a small energy weapon at him. His back struck painfully against the edge of the lectern and Mal fell to his hands and knees. He shook his head then looked up. The woman had stepped up and was aiming the gun at his head. Mal stared at it stupidly, the effects of the first shot having numbed him mentally.

"Amateur," the woman said derisively then fired again.

\* \* \*

Sean Frost had noticed the two people in the back of Professor Magill's class and was struck by both of them. The woman was in her twenties and fairly pretty. She'd seemed out of place somehow, a feeling Sean attributed to the way she'd been only half-awake.

The man had seemed even more out of place. There were older students at BCU of course, but not many, and not that old. And certainly not in SDT classes. There was little use for singularity drive theory outside the hull of a ball chaser, so the class makeup was generally younger students working their way up ITA's engineering ladder.

He'd stared impolitely at the man, both for his age and his familiar looks. Had they met before, perhaps in a different class? He'd been put off by the man's scowl, but now, as he walked toward the gym, his thoughts returned to the pair. He turned toward his friend.

"Hey, Harriet. Did you see that old guy at the back of the hall?"

"You mean the one with the woman? Yeah. What about it?"

"Have you seen him around? I have a feeling I've seen him before. I was just wondering if he's from around here."

Harriet thought a moment before shaking her head. "Nope. He looked familiar to me, too, but I'm sure I'd remember him if I had met him. Anyway, I know he wasn't a student or prof because he had on a visitor badge. The woman did, too."

"Really? I missed that."

"Well, he's not from BCU, Sean. There wouldn't be a lot of point for an old codger like him to learn ball chasing." She laughed. "He was old before there even *were* ball chasers!" She laughed again, then her voice tapered off as realization came.

Sean pulled up sharply and stared at his friend, who in turn was staring at him. They remained that way a moment longer, then broke into a run back toward the lecture hall, calling out to friends as they ran.

\* \* \*

"Wake up, Stanton!"

Mal felt his face jerk to one side as a hand slapped it, but he felt no pain. His entire body seemed numb. He lifted his head groggily, raising his hands to his face.

He was seated on the floor of the hall, at the bottom of the lectern stage. Emily was beside him, coughing from the effects of her beating at the hands of the redhead. Standing over him were both of the professors girlfriends. Only now they seemed much less like girlfriends and much more like bodyguards. The redhead stepped up and slapped him again.

"Wake up!"

"Geez! Lay off! I'm up!" He rubbed his cheek, as though stung by her hit. In truth, he was still numb, but the tingling of recovery was spreading quickly through his body. "What did you do that for?" he complained.

"None of your business," she snapped back. "What's your true name and why are you bothering the Professor?"

He stared at her, hoping to give her the impression he was still floundering in the effects of the stun which have already faded. He'd heard of students defending their teacher's beliefs and position, but this was going a little too far.

"Who are you?" he replied in a slurred voice. Most of it was acting, but a small corner of his mouth was still numb, so there was a touch of reality. "You're not a normal student."

"She's not a student at all, Mr. ... Stanton," the professor answered. His lingering over Mal's name told him that Magill knew who he was. He jerked a thumb at the blonde. "And neither's she. They're..."

"Off line the mouth, Professor," the blonde interrupted with a nasty voice. She was holding a gun on Emily, who glared back at her.

"Or what?" he replied. "You'll shoot me, too? I don't think your masters at Harting would approve, do you?"

"Shut up, Magill!" The redhead ordered. "And you're wrong. I *do* have authority to use force against you to prevent situation compromise. You're about three words away from causing compromise." She turned back to Mal and raised her gun.

"This is the way it works. I need you to have value to keep you alive. As Stanton, you don't have any value. Tell me who you really are and I'll let you and the girl live."

"Sorry, lady," Mal said quietly. "I really am Mark Stanton and I really am an engineer doing research on the viability of hyperspace travel. If that has no value to you, you'll just have to shoot me."

"Fair enough," she said and brought the gun up. "I'll get a retinal ID after you're dead and find out then. It'll take a little longer, and it won't be of much use, but I always like to keep my jobs neat. So long, Stanton." Her arm came forward, the gun less than a meter from his head.

Mal lunged at her in a futile attempt to get under her aim. Just as he did, the doors to the lecture hall burst open and Mal heard shouts. He fought down the natural reaction to look and went with his more basic instinct to survive, continuing his attack.

Such was not the case for the redhead. She stepped back from Mal to avoid his rush and swung her gun around at the new threat. She felt confident she'd be able to control and contain both the old man and the new disturbance.

Her confidence seemed well placed. Mal fell heavily to the floor where she'd been standing, and the disturbance was only the return of twenty or so students who were excited about something but were not a threat. Knowing she'd have to explain her actions at this point regardless, she decided to stun her prisoner again and spirit him and his companion to a more secure location. She swung the gun back and only then realized her mistake.

Mal had misjudged her speed. It was absolutely impossible that a human could move so fast under such heavy gravity, but she had. Nimbly dodging him, she turned her attention quickly to the noise coming from the top of the lecture hall. That was all the underestimation he needed.

Inside Mal was a constant resolve that defined his true self. Easy going and taciturn on the surface, anyone who spent any time with Mal soon found out what he was made of on the inside. And that was a hard, cold will that rivalled the iron mined from his planet.

He didn't explode in anger, nor did he feel a surge of power. It wasn't a rush of adrenaline that released an animal in him, nor was it an "other self" that took him over in times of danger. It was easily explained and impossible to duplicate without possession of an equally strong will: Mal just never stopped coming.

Nor did he now. Falling to the floor, he grunted with the additional force, but rose immediately and advanced. The situation was very clear: It was him or her. She'd made it known what her intentions were and in doing so forfeited all mercy. For the *Horizon* to survive, Mal had to live and this hired thug had to be stopped.

She'd swung her gun back but Mal was too close. He stepped inside her reach and jammed her gun hand and wrist under his left armpit. At the same instant, he brought his right fist up hard underneath her straightened elbow. There was a sharp crack as the joint snapped and the woman's gun fell free from her suddenly useless right hand.

Not giving her even a moment to react, Mal pressed his attack. A small churn in his stomach gave him a twinge of guilt for attacking a woman so brutally, but he crushed it down. She wasn't a woman, she was a soldier; a mercenary paid by Harting to control and—if necessary—kill people. Her gender was only one more weapon she possessed to use against him, and he wasn't going to let it affect him. She'd chosen her way, and now she was going to walk it.

He whipped his fist to her throat to punch her wind pipe, but she blocked it deftly and brought her own left fist against his cheek. A thousand needles jabbed into his face as the still sensitized nerves exploded from the blow, but he ignored it. Twisting the broken arm he still held, he wrapped his left hand around and over the top of it and grabbed her shoulder. He pulled her forward and jerked her head down to his rising knee, giving her a Liverpool kiss. She grunted and her head bounced up, but Mal seized her by the back of the head with his free right hand and rammed her face down and gave her another "kiss". This time she made no sound and instead crumpled to the ground unconscious. He dropped her and made for the blonde, knowing Emily would need help.

She already had it. Magill had closed on the blonde as well and the two of them were holding their own against the trained woman. Though Emily was bleeding from the nose and the Professor had a bloody red streak on his neck, they had forced her to drop her gun. Wanting to end this as quickly as possible, Mal scooped up the gun and fired, figuring that whatever setting she'd put the gun on would be her own epitaph.

The air glimmered for an instant as the beam traveled the short distance and struck the woman in the stomach. She coughed and stumbled to her hands and knees. She turned her head up defiantly at Mal, who just shrugged.

"I guess this means we're both amateurs, huh?" he said calmly and shot her again. She jerked upright to her knees then fell back, unmoving but alive. He heaved a sigh of relief and lowered the gun, turning toward Magill.

"I didn't figure on you helping out, Professor," Mal commented, a touch of pleasant surprise in his tone. "I'd just assumed you were..."

"With these as a matter of choice, no doubt," Magill finished for him. He nodded. "That was what Harting intended by pairing up attractive operatives with me and having them act like loopies. Anyone who did penetrate their admittedly well acted façade would assume I was a willing accomplice. I don't blame you for having your suspicions, Commander Stewart."

At the sound of his name, there was a busy noise behind him and it was only then that Mal remembered the disturbance that had given him his chance. He turned back toward the seats

of the lecture hall and saw about twenty students standing near him, staring. He smiled self-consciously.

“Uh... sorry you had to see that, kids. Not exactly normal classroom activity, huh?” he said wryly.

“Don’t worry about it, Commander,” a student in the front said. Mal recognized him as one of those who’d stared at him. “I’m sure she had it coming.”

“You are?” he said, surprised.

“Sure. You’re Mahlon Stewart,” he said flatly, as though that closed the discussion. It certainly seemed to for his companions, all of whom were still staring at him. “We’ve studied your career so much in the past three years that we all know you wouldn’t have the time, let alone the character, to do anything illegal.”

“Mr. Frost’s conclusion—though leapt at—is correct, Commander,” Magill said. “You’ve no doubt had to suffer holostar status for the past fifteen years, but I’d say in this case, it was to your benefit.”

“I’ll give you that, Prof,” Mal agreed. He looked at Frost and his friends. “If it hadn’t been for the bunch of you, I probably couldn’t have taken her.”

“So what’s going on, Commander?” asked a young woman beside Frost.

“He’s not at liberty to say, Miss Hochkins,” Magill broke in before Mal could reply. “I thank you for your intervention, but Commander Stewart and I need to speak in private.”

“No.” Mal’s voice was soft but firm. He looked at the Magill. “It’s secrecy that’s kept you in so much trouble, Professor. And now that this has happened,” he waved a hand at the two unconscious soldiers, “Harting’s going to really go after you. Maybe going public with this is the way to go.”

“You may be right, Commander. But that means a risk to my students. Harting may decide to go after them as well. That I cannot tolerate.”

“Who cares?!” yelled a tall man from the back. “Let ‘em come! We’re backing you and Stewart, Professor!” The others shouted their agreement and support.

“So?” the professor said in a sharp tone. “And do you have such a cavalier attitude toward your families? Harting need not harm *you* to hurt you.”

Sudden silence. Then, Frost nodded his head.

“I’m not cavalier about this, Professor, but I am personally willing to accept responsibility. If what’s going on is this serious, my family will support me.” Slowly, the others agreed.

Mal looked at them gratefully, but with caution. “I appreciate your confidence in me, but you realize this can be dangerous? This isn’t for fun. They were going to kill us. Once they find out you know, and until the *Horizon* finishes her mission, you’re all potential targets for Harting.”

Frost shrugged. “So? We probably are now anyway. Unless we kill these two rent-a-goons...”

"No," Mal said firmly.

"I agree," Frost said. "So that means they'll be able to identify us. After all, they are in the same class as we are, even if for different reasons. So some of us are already in deep. Give us the rest of the details and we'll spread the word. Harting can't kill us all."

Mal shook his head in amazement. He'd once had this unshakable commitment to doing what was right, regardless of cost. Did he still have it?

"All right. Thank you. I can't tell you everything, but I'd like you to witness this conversation." Mal had a sudden thought. "Though not here. I have a better idea, one that will make things clearer and provide an extra protection for you. Professor? Is Dean Walker still in residence at BCU?"

Magill nodded. "Yes, he is. The Pisces have maintained a presence here since the inception of the university. But why him?"

"You'll see in a few minutes. Call him up and arrange a meeting with him. Use my name for an immediate appointment. We have a kind of agreement set up on Mars, and he'll see us. In the meantime..." he pointed at the two still unconscious guards, "how about a couple of you stronger ones haul them away some place where they'll be comfortable and quiet for a couple days?"

\* \* \*

The emergency klaxon sounded throughout the ship, reverberating off the hull and driving its blaring tone into the skull of every person on the *Horizon*. Other than a slight wince by the odd crewman with sensitive hearing, however, no action was taken. Everyone was already in position.

"Hyperspace navigational array is on line and operation is nominal, Captain," Ensign M'boula called from her pilot's chair. "Fred reports ripe backup navigation systems are also on line."

"Good," Pamela shot back. "Maintain course, increase speed to 1800 kps."

"1800 kps, aye, aye."

"Fusion grid status?"

"Powered and flat, Captain," Soldano called from his station, "Subspace prongs are at optimal charge and the ion feed is steady. Fifty-four seconds to rift creation."

"Very well. Helm, commence insertion procedure beta."

"Why not the alpha procedure, Captain?" Though Matheson, standing beside the Captain's chair, had learned to address Pamela properly, his tone nonetheless conveyed his displeasure at doing so. Pamela wanted to ignore him, but knew the man wouldn't shut up until she answered and she didn't need further distraction.

"Your presence is tolerated on the bridge, Mr. Matheson, but your questions are not. Please remain silent until after insertion." She paused, then added, "The alpha insertion failed twice in

the previous forty simulations. The Chief Engineer feels the beta has better numbers, and that's good enough for me." She turned her attention back to helm.

"Course and speed?"

"Standard Terran Northern Axle Route, 1750 kps." Standard procedure had all test flights plot a course along the Terran axis, out of the solar system and at right angles to the tilt the Earth. "1775—1790—1800 kps."

"Very good. Increase speed to three thou—"

"Captain?" Com officer Woodard broke in. "Priority message from ITA Admiralty. They request immediate response."

Pam sighed. Just like a shower, she mused. "Very well. Duane, cancel the drill and have the crew stand down. Reset the scenario and we'll run it again in thirty minutes—"

"Aye, Captain."

Pam rose from her chair and walked back to the Captain's ready room. Duane called out the needed orders, shutting down their forty-first hyperspace insertion simulation. He snuck a quick peek at the Captain. Her less than relaxed posture told him she was pretty ticked off at being disturbed. It was no doubt compounded by Matheson's irresponsible interruption at a critical point in the drill. She stepped through the ghost door, still bugged, but Duane knew it wouldn't show when she spoke to ITA.

When she came out five minutes later, though, Duane was surprised to see she was even more upset, which was very unusual. She walked straight up to him, still stiff in her walk and a bitter look on her face. Duane rose and faced her.

"Captain?"

"Chief Officer Duane Stoddard," she said in a sharp, clear voice, catching the attention of everyone on the bridge. "You are now in command of the *Horizon*."

"Ma'am?" Duane blurted out, startled at her formality, but floored by her statement. Despite having his attention focused on Captain Carlson, Duane noticed the small smile on Matheson's face. "What's going on, Captain?"

"I have been relieved of command, by order of Admiral Parker-Lewis." Admiral Parker-Lewis was head of ITA's internal affairs investigations.

"What?!" he exclaimed. "That's nonsense!"

"I agree, First, but orders are orders. You are to take command of the *Horizon* and I am to leave the ship within the hour and report to the *Gamma* to be placed under station arrest."

"Why?" Duane asked numbly, wanting to sit down but staying on his feet.

"I am to be remanded to the Martian Planetary Police upon their arrival here and returned to Mars to stand trial for the murders of Margaret Harbreath and her two sons."



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## Chapter Nine

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It was a pitch darkness that Mal was used to being surrounded by. Being close to his normal weight was also a welcome sensation. And the closeness of the hull and portals further increased the comfort. Overall, a relaxing environment for a Martian space traveler to be in. He just wished the Pisces would go a little slower. While Mal had a growing confidence in both the pilot and the narrow three person submersible they were in, unlike the empty vastness of space, Terra's oceans had a lot of things against which their small transport could go bump.

Still, the pilot—a youngster in his teens—had excellent command of the ship and a healthy opinion of his skills, so Mal relaxed against the firm water cushion, gave Emily—sitting directly in front of him—a reassuring squeeze and took a deep breath of salt water. The mechanical Pisces lung attached to his neck made an odd vibrating action as it processed the salt water and sent the extracted oxygen to his lungs while expelling everything else through its artificial gill. Although there was much to be done, and several important questions that still needed answering, Mal had a far better grasp about where he stood—as it were—than he did two days earlier when he, Emily, Professor Magill, and a handful of Magill's students had crowded into Dean Walker's office.

\* \* \*

Dean Walker—his real Pisces name was not well known beyond several trusted friends—stood behind his desk and accepted his sudden visitors with an elegant bow. He wore the standard uniform of an ITA Rear Admiral but still looked every inch a member of his race.

“Conversation is needful, and the time for most secrecy is past,” he concluded, his watery gray eyes fixed on Mal. “Begin construction.”

Mal bowed at the waist, performing the first level of Pisces greeting with a fluidity that made Dean Walker flip his gills with appreciation.

“I beg forgiveness and will begin construction upon the rock of our children's friendship.” He stepped directly in front of the dean and stood at arm's length. “Time for secrecy is past, just as for some all time is now past.” And with that he reached out and took the dean by the shoulders.

There was an audible gasp behind him as Mal performed this gross breach of etiquette. They looked to Dean Walker to see his reaction to such a blatant disregard of a Pisces personal space, and were again surprised when he remained calm and passive. Indeed, his eyes trailed several tears.

“Time is greatly wasted and I am unhappy. Speak the greeting I long to hear, and let my children be happy.”

Mal leaned even closer to the dean and whispered into his ear.

“With sorrow and happiness I have become a messenger of Darkly Softide. His children

and mine are friends. His last memory is with me and I now give you his name to tell his children and yours. Share my sorrow with me and share my happiness with others." With that, Mal released him and stepped back.

Dean Walker was visibly shaken. Mal surmised that the two had been friends, but it was difficult to tell. They may have just been acquaintances, they may have even been enemies. Mourning among Pisces was very open within their society and very closed everywhere else. All that was known was that they deeply mourned all their dead, regardless of personal relationship.

The dean composed himself quickly, though he stood a little less straight now.

"Construction is begun. The necessary evil has become entangled in the weeds of the unnecessary evil. They have joined and have prepared the sacrifice." He turned toward Magill, who was struggling to decipher the conversation. "You are a key as she are the keys. Each unlocks an unbreathable secret."

Mal turned to Magill as well.

"Back in the lecture hall, one of your guards said you were three words from compromising the situation. I'm betting those three words were, 'I was there'.

Magill nodded. "My conclusion as well, Commander. I was indeed at the ITA Research Lab in Oregon at the time of the firestorm, though thankfully away on the fateful day. I was the lead theoretical application engineer for hyperspace drives."

"But that's got nothing to do with me," Emily spoke for the first time in a great while. Mal had been concerned about her mental health. Not only did she have the same stresses he did of people wanting him dead, she was already under sentence of death as a shard. He was glad to here her voice again.

"I'm not sure I understand your role in this in any event, young lady."

"I was kidnapped by Harting and ripped. From what Mal's told me, I was supposed to be sent somewhere by them to dig rock until I died."

"You do not seem ripped now."

"I... I sharded," she replied with a barely contained sob. "I tried to escape from the transport site and was almost caught. I was caught, until a Pisces rescued me. They sent me to Mars, where Mal and I met."

"She are the first keys," Dean Walker reemphasized. He looked at her with gentle eyes, physically extending his sorrow and comfort to her. "Continue construction," he encouraged softly.

"That's... That's about it. I sharded again on Mars and the next thing I remember was waking up in bed on the *DL White*, heading back to Earth."

"You said you were at a transport site?" Magill asked.

"Yes. There were twenty of us and piles of supplies. We were all gathered around a green ion power sphere, staring into it. I don't remember anything before..."

"A green power sphere?" Magill interrupted, his face draining of color.

"Yes."

Magill swore, softly and violently. Mal had a strange feeling of dread sweep through him.

"That means something, Professor."

"Yes, it does, Commander. The Hyperidor project was not the only project being researched at the Oregon lab. A second project was also being developed under the tightest of security. Until the final days, there were only five people who knew the details of both projects. I was one of them. To my knowledge, I'm also the only one still living, which is probably why I'm still living. Everyone else perished in the conflagration. Let me lay a short history." He glanced at his classmates. "What you are about hear cannot be repeated on pain of death. Feel free to use this information to further your own knowledge, but never speak of this again." His somber voice had the proper effect on the students, who agreed, and he continued.

"Despite man's best efforts to destroy himself over the millennia, we've managed to prosper on this planet. But we were reaching a point in our race's history where our own prosperity was going to succeed where we had failed at war. We'd outgrown our planet and were approaching the point when we'd start starving ourselves. While massive deaths—on the order of several billion—would solve its own problem—it would create stagnation in our race. It's been an accepted fact for decades that space colonization was absolutely essential for the healthy continuance of mankind. While we had some extra breathing room by colonizing Mars and the micro colonies of Jupiter, Saturn and Pluto, colonization on anything other than an M class planet only extended the misery. Man had to spread to other Earth type planets.

"The problem, of course, was distance. Once outside the solar system, everything is measured in light years. Traveling to even a relatively nearby star like Alpha Centauri required years. It would be impossible to colonize without shortening the time it took to travel vast distances.

"We attacked the problem from three directions. If we could increase velocity, we could shorten the time it took to traverse the distance between planets. That was the arm that eventually developed the ball chasers and was independent of the Oregon projects.

"The second attack—and primary project at the lab—was on shortening the distance. We'd been working on the theory of hyperspace and hyperidor travel for decades, long before the ball chasers were built, and it seemed possible to bypass normal space and travel at high speed over a route that was actually shorter than physically possible. If this solution could be applied, colonization would be cheap, practical, and widespread.

"The third approach, however, had the most potential. If we could circumvent physical space, thus changing one component of the problem, could we not also change time, the other component of the same problem?"

"You actually had people working on time travel?" Frost asked incredulously.

"Do not sound so surprised, Mr. Frost," Magill reproved gently. "You should know from your second year of astrophysics the six theorems of event horizon space. Four of them directly involve time. And of the three approaches, this one had the best opportunity of success."

“Why is that?” Mal asked.

“Because not only had preliminary work been done by Carl Woldheim in the late 20th century, there’s every indication he used such a time device shortly after inventing it. You’ll forgive me if I do not go into detail.

“Regardless, there were two projects, each with the same goal, being developed at ITA Research Labs in the spring and summer of 2214. In an effort to maintain all secrecy, we’d cut ourselves off from the puterverse and created our own net. For whatever reason, being disconnected from the Net propelled our research forward at an amazing pace. We accomplished more in six months developing hyperspace and time travel theory than had been done in six decades. On August 29th, by sheer coincidence, both projects completed the most rudimentary prototype drives. We had hoped for an indication of which direction to take further studies. We ended up with two solutions.”

He paused and closed his eyes a moment to steady his voice, which had become excited and emotional.

“We joined the two project teams and discussed the possibility of joining the technologies as well. It was very quickly determined however, that the results would be disastrous. Apparently we had not broken the laws of physics; we’d better defined the fringes of it. The laws of physics as they are understood today are essentially immutable and universal. When applied against themselves, however, it is possible to ‘alter’ them, for lack of a better word.”

“You mean, like the immovable object and irresistible force paradox?” Miss Hochkins, Frost’s companion, interrupted.

“Hmm—yes, I suppose to an extent,” Magill said thoughtfully, “though not as simplistic. Your example contains two conditions impossible in physics, Miss Hochkins. There is no such thing as an immovable object nor an irresistible force. And while the fringe laws of Physics might allow for one in theory, proof of one’s existence demands a corollary proving the non-existence of the other.

“Which brings us back to our chilling discovery. If the physical law says that distance is equal to time multiplied by velocity, it is possible to change one aspect of the law, but not two. Not in the same application.”

“But you tried anyway, didn’t you, Professor?” Mal asked quietly.

“They did not,” Dean Walker stated flatly. All eyes swung to him. “The unnecessary evil that is alive and not alive combined the two projects into an unbreathable force of balance.”

“That’s right,” Magill said slowly, “It was decided to keep the two projects independent and let them mature at their own pace. We made plans to move the time travel segment to the ITA labs in Brazil on September 15th. The date was originally going to be September 8th, but I had to attend high level symposium with the world council from September 4th to the 7th, so the move was delayed a week.”

“And ended up being delayed forever,” Mal said dryly, “because the lab and half of Oregon went up on September 5th. Somebody played with matches and mixed the hyperspace drive and the time drive, didn’t they, Professor?”

Magill shrugged. "It seems impossible. Every person there was absolutely convinced of the catastrophic results bringing the two technologies together would wreak. When the vote was made to split the two teams, it was unanimous and instant. Yet there can be no other explanation. The two drives were combined and activated."

"And what about the green ion power sphere, Professor?" Emily asked in a quiet voice.

The professor looked at her a long moment, then gave Mal the answer he was desperately searching for and dreading to find. "The hyperspace drive was the more promising of the two technologies because it could be applied to existing power supplies that were already in use as propulsion. I refer to the fusion engines on every space craft mankind has. The hyperspace drive was less of an engine and more of an application. It could be safely coupled with a fusion engine, then draw the required power to open a rift into hyperspace. The engines would continue to provide thrust.

"But the time drive; that was very different. It required a power source that was centered inside a field. There really was no ship required for the time drive, because when activated, those inside the field simply stopped in time and space while the rest of the universe continued on. At the appropriate point, the time drive would be deactivated and the traveler—or travelers, as in your case, young lady—would simply appear at their destination, usually several seconds *before* they made the jump. Since it was the universe that traveled without them, no thrust was needed; only a modified ionic power sphere was required to charge the time drive. And of the five spheres we modified for the prototype time drive, all five produced green plasma trails."

\* \* \*

"Arrival in thirty minutes," the pilot called out to them, bringing Mal back from his wanderings. He looked through the numerous portals to get his bearings, but could still make nothing out. The Pisces, however, must have known their exact location despite operating the craft with no visible guidance systems. He wondered idly whether their people had an internal navigational system similar to whales.

"Mal?" Despite the water, Emily's voice carried clearly back to him, thanks to the enhanced sound capabilities of the Pisces mechanical gill.

"Yes, Em?"

"What Dean Walker said about the unnecessary evil. Do you think it's true? That there's someone in this world who doesn't want humans to explore space? Someone with enough power and influence to—"

"I call upon your gracious name for forgiveness, air sister," the young Pisces interrupted, an urgent pleading in his voice, "but I humbly remind my mistress that she is nearing deconstruction of wisdom and should only continue if this one's opinion is not worthy of consideration." He bowed his head and stared at his feet.

"I—I'm sorry!" Emily said, her mechanical gill giving her apology a slight rasp. "I ask for your forgiveness as well." The Pisces continued to look down. Mal leaned forward.

“Your time is returned you, brother, and my mate is grateful of your wisdom.”

The Pisces twisted his head in the dim phosphor glow that lit the cabin in soft yellow, and they saw his slow smile. He turned his head forward again to navigate while Mal turned his mind back.

\* \* \*

“All right, Dean. Out with it.” Mal was alone now with Dean Walker, with only Emily in attendance. Magill and his students had already left to tend to the two guards and begin carrying out their plans for the next few days. “Who’s out to destroy the *Horizon* and why?”

“Construction continues, Mahlon Vermilion Stewart,” Dean Walker said in his quiet, calm voice. While Mal digested the dean’s use of his full name, the Pisces reached behind his desk to his puterverse interface. His fingers flowed over the buttons and holomist projection field and the entire puter dropped from sight. At the same time, the room began shimmering as though underwater. Mal had never seen the effect before, but knew it to be a Pisces dampening field, purported to be impenetrable to all known methods of eavesdropping. He turned back to Mal and stood straight, extending his hands, long fingers splayed out. Casting his look to the floor, he bowed deeply.

“I am Nek’kratha Fathom. Tell your children.”

“I will tell my children your name, Nek’kratha Fathom, when they have the wisdom to value so great a treasure and rejoice with this knowledge.” Mal bowed as deeply, both honored and disturbed. He was entering into Pisces protocol he’d never encountered.

“You please the People, Mahlon Vermilion Stewart, and you are considered this day to be one of us. Your knowledge of our People is pleasing to experience, and your way with the two Peoples is salty. Construction continues.

“The unnecessary evil is strong. The People fight against it with their souls. It will be destroyed, or it will destroy us.”

“Speak to me the unbreathable name of this unnecessary evil,” Mal said flatly, getting to the point.

“The unnecessary evil is nameless to all but the Mariner.” Mariner was the leader of the Pisces people and never appeared above water, instead focusing on internal affairs. “Yet his true name is known to all Pisces above the age of youth.”

Mal understood this much. A “true name” was the reputation of a person. One of the reasons the Pisces custom of guarding their names was so prominent was they believed their reputation better defined them. Mal couldn’t disagree with them. Nek’kratha Fathom continued.

“The People have been opposed to his true name since before the Beginning of the People. Our Groundfather who is under a false name today, opposed him once and will one day oppose him again. Until that day, the People struggle in his place, preserving the Groundfather’s true name. It is our opposition to the unnecessary evil that gives the People our true name.”

Little of this made sense to Mal. Nek'kratha seemed to be talking in vague, apocalyptic terms that his people never used. They always spoke in solid ideas. Understood in that light, Mal was being told that the entire Pisces race had a single purpose, and that was the elimination of an evil that threatened the entire world, yet no one had ever heard of. Not only that, but they'd been fighting him for over two centuries.

"Speak the unbreathable's true name," Mal ventured, not knowing how far he could go. "Speak his name, Nek'kratha Fathom, so I may oppose him as one of the People."

"Your addition to the foundation gives our People gladness, Mahlon Vermilion Stewart, and it had given more salt to your true name. Yet though you are one of the People, you are not to be fully told his true name, for we know that space burns in your soul. If in foolish wisdom we gave the unbreathable's full, true name, you would not space again."

Mal felt a sense of relief and frustration. So close! To be considered one of the Pisces was truly an honor, yet they restricted his full membership out of concern for his profession and lifestyle. He now understood—at least to a certain level—why the Pisces never sought careers on ships. It took them away from the goal of their race.

"Tell me what pleases the wisdom of the People, and I shall join with them against the unnecessary evil."

"The unnecessary evil wishes to keep our peoples here on Terra, on her land, though not in her seas. He will tolerate those who live away from her but who still depend upon her life giving waters." That would mean Luna, Mars and the micro colonies, Mal surmised. "But to go to another Terra that is beyond his unbreathable touch is intolerable to him. To destroy this new foundation of our peoples' wisdom, he will sacrifice the beginning of the foundation, forcing all to remain within him. For him to remain an unnecessary evil, Mahlon Vermilion Stewart, your ship must die. And in the sacrifice of your ship, both peoples will fear to leave his embrace."

So there it was. The answer to the question. The *Horizon* was brought to Earth to try a technology that would fail. Whether through design or sabotage, the hyperspace drive being installed on the *Horizon* would never work, instead destroying both the very ship that had widened man's horizon of colonization and the means to further his accomplishments even more. And all so some nameless entity could have power.

Mal looked to his benefactor and bowed with his hands splayed out.

"You have given me much wisdom, Nek'kratha Fathom, and I am indebted to the People. Though I may fail in the attempt, I will honor the true name of my new People and join in their cause."

Nek'kratha Fathom closed his eyes and turned his back demonstrating his complete trust of Mal.

"Three twenty-six, Mahlon Vermilion Stewart."

"May I speak?" Emily's quavering voice sounded lost, but had a hard resolve to it.

Nek'kratha Fathom turned back toward them, his eyes misted with sadness. He bowed graciously to Emily.

“My children are happy to hear your voice, air sister, and so I am as well. Speak the sad song you have within you.”

“Why have I been included in all this?” she whispered, her eyes as wet as Nek’kratha Fathom’s. “Why have you allowed me to hear these things without making me one of the People?”

“You are one of the People,” Nek’kratha corrected with a soft voice, reminding Mal of the gentle crash of a quiet surf on a New England shore. “You became one of the People when the unnecessary evil’s minions took you and made them one of theirs against your foundation.”

“Then why do you not speak my name?” she asked. Nek’kratha continued to look at her with pity, but did not speak. Mal felt a chill stab at him. Nek’kratha turned slowly, looking diminished in spirit, and Mal took Emily gently by the hand. She was sobbing, knowing the answer as well, but wanting to hear it. Mal leaned close to her.

“Emily, you are being honored by his silence. Your name will be spoken of one day. It will be passed to the children, who will pass it to their children. But until that day, the Pisces will never speak the name of the dying, for fear of taking away from it.”

\* \* \*

The craft came to a gentle stop and the firm water cockpit dissolved into the sea. Mal, Emily, and the pilot pushed free and swam the remaining hundred meters to the end of a pier. Mal tugged at the gill and the device detached itself from his neck with a small electrical jolt. He immediately surfaced, knowing he’d temporarily lost his instinct to hold his breath underwater. Emily surfaced beside him, as did the Pisces.

“You have honored us with your presence, water brother,” Mal spoke quietly to the Pisces. “My children will hear of your kindness until they are old.”

“My children will sleep in soft darkness Mahlon Vermilion Stewart, having the honor of your children’s friendship. You are of the People.” He turned to Emily and bowed, his face near the water’s surface. “As are you, honored one.” He ducked beneath the waves and Mal felt a wall of water strike his lower body as the Pisces swam away at high speed.

Mal turned toward the pier and looked over the area. It was around midnight, and the only light was from the stars overhead and several small lights mounted to a large structure located on the shore, some sixty meters ahead.

“Let’s get this over with, Em,” he hissed quietly. “Stay close to me. Keep your hands free for moving and only draw a weapon if needed.” The Pisces had provided Mal and Emily each with an energy gun and a knife. Emily nodded silently and the two began wading toward shore, using the pier overhead for cover.

They reached the shore without incident or surprise. The Pisces kept the Harting Enterprises manufacturing facility under constant surveillance and knew the routines of the six guards very well. They were at that moment all playing a card game at the front entrance, the loser getting the worst of the patrol routes for the remainder of the evening. Mal and Emily had nearly twenty minutes before they began their rounds, and an additional ten minutes before the first guard reached the computer interface Mal would be accessing.



They made shore and went quickly up the alley, Emily leading the way as she took them back along her escape route. Ironically, in an effort to better secure their facilities, Harting maintained a standard patrol over this decidedly non-standard facility. While this was effective in not drawing unwanted attention, it enabled Emily and Mal to reach the alley doorway without incident. The alley itself was dark, with only the tiny blue and white access lights at the doorway to guide them.

“We’ll try the easy way, first,” Mal whispered and applied the forged card that Nek’kratha had given him. The lights quivered at high speed, then released the lock with an audible click. The small display on the access panel indicated Mal had the master key. The Pisces were never ones to do things halfway, he mused. Easing open the door, he and Emily quickly slipped through, then shut it.

Inside, the dimly lit facility was vast. Over one hundred meters from one end to another, Mal could make out multiple shapes of partially assembled hover craft, each in construction bays where teams of workers painstakingly built them. Though Harting had many plants that used more conventional assembly lines, this facility was their custom build plant. It made for ideal circumstances, the Pisces had told him, for Harting to carry out their occasional time drive operations.

There was a dim murmur of voices, but they were from the far end of the building. Turning to his right, Mal led Emily toward a rung ladder bolted to an overhead walkway that in turn went to the upper level offices that overlooked the work area. There were only two reasons Mal was here tonight; to learn the specifications of the time drive and possibly figure out how to disable it; and to ascertain if there was indeed a time drive installed on the *Horizon*. He hoped to be in and out in no more than ten minutes, and back in the Pisces submersible within the hour.

They reached the ladder without incident, and Mal motioned Emily to go first. He glanced to his right and saw the eledisc. It was tempting but too risky. His card apparently gave him full access, but there was no need to push his luck. Looking up, he saw Emily’s dark clothed form already five meters up. Reaching high, Mal began climbing.

He was about halfway up when he began to regret his cautious nature. He was not only in good shape for a man of his age, Mal was in good shape for a man of any age. But even though he’d climbed only twenty meters, his shoulders were shredded and his arms were on fire. He’d stupidly assumed that he had adapted to Earth’s gravity by now, an assumption he was paying for. Emily was doing a little better, but not much. She’d spent several months on Mars and was showing it. He reached up and touched her pant leg, tugging at it slightly. He saw the blur of her face as she looked back down.

“Are you okay to make it, Em?” he whispered. She nodded and continued climbing. He’d almost hoped she said no so he could justify descending and using the eledisc. He took a deep breath and followed.

They made it to the catwalk and lay down on it, gasping and resting. Mal’s whole upper body felt as though he had the *Horizon*’s number one fusion engine strapped to his back.

Mercifully, the effects of their exertion passed quickly, and sooner than Mal would have thought possible, he and Emily had risen and made their way down the length of the catwalk to a monitoring booth located in the middle of the western wall of the facility. A quick pass of

the card and they were in.

Leaving Emily at the door to keep an eye out for movement, Mal crossed the five meters to the far edge of the small control room and sat in front of the holomist interface. It was in idle mode, displaying a very realistic image of a fish tank, but sprang to life when Mal slid the card through the mist. A menu appeared, but Mal bypassed it with a whispered voice command. He needed to hurry; there were less than fifteen minutes left before the guard made his scheduled round.

An image of the *Horizon* appeared and Mal began manipulating the readouts, narrowing the scope of his search down to engineering and navigation. From there he tightened the time frame to the past two weeks and focused on modifications. A flash of green light leapt from the mist, making Mal's heart skip a beat, then the newly installed hyperidor drive specifications appeared on the screen. Mal's eyes narrowed as he took on the general feel of the technology at the same time his mind absorbed the facts.

The same flash that made Mal's heart skip a beat had the same effect on Emily. She'd been looking outside the room, inspecting the floor far below, and had turned back toward Mal. Just as her eyes touched on the scene of the *Horizon*, the light flashed. To Emily, it meant nothing.

To 918, however, it was the comforting color of the green sphere. She looked around, startled, for she'd only just lay down in bed on board the *DL White*, which this most assuredly was not. She recognized Mal, but his back was to her as he studied something in a puterverse terminal. Not wanting to disturb him, 918 looked around to get her bearings.

She felt an excitement fill her as she recognized she was back at the insertion point! Mal had returned her, just like he promised! She wanted to thank him, but the drive to hurry to the insertion point was overwhelming. Moving silently, she slipped out the door.

She heard voices far below her and to the right, so she walked quickly down the catwalk to locate a ladder and find someone who would tell her where she could dig rock. Her muscles hurt and she wondered if she had been digging rock in her sleep. She hoped so.

Reaching the ladder, she descended it quickly, ignoring the pain in her shoulders in her growing excitement. This was the insertion point! She recognized the shape and feel of the building as well as the function. It was in a hovercraft assembly building that the ion sphere was located, so this had to be the same building. Setting her feet down on the glassmac surface, she moved quickly toward the middle of the facility, for she saw something that gave her a wonderful thrill through her entire body. The canvas room that contained the transport sight! Giddy with anticipation, 918 hurried to the canvas partition and slipped inside at a point where two of the heavy tarps came together.

It was no longer the transport sight. In the middle sat a dark shape that could only be a hovercraft in the midst of construction. Nowhere was there an indication that this had been the most wonderful of locations; the point where 918 could be sent to the cavern. Her hope crushed to smothering despair, 918 brushed away sudden hot tears and began frantically looking for any indication that there might still be some way to join her fellow workers in the cavern. But not knowing exactly what to look for, her frantic searching only served to increase her despair. She let out a small sob and sank back against the partially built hov. So close!

It was then that she remembered the voices. Calming herself, she could still hear them, and noticed they were louder now that she was on the same level. They were coming from one location and seemed to be stationary. Maybe they could help! Gathering herself, 918 stood and left the confines of the now useless canvas room, moving toward the voices.

Almost at once she saw them. They were guards, six of them, and they were dressed in uniforms she remembered! Feeling her hope rising again, 918 began walking quickly and quietly, her despair of only moments ago forgotten in the rush of happiness that filled her.

Mal had it now. Staring at the detailed schematics of the hyperidor drive, he understood completely. It was so simple! he thought in amazement. Just a matter of thinking outside the box. Or in this case, outside reality. He'd only been studying it for five minutes, but he was confident enough in his abilities and the logical design of the drive that he could operate it. What had surprised him the most was that it would actually work. Mal had half expected a faulty drive, just in case the time drive failed to destroy the *Horizon* when the crew—thinking it was the navigational array—activated it shortly after entering hyperspace. He was not a vain man, but Mal knew that it was probably his presence on the *Horizon* that necessitated a working model; he'd spot a phony long before they'd try to use it.

What was more disturbing, however, was the supposed navigational system. Magill was right; it was the time drive. The design had been altered slightly from the rough schematic the professor had given him, but there was no disguising or mistaking the modular insertion capsule, the solid light cabling or the inverted surge of the green power sphere. This was the main reason why the hyperspace drive was real, Mal thought. You couldn't blow the *Horizon* out of existence by combining a real time drive with a fake hyperdrive.

A notation on the lower edge of the holo display caught Mal's eye and he zoomed in on it. It was a ragged scratching, unable to read in this resolution, but its placement on the time drive control panel indicated it was perhaps a serial number.

A serial number? On a unique, highly secret device? Mal frowned. What was the point of identifying such a thing? Was it a fake serial number, meant to lull even the most imaginative of suspicions? Was there a reason why someone really would want to distinguish it from...

Acting on a sudden hunch, Mal called up the search grid and accessed the on board inventory of the *Gamma*. Nothing. Shifting to an energy imprint scan, he tried again. There was a quick blink of gold on the bottom of the display and Mal sat back, staring at what the search had discovered.

It was a second time drive, located in hold 12-14A on deck 12 of the *Gamma*. That was why they serialized the drives; they wanted to make sure the *Horizon* went on a one way mission, and had a back up time drive at the ready in case of difficulty with the first one.

They wanted to make sure. A small shudder went through Mal. Yet the complete ruthlessness and cold efficiency of his enemy might just save the ship. Mal didn't have a plan as yet, but there was the start of an idea... Still staring at the schematics, Mal twisted his head.

"Hey, Em, check out this drive. I think we can actually use it against..." he turned away from the monitor and looked around the room.

“Em?” he called out.

She was gone! But where could she go that she wouldn't tell him? Could a guard have happened upon her? No, because Mal would have been taken as well. Had Emily seen someone and gone to investigate? Again, no, not without first telling Mal. Then where could Emily have gone that...

Realization hit Mal and he jumped up. It wasn't Emily that had left, it was 918! She'd sharded again! In this facility, she'd certainly head down to the ground floor and begin asking people about where to start digging. And the only people here were the guards.

He took three quick steps toward the door, then skidded to a halt. Even in this desperate time, there had to be priorities. He needed to squirrel that file away in a location where he could study it later. Mal had the beginnings of a plan forming, but he had to keep the schematics as a reference. They'd also come in handy in case he needed to prove wrongdoing on Harting's part. He hurried back to the terminal and encapsulated the file, attaching copies of all related files, images and holos to the casing. A question mark appeared, asking for destination. Where? His own account? No, that would send up the flag for sure. The same if he sent it to Pamela, or Magill. Where then? Feeling his body edging to get to Emily, his mind wandering to her, Mal tried to think. Where to send it? Anonymous? That wouldn't work; not with the high clearance tag this capsule had. Where!?!

Then he had it. Marking out the address, Mal swept his forged card through the holomist, authorizing the copy. A moment later, a green bar throbbled on the bottom of the display, indicating file copy. It faded and Mal logged out. The fish tank had not even finished resetting itself before Mal was outside the room and racing down the catwalk.

Glancing over the railing as he headed toward the forward ladder, Mal felt his throat tighten in fear as he saw Emily walking toward the guards, making no attempt at hiding from them. She'd be noticed in seconds, and it would take Mal longer than that just to drop down the ladder. Hopelessness was not an option for him, though. He seized the railing of the ladder and, holding the bars tightly with his hands while using his feet to guide, slid down the ladder at a reckless speed.

Reckless and dangerous. Again he forgot about the gravity. Accelerating at a horrifying rate, Mal nearly lost control of his descent, but kept his head and braked as hard as he could. His hands burned on the metal railing and his entire body received a terrific jolt as he hit the floor, but there was otherwise no damage. He pulled out the energy gun with his right hand and snapped it on, then pulled out his knife with his left. His legs still tingling from the impact, Mal staggered toward Emily, who was at least twenty meters away and hidden behind a parts storage area.

He'd taken no more than three steps when he heard a slug gun go off. Lurching forward even faster, Mal rounded the storage area and moved toward the location of the shot.

The lighting was brighter here but it only served to accent Mal's failure. All six guards were in view and they were arguing amongst themselves. One held a gun, the barrel still smoking.

“What'd you shoot for?” one of them was shouting. He'd begun reaching for his own weapon, but stopped when the gunman raised his pistol.

"You just keep that thing holstered, Tommy," he yelled. "Or you'll catch one, too. I got orders for just this thing, an' all I did was follow orders!"

Two of them shifted position slightly and Mal could see clearly. Seated on the floor, blood flowing from her abdomen, was Emily. She looked up at the gunman.

"Can I go dig rock now?" 918 asked in a pain filled voice.

"Sorry, missy," the gunman said raising his pistol to her head. "But you ain't doing anything but dyin'."

It was hopeless. Mal had a small energy gun and a knife. There were six of them, all armed, and one with his weapon held against Emily's head. There was nothing Mal could do to save her.

He did it anyway.

Shouting at them, Mal raised the weapon and shot the gunman in the head. The man jerked back and dropped, his finger pulling the trigger and shooting another guard in the leg. Following the shot in, Mal swept passed the momentarily shocked guards and charged the wounded gunman. He sank his knife into the man's throat, leaving it buried to the hilt. The only chance he had was in killing the gunman and hoping the others could be bluffed into letting him take Emily and go.

Standing over the dead man, Mal turned to the other guards and stared at them. His gun came up and leveled on the lead man. One was on the ground, grasping his leg, but the others were staring at Mal, quickly adjusting to this sudden attack.

"What's it to be, boys?" Mal asked quietly. "Do you let me take the girl and leave or do we start killing each other?" To emphasize his point, the energy gun toned ready.

"You can't kill us all," one of them said, his hand drifting back to his holstered gun. "That gun takes at least eight seconds to charge. You'll be lucky to get one of us."

"You're right," Mal said with an indifferent shrug. "But which one of you will it be?" He took a step closer to Emily, who had now slumped to the floor.

"I guess we'll find out," the guard replied and reached for his gun, causing the others to also act. Mal knew he'd lost his gamble, but determined to take as many as he could.

He fired into the body of the leader and stepped closer. The leader fell back, his gun falling from his suddenly useless hand. As he did, the guard beside him screamed and Mal saw the left side of the man's face turn to blood. Unheard, unseen, the Pisces had returned and was now in the middle of the fight.

Attacking with blurred speed, the young Pisces slashed his hand across the throat of the third guard. The extra length of his fingers further increased the velocity and there was a glint of metal as the nail razor attached to his middle fingers laid open flesh as easily as it cut water.

Kicking the shin of the remaining standing guard, Mal closed and, as the man instinctively reached down to hold his leg, seized the man's head with his arms. Falling to the floor, Mal twisted hard and broke the man's neck as he landed. Snatching the gun from the man's holster, Mal brought it up quickly, looking for the next target.

There weren't any. As quickly as it had started, it was over. Four men were dead, including the one who'd shot Emily, and two more wounded. Trusting the Pisces to watch them, Mal slid next to Emily and brought her head into his lap.

"Emily?" he said, his voice cracking.

At the sound of the name, 918's eyes seemed to change and Emily found herself looking up at Mal. There was a numbing pain in her stomach.

"What happened, Mal?" she gasped out, wincing from the effort.

"You've been shot, Em. You sharded into 918 and tried to turn yourself in. One of the guards apparently had orders to shoot you on sight, and did." He looked at her questioning look and closed his eyes in anger and sadness, then shook his head. When he opened them, he felt hot tears well up. "I'm sorry, Em."

She nodded, and brushed her hand gently along Mal's arm.

"Don't be, Mal," she said in a soft voice, the pain draining away with her life. "I was already dead. At least this way, I'll be me when I... oohh!" she gave a last grimace and relaxed. Mal knew she was gone, but she opened her eyes again.

"So, will the hyperspace drive work?"

"Uh-huh," he responded numbly.

"Good. You'll be famous all over again. I wish I was going with you." Emily closed her eyes. "Mal?"

"Yeah, Em?"

She gave a small smile. "Don't trip on your petticoats." The smile faded and her hand fell away from his arm. Mal gathered her close and hugged her tightly.

"I won't, Em. I won't."

The Pisces stared down at the two.

"Her name is Emily Lisa O'Brien," he spoke with a voice that echoed from the deepest well of sadness. "and her way is salty. Today the People speak her name with pride. Construction is complete."

## Chapter Ten



**Terran Date:** May 20, 2259

The hyperspace drive is online, Captain," Ensign M'boula called over her shoulder, her eyes riveted on the forward screen.

"Very good," Pamela responded, then turned her head back toward the engineering

station. "What's the projected time until insertion, Mal?"

"Less than ten seconds, Captain," came the calm voice of Chief Engineer Soldano.

Pam turned all the way around and frowned.

"Where's Mal, Chief?"

"He ran away, Captain. But don't worry," Soldano said with a smile. "Matheson is the engineer now and he's going to ruin everything for us."

"What?"

"Captain?" Duane Stoddard called out.

Still confused, Pamela turned to him.

"What is it, First?"

"Just that we're about to enter hyperspace and you have to get out of your chair." He stepped up and pulled her gently from the Captain's chair.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asked, scared.

"You forgot, Pamela. I'm the Captain now. See?" he indicated his uniform, which was the Captain's uniform. "You'd better go now, and put something on."

"What?" she said, then realized she was naked. Of course she was naked, she wasn't the Captain anymore. Captain Stoddard was the Captain now, so he wore the uniform. She looked up at Stoddard, but instead saw Matheson.

"Get out of here, Carlson!" he yelled. "I'm the Captain and the Chief Engineer now and you're going away. The *Horizon* is mine."

"No!" she cried out, trying to push him. But when she hit him, he laughed as she fell backwards into the brig.

"We'll have to arrest you for that, too, Carlson!" he laughed.

"Captain?" Ensign M'boula called out. She was in the brig too, but was still piloting the ship. "We're about to go into hyperspace, Captain. You have to get us up to the bridge. I can't pilot very well from here."

"All right, let's go," Pamela said and walked toward the corridor leading to the eledisc. But the corridor was far too long and uphill.

"Captain!" M'boula said urgently, "Only three seconds until we enter hyperspace!"

Desperately Pam ran as hard as she could toward the eledisc, but Mal was in her way, holding her back.

"Pam, I'm on Earth and the hyperspace drive is a trap! You better get to Earth right away!"

"I can't, Mal! I have to get to the bridge!"

"Pam, please come!" Mal called out as he stepped on the eledisc that took him from deck

six down to Earth. Now she'd have to wait until it came back up before she could get to the bridge.

"Two seconds, Captain!" M'boula shouted, trying to navigate the ship with the eledisc controls. "Only two seconds to go and you're still not dressed!"

\* \* \*

Pam shot up in her bed, sweating and gasping hard. She felt a surge of horror as the moment between dream and reality washed over her. With a shudder, she felt the nightmare recede and her normal senses return. She reached for the glass of water she kept on her night table, but it wasn't there.

Of course it wasn't. She wasn't in her cabin on the *Horizon*. She was under station arrest and had quarters on Deck Six of the *Gamma*. That part of the nightmare had been real.

Wide awake now, Pam flipped back the covers and went to the sink to wash off her face. Her legs were still trembling from the dream and though she couldn't remember much of it, the emotion she'd poured into it had drained her.

She splashed some water on her face then dried off.

"Computer?"

"Computer," came the soft response.

"What is the time, please?"

"Station time is 0457, Friday, Captain Carlson."

"Thank you."

"You are welcome, Captain." It toned off.

Well, she thought, at least the computer still called her Captain. Right now, it was a courtesy title only. She wasn't captain of anything. And while the Admiralty had sided with her completely, they also had to bow to the considerable pressure they were under to hold her until the Martian authorities arrived. She had no idea who was bringing that pressure to bear. It certainly wasn't the Martian government. Pam was very much a folk heroine on her native planet; the Martian daughter made good. Whether fair or not, she could count on a quick settlement of the entire matter upon arrival on Mars. Once word leaked out she was under arrest, being on the other side of Pam would be tantamount to political suicide.

The problem was that just the trip to Mars would be all the delay needed to get her out the Captain's chair at the critical moment. She had a vague image of Duane pulling her out of the chair and her standing there without her uniform, naked. She shook off the thought and walked to the large bay portal looking out toward the moon.

Hanging there, less than two kilometers away, was the *Horizon*. One hundred meters below her port stern was the gunship *Revenge*. A constant companion since it had started tailing them on their trip to Earth, it looked like a vicious dog, not so much watching an ally as guarding a prisoner. Her eyes drifted back to the *Horizon*.



How small it looked! And how forlorn and out of place. Yet though there were hundreds of ships larger than her moving about the solar system, none had the sheer power of her engines. Only twenty-three other ships—all of them her younger sisters, could even hope to match her speed. But here, in the system, her huge drive was silent and useless. For to form a ball in a star system was to doom that system as the artificial black hole at her bows pulled in everything for billions of kilometers around it.

The *Horizon* didn't belong here, orbiting a settled planet. She needed to be outside of the system, racing through the eternal void of space, searching, discovering, investigating the wonders of the galaxy, expanding mankind's own horizons and presence as her unimaginably powerful singularity drive freed her from the shackles of sub-light, letting her mark her own path as she...

Pam felt a hot surge of anger and sadness that she wasn't on board, but was helpless at the moment to do anything. She'd pulled in every favor she had at ITA to get back in the chair, but nothing had come of it so far beyond her complete freedom on the *Gamma*, and quarters for her steward, ABS Nicholas Jenkins, who remained with her, his quarters adjacent to hers. That had taken some doing, but Admiral Howbarque was a native Martian and knew the unwritten code. She'd gotten her steward and didn't feel so alone.

She'd feel even less alone if she could have heard from Mal. But his last communication was the phoney broadcast back on Mars. He'd not been heard from for nearly two weeks. It was as though he'd dropped off the face of Mars.

Mal's absence as much as anything, compounded her loneliness. He'd always been there, for years, ready with a quip, a comment, a wry smile. And now he wasn't. She'd loved him for years, and had admitted it to herself, but never to him. Once they'd entered into the formal structure of ITA military ship life, to admit something like that meant separating. So she had quietly waited for the right time, knowing they'd serve together until one retired, and then they'd truly be together. But now, perhaps, that moment was gone.

Shaking her head, she turned away from the portal. It was after 0500, and she normally rose at this time anyway. May as well start the daily routine and continue on. It would work out. She walked to the bathroom, pulling up her gown to take a shower.

"You shouldn't undress like that unless you know you're alone, lady. People will ask about that brand."

Startled, she dropped the gown back over her and whirled. A man was leaning against the doorway between her bedroom and living area, smiling a wry grin.

"Mal!" Pam shouted and ran to his waiting arms.

Gone forever, the moment had been given back to them, and neither would ever again let it go.

\* \* \*

"That stuff'll kill you, black like that," he chided Pam as she took the mug from his hand and sipped the piping hot coffee. His coffee was already a dark brown from the added cream

and sugar. They were seated at a small table at a small café just inside the Red Zone. The Red Zone were the decks—usually two or more of the first five at the top of the station—that was devoted to catering to the carnal pleasures of crew just putting in to port. Rough, loud and operating only just on the shady side of legal, it was a place that neither Mal nor Pam frequented but nonetheless offered a certain amount of anonymity. It was made further safe by the presence of ABS Jenkins at a nearby table.

“Believe me, Mal,” Pam said, setting the mug down, “if this is what will be the death of me, I’ll die a happy woman.” She smiled quickly, a flash of radiance in a sordid place, then grew serious. “Right now, I’d lay odds I’m safe from the harm of black coffee. There’s about a dozen other things in line before it.”

“That’s the truth, Pam.” It was now 0700 and they’d shared their information and were only now digesting it with their breakfast. “And Harting is number one.”

“Agreed.” Pam said, taking a bite of an apple. She chewed it quietly, considering. “I don’t think we’ll have to worry about ITA. My hunch is they’re as much in the dark about this as we are. Harting—or whoever’s pushing the buttons at Harting—has dangled the hyperdrive in front of ITA’s nose and it’s too tempting. Now that the modifications have been done to the *Horizon* I doubt ITA will back out now. The inaugural flight’s less than thirty hours away.”

“I don’t think ITA could back out now even if it did want to, Pam. Harting’s goal is the destruction of the *Horizon* and the collapse of hyperspace in this system. If they succeed, it’ll never be possible to open a hyperspace rift within ten light years of Earth.”

“But why, Mal?”

“The physics is kinda muddy, but since hyperspace is the...”

“No, I mean why would Harting want to collapse hyperspace? What’s gained?”

“I’m not sure, Pam, but my guess is that they see this as some sort of way to keep Earth from branching out too fast. The hyperspace ships would be dirt cheap, Pam. The drives are simple and there’ll be nothing to bump up against in hyperspace. Not a single atom. Navigational controls would only be needed in real space, and that would be within already charted star systems. If you made the ships orbit their only jobs, you’d only have to install fusion engines, and even they could be pretty small.” Mal shrugged. “Maybe Harting doesn’t see enough profit in it.”

“That’s possible, I’ll grant,” Pam replied with a frown, “but I’m somehow not convinced that’s all there is to it. Otherwise the Pisces wouldn’t be so intense on seeing them fail. There’s more to this.”

“I suppose it doesn’t matter, though, does it?” Mal asked.

“You’re right. It doesn’t matter to us. We’ll let the Pisces work out the who in their own way and time. I’m just worried about now. Whatever the reason, my ship and crew have been marked for death, and I’m not going to allow that to happen.”

“You mean, we ain’t, lady,” Mal said with a grin. “She’s your ship, but those are my engines, and nobody fools with my engines.”

“So, where to, Mal?” At his thoughtful look, she grinned slowly. “You have an idea.”

“Uh-huh,” he replied. “It’s a gamble, but I think I figured a way to get on the *Horizon*. Once we’re on board, I’ll be able to disable the time drive and we can slip into hyperspace without blowing ourselves up.”

“We’ll have to let them know we’re coming, to coordinate the take over. But all the channels are either closed or monitored constantly.”

“I got an idea about that, too.” He said, glancing over at Jenkins

\* \* \*

Able-bodied spaceman Nicholas Jenkins had been in ITA his entire life. Born to parents that served on board the ITA high speed freighter *Apollo*, Nicholas had never known any other life. Twenty years of age, he’d logged nearly as many light years as a crewman twice his age.

Despite his ITA roots, however, Nicholas thought of himself as a Martian. Both his parents were Martian, and the ships they served on were Martian. He’d never been on Earth nor had any interest in going there. Neither had he ever thought in Terran terms; he was twenty, not thirty-eight.

At the tender age of four—by Martian reckoning, of course—he calmly told his parents that he intended to be a soul servant when he grew up. They hadn’t been very surprised by the announcement; at some point in their young lives all Martian children dreamed of becoming a mysterious soul servant. But they were surprised when, as the years passed, Nicholas clung to this dream as his future. When he turned eight, the firmness of his decision had not wavered, so with a mixture of pride and sadness, they released their son from their custody and sent him to Vermilion for training.

A rigorous course that lasted four years did nothing to change his feelings or attitudes, much to the delight of his instructors. For while the physical and mental conditionings of a soul servant were intended to sharpen senses and thought, they were not intended to “make” soul servants. One did not become a soul servant; one either was or was not one from the beginning, and the training weeded out all but one percent of those who tried to enter that life. At the conclusion of his training, Nicholas began his life properly; committed for life to a single person, with no thought other than protecting his mistress.

A product of a Martian culture that Terrans could never understand, a soul servant was neither a commodity nor a slave. And though they had a singleness of purpose that rivaled ripes—and outside Martian society carried a similar stigma—they also had their own mind. They could most closely be considered an extension of their chosen master, similar to the *samurai* of ancient Earth history but more. Having skills to protect and a mind set to obey, each soul servant thought as their charge, which was why each soul servant chose their master carefully, knowing that once committed to them, only death could end the relationship.

And Nicholas had chosen carefully. Given the profiles of those his teachers had decided best matched his talents and personality, Nicholas had been very surprised to see the famous Pamela Carlson among them. He’d felt drawn to her for years, but hadn’t thought himself capable enough. His teachers thought otherwise, however, and had given him the opportunity. With a keen sense of certainty, Nicholas selected her to be his mistress.

He'd been with her now for eight years, coming on board the *Horizon* just after her maiden voyage. Although she'd asked for a soul servant in keeping with her rising and ever more risky status, it had taken her several years to grow accustomed to this most rare of advantages. Signing on as non-transferable personnel, Nicholas quietly served her as she needed. She'd posted him in stellar cartography, which was to his liking, since it allowed him to broaden his skills and keep his mind sharp while still remaining close by. She'd check in on him occasionally, not knowing quite how to proceed, recognizing the need for his presence, yet uncomfortable with it.

Such had not been the case for Nicholas. He'd been a soul servant his entire life and was now able to fulfill his purpose. What his mistress was going through now was the reason why he existed. Now was his moment; the moment when he would actively put his life in front of hers, a living shield and weapon for the person most important to him. There had been these moments in the past, of course. He'd taken care of two loony stalkers shortly after she'd been promoted to the captaincy. It was his convincing yet non-lethal actions against them that finally put her at ease with her protector. The second incident—again a stalker—was fatal, but his deadly force had been justified. The final one—which had occurred only two years ago—had also been fatal for the attacker. Nicholas had kept this slaying to himself, feeling there was no need to disturb her with the gory details of a delusional romance gone terribly wrong.

Her real romance was quite different. He'd spotted her love for Chief Engineer Stewart soon after committing, and had approved of her behavior and his. Mal—as Nicholas had come to think of him over the years—gave his mistress a sense of completeness and happiness that in turn gave Nicholas a quiet satisfaction. Mal's tunnel-wise experiences also diminished her exposure to risk that would otherwise demand Nicholas' personal attention. And, in keeping with his nature, Nicholas had grown to trust the wiry engineer, with his loyalty to the man increasing as Pamela's love for Stewart had increased. Mal had not outwardly acknowledged this, but to Nicholas it was clear he was aware of it.

That had changed in the past month, but Nicholas did not blame Mal. Everything—the recall to Earth, the killings on Mars, the unjust usurping of Pam's position—was beyond their control. They were forced to react to circumstances as they occurred; a dangerous tactic. But now they were taking the initiative. And Nicholas himself was to be the catalyst.

Stepping off the eledisc onto deck one—the wildest deck of the Red Zone, Nicholas looked around quickly, orienting himself to the station blue prints he'd memorized. To his left was a short, dark corridor that led to the guarded Deck One air lock. To his right was the main corridor that circled the entire station. And immediately in front of him was a bar, whose lurid, flashing holo sign proclaimed the bar's name as The Sweet Spot. The accompanying holo clips and blaring, deep-throated voice left nothing to the imagination as to what one would find inside. Knowing this was an ideal location, Nicholas made for it. Behind him he heard the eledisc descending for another passenger.

He'd gotten no further than five meters into the bar when he was approached by a slinky blonde wearing what appeared to be nothing more than fog.

"Just get in, sailor?" she asked in the age old proposition. Her eyes were bright and empty, betraying her ripped and enslaved mind. Nicholas felt a twinge of pity and revulsion, but smiled at her, knowing he had time to use and a front to put up.

"Well, miss," he said in a nervous, shy voice that matched his boyish face and made the woman's eyes brighten even further as she sensed an easy profit for her owners, Programmed Pleasure Unlimited. "I'm new to space and I just got back from my first trip to Triton." He gave a choppy, self-conscious laugh. "I didn't know it would be such a long trip!"

"That's not a problem, honey," she cooed, running a hand up his front. "I can make you forget all about that trip."

"Really?" he asked stupidly. "How?"

She gave out a sound that was part groan and part murmur, "In ways you've never even dreamed of, lover."

"Gee, I don't know," he said hesitantly. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Mal stepping off the eledisc. Seeming to make up his mind, he suddenly smiled at her. "All right! Let's do it! I've still got ten creds left, so we can..."

"Ten!" she said with a sad look on her face. "You're just a boy if you've only got ten creds!"

"Well, I sent my mom most of my creds."

"Sorry, lover, but I'm fifty creds an hour." She seemed genuinely sad, which she no doubt was. Ripes were very different from normal prostitutes. She brightened. "Ten credits will get you a beer, though," she offered helpfully.

"Fair enough," Nicholas replied cheerfully and walked toward the bar. He waved at her to maintain his naïve nature, but it was wasted on her. She'd already slunk off to a new mark, a woman entering just ahead of Mal.

His act wasn't wasted on a group of four men in the back of the bar, however. They were playing an Earth game called pool, and were looking for dupes as well. And they saw one in Nicholas. Three of them did, at least. The fourth one was looking him over carefully, as though seeing him in a way different from the others.

Nicholas picked up his ten cred beer and walked to the back, sipping it. He smiled at the men.

"Hey, guys! Just get in?" he said. One of them snorted disgustingly.

"Beat it, kid." Although he was twenty years old, Nicholas had a smooth face and wiry build, making him look much younger than he was. That at least three were Terrans, not used to seeing the slow aging process of Martians because of the lighter gravity, only underscored his apparent youth.

"So, whatcha' playin'?" he asked, taking another swallow of the cheap beer.

That was the question they were looking for. Still acting grouchy, the one who'd spoken to him gave him a sour look.

"This is pool kid, and you need money and skill to play." He leaned over the table and lined up a shot, baiting Nicholas. "An' you don't got the money."

"Really? How much money?" he asked excitedly. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his card. "I still got twelve hundred creds. Is that enough?"

Judging by the sharp crack of the cue on the ball just as he spoke, Nicholas had enough. The man stood up and eyed him.

“Okay, you got the money, kid. You got the skill?”

“Skill?” Nicholas asked, focusing on the speaker, but shifting to also take in the fourth man. The Martian.

“Yeah. You ever play pool before?”

“No. But I’ve played Sebec’s Staggering Fool. Does that count?”

“I ain’t never heard of Sebec’s Staggering Fool, kid.”

“I have,” the fourth man said quietly. He picked up a chalk and began rubbing his pool cue. “It’s the toughest game there is. I don’t think there’s more than two hundred guys can play Staggering Fool.”

“One hundred and eighty-nine,” Nicholas said softly. He had the man’s measure now. “Do you want to play a game?”

The man shrugged. “Way I hear it, once I been asked, I don’t have much of a choice, do I?” At Nicholas’s impassive stare, the man nodded. “Yeah, I’ll play. I just wantcha to know I’d play even if I did have a choice. It’s for her, ain’t it?”

“Yes.”

The first man, sensing something wrong, stepped up.

“What’s goin’ on, King? You know this kid?”

King, the Martian, looked at him and chuckled.

“Nah, I don’t know him, Louie. Never will, either. But we got ourselves a stake, and it’s gonna be an easy month for us.” He set the chalk down and looked at Nicholas “Only we can’t spend the money til tomorrow, right kid?” And he stabbed the cue at his throat.

Nicholas’ left hand shot up and across his body, deflected the cue point into the arm of the man nearest him, then closed in and up to the Martian. Their eyes locked for an instant and King saw a quick flash of gratitude in Nicholas’ eyes.

“Right,” Nicholas replied, then brought his scything right hand up hard under the man’s breast bone. King grunted hard and staggered back, but not before, Nicholas’ blurred hand shoved his cred card deep into one of the Martian’s pockets. Nicholas always paid his debts.

Pushing off King, Nicholas tossed the heavy glass beer mug at one of the men on the other side of the pool table, then dropped to the floor and swept a leg across the shins of the man who’d been hit by the cue. His legs jerked out from beneath him and he fell hard, the pool table abruptly stopping his descent as it caught his lower jaw.

Nicholas rose to his feet quickly, but did not press the attack. He wanted his opponents conscious long enough to start a bar wide brawl.

The fourth man—the only one still uninjured—approached Nicholas warily, brandishing a gleaming knife he’d produced from a sheath behind his neck. The blade was only a dozen

centimeters long, but both sides were razor sharp, and the hilt was balanced for throwing. Wanting to keep his distance, the man flipped the knife in his hand, then swept his arm back for the throw. He paused, then brought his arm down quickly.

The blade gleamed for an instant in the light, then Nicholas brought out his hand and allowed the blade to penetrate it. He could have dodged it easily, but doing so would have left the Martian behind him defenseless, and Nicholas abided by the only rule in Sebec's Staggering Fool; your opponent must not die. It was this immutable law that made Nicholas the Fool.

The blade smacked into his palm, coming to a quivering stop with half the blade poking out the back of Nicholas' left hand. Without a sound, Nicholas brought his wounded hand down and plucked the knife free. Blood started ebbing from both sides of the wound, but he ignored it. He repeated the action of his attacker, flipping the knife and bringing his arm back, then jerking it down quickly, releasing the blade. The man threw his arms up, wincing with the anticipated blow.

The knife missed the man by a wide margin and buried itself into the leg of an spectator that had an instigator look about him. The man yelled and fell back, staggering against a table of four ITA marines, who hadn't particularly wanted to join, but now had no option. They picked up the wounded man and heaved him through the plate glass window and into the passageway.

The smashing sound of the heavy glass seemed to throw a switch in everyone present, and the entire populace of the bar, who only moments before had been interested in purchasing love were now quite willing to give away war for free. Nicholas was pleased with his efforts.

Mal, who was about the only person still sitting, was also quite happy with the broiling donnybrook. Yet, he thought, casting a critical eye on the growing fight, it still lacked something. It lacked the spicy flavor of helpless authority. And for that ingredient, Mal had the perfect tool.

Pulling a small, three-shot energy gun from behind his waistband, Mal charged it then fired down the hall, aiming in the general direction of the two station guards posted at the airlock tunnel.

The beam struck within a meter of one of guards, causing the metal decking to crackle and groan under the sudden heat. It did little actual damage, but served admirably in causing the two guards to jump suddenly, then scramble toward the bar. One of them was shouting out loud; no doubt calling for backup over his comlink.

The guards swept by Mal—who was still lingering near the Sweet Spot's entrance, and were quickly swallowed up by the raucous mob. That was all Mal needed to see. Rising, he tossed the laser onto the floor and hurriedly walked to the now unguarded airlock. Banging in his codes, he passed through, letting the door close and lock behind him.

He was standing in a tunnel only ten meters long but with a three meter height and eight meter width. It had a very rich odor that would have been overpowering even in a hall ten times larger. The source of the marshy smell was obvious: Every square meter of bulkhead was

lined with various types of well-used space suits, the majority being rigged for construction work and as such too bulky for Mal. He passed them by and quickly located the one he wanted; the communications suit, used for maintaining comlinks for workers in the other suits. It was also good for short range communications to ships.

He donned the suit and proceeded to the lock. He was confident no one would catch him going out; that bar fight had all the makings of first class brouhaha. But he didn't know how long he'd be out in space, and it would be just as bad for him to get caught coming in as going out. The inside lock cycled and Mal entered the small chamber. Twenty seconds later the outside lock cycled and Mal was standing on the hull of the *Gamma*.

Although work on the hull was routine, Mal had the entire outside of the *Gamma* to himself. There had been higher than normal solar flare activity in the past week, and all maintenance work was suspended.

Clumping along in magnetic boots, Mal trudged over the hull. It was a good two hundred meter walk until he could get line of sight on the *Horizon*. The actual distance was closer to six hundred meters because of the convoluted route Mal had to take around various equipment clusters that bulged up or cratered into the *Gamma*.

As he walked, the Earth hanging over his head like some great blue sun, Mal thought over his plan. It was wildly foolish, hinged on many conditions and had absolutely no margin for error. Pam had been equally sceptical, but had almost immediately seen it was the only way to get the two of them back on the *Horizon*. Once on board, they could implement the easier part of their scheme; retake command and disable the time drive. Mal was in favor of disabling the hyperidor drive as well, but Pam was adamantly against that.

"No, Mal," she'd said with a hard edge to her voice. "We're going to go through with the hyperspace test. You've told me it should work and I believe you. If we cancel the test now, then not only will Harting get another opportunity to sabotage the next test, we'll be court-martialed by ITA for interference and mutiny. But if we go through with it and enter hyperspace, our success will go only that much further to bolster the correctness of our actions and the extent of Harting's guilt."

"I'm only thinking, Pam, that the drive will work from the schematics. I haven't actually *seen* the drive and won't have more than a few minutes to get to know it before we have to engage it."

"Then I guess you've got a real challenge in front of you, Chief Engineer, because those are my orders. Besides," she added with a smile, "you've always said the biggest danger is knowing your engines too well. It seems to me that not knowing them at all can only help you."

Mal gave a snort then and gave another one now as he recalled the conversation. Pam had always been a risk taker, which was why she had the Chair. She was right of course. Taking the *Horizon* into hyperspace was the best thing, even if...

"Greetings, Commander Stewart!" a clipped, measured and slightly pleased voice called out.

Mal jumped back, momentarily losing contact with the hull, startled at the sudden voice. His boots increased their magnetic pull and dragged him back to the hull, where he twisted to



his right slightly and saw Fred, the *Horizon's* ripe, standing not three meters in front of him, wearing only his normal black uniform.

"Geez, Fred!" Mal brought a hand up to his chest and pounded his suit a couple times. "Don't do that!"

"I was under the impression from your transmission from the Harting Cuban Keys complex that you wished to speak privately with me." Although completely exposed to open space, Fred seemed unaffected by the total vacuum, even breathing freely in it. It was illusion only. Fred was actually safe in his small cabin in the forward shielding cone of the *Horizon*, and was merely projecting his image onto Mal's helmet, giving the disturbing appearance of his standing on the hull of the *Gamma*.

"Yeah, I did. I just didn't expect you to pop up like that."

"Oh. My apologies, sir. I think that we have only a few minutes before our line of sight communication is detected and either traced or jammed. We'd best discuss our plan of action."

"Then you're gonna join our side, Fred?"

"Join, sir? No, that is an incorrect statement. I have always been on 'your' side, as it were, because it is in the best interests of ITA, my true masters, to serve you. Captain Carlson's efforts to re-establish her claim to the command of the *Horizon* were not in vain. Admiral Howbarque sent me a coded communiqué at 1451 hours yesterday, defining Pam's position in ITA and her continued command, albeit suppressed, of the *Horizon*. As the ship's ripe, I fall under that command."

"Great to hear, Fred! I'd say you're pleased with that, but like you said, we ain't got the time. So, gimme your opinion: Will my plan work?" Mal took a deep breath both fearing a yes or a no. Fred saying no meant failure, but his saying yes put Mal on a damn fool path. Worse, he would be dragging Pam along with him.

"Yes, sir, your plan will work. I've been able to access the primary riped core of the *Gamma* and successfully request a power up of the auxiliary time drive located in hold 12-14A on deck 12. Tomorrow morning, at 1135 hours, twenty-five minutes before the hyperdrive is activated, I will broadcast a universal location beacon from our time drive to the *Gamma's*."

"How long until they pin down the beacon, Fred?"

"Not long, sir. Perhaps as little as ten seconds and no more than twenty. Unfortunately, I will need to have the beacon active for at least fourteen seconds, from the point of successful arrival until the point of departure. I will therefore enable the beacon only when I have brought the ship sufficiently past the absolute universe coordinates that will successfully transfer you and Captain Carlson to Engineering, where you can disable the time drive. I should point out, sir," he added with a voice that remained cool and detached but still carried a small note of concern, "that the margin of error is less than one-thousandth of a second. You and Captain Carlson absolutely must be inside the transport sphere when the drive is activated."

"We'll be there, Fred."

"I'm sure you will be, sir. A successful temporal voyage will result in a twelve point eight six three second time gain. In other words, I will know the jump is successful before I activate

the beacon, which means I must activate the beacon before then.”

“Just like the Harting jumps,” Mal said with a low tone. He’d discovered the reason for Emily’s riping and it still ate at him. “Their psitechs knew in advance whether they’d sent their riped victims to work or to death. I wonder if they ever called off a jump because of not knowing.”

“Probably not, sir, since they couldn’t know until they’d done it, even though they did know. I find myself unable to clarify that statement.”

“Just as well, Fred, since now’s not the time, so to speak.”

“Indeed, sir. Risk of transmission detection has increased by 37 percent. I recommend we terminate our conversation.”

“I agree. We’ll wait for your signal, Fred. Good luck.”

“To you as well, sir. Good bye.” Fred’s image flickered out, leaving Mal alone, wondering if he’d ever see him again.

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## Chapter Eleven

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Terran Date: May 21, 2259

Attention, all station personnel!” The loud atmospeakers sounded throughout the *Gamma*, making everything from crockery to teeth rattle. “Docking bay 7-19 is now a restricted area! No unauthorized personnel allowed in the blue section of deck seven! Attention, all station personnel!” The message continued to repeat, the urgency of the announcement punctuated by a strident tone that further loosened dishes and dental work. Lieutenant Benderstein, the ITA officer in charge of security on decks six through eight, winced and motioned to one of his men, who cancelled both announcement and horn. Satisfied with the resulting silence, he turned to the corporal standing at the air lock. The corporal had a less than pleased look on her face.

“Not your kind of detail, Corporal?” he asked.

“No, sir. We’re wasting our time, Martian Security time, and most of all, Captain Carlson’s time. I’d really rather be somewhere else.”

“I don’t blame you, Manda,” Benderstein replied. He looked through the bay windows and watched as the Martian security ship landed on its designated pad. It was a mean looking vessel. Carrying six crew, it mounted eight guns that could shred any target within moments with either high explosive shells or pulsed laser. The sharpened bows sported the harsh Martian flag painted on its hull, but every other square centimeter was coated with a low key black skin of anti-sensor alloy.

The outer doors of the hangers closed with an eerie combination of deep vibration but no

sound, and the pressurization light on the air locks control panel blinked on. He shook his head.

"This is a complete waste of time," he agreed, "but it is our duty. Take your security squad to Captain Carlson's quarters and escort her here at her convenience."

"Yes, sir." The corporal saluted with a complete lack of enthusiasm, then walked off, the other three men of the detail following. Captain Carlson's quarters during her station arrest were on deck six, blue area, which was the spaceward third of the deck, almost directly overhead. It took less than three minutes for the detail to arrive at her quarters. Positioning themselves at a respectful distance, Corporal Dorian pinged the door, announcing her arrival. She waited about half a minute, then pinged again.

There was still no answer.

\* \* \*

"Mal, are you sure about this?"

Pam and Mal were five decks higher than the patiently waiting Corporal, and looking down into the vast interior space dock of the *Gamma*. Though millions of cubic meters in area, it nonetheless looked crowded by a large number of a large variety of ships in various states of repair or construction. Not ten meters above them were the massive doors of the station's ship airlock.

"Pam," Mal replied honestly, "I ain't been sure about anything since we came out of FTL two weeks ago." He cracked a quick grin. "Well, anything but you. You and my engines have always been my reality check."

"How romantic!" she purred acidly. "I'll make sure all three of us are named in the wedding invitations." She pointed down into the maw of the space dock. As she did, her hand extended beyond the deck's railing and the station's gravity field, causing her blood to tingle. "It's just that it seems like an added risk, not only crossing the space dock unsuited and unpowered, but also dropping twelve decks."

"It's not my preferred mode of travel," Mal admitted. "But once we're in the space dock itself, especially without suits, the station will be unable to peg our whereabouts past our having last been here on deck one." He glanced up at the airlock, where the fifty or so blinking green lights indicated the doors' intention of staying closed. "I only hope there's no departures scheduled while we're hanging out there. Speaking of which, it's time to go. The Martian escort'll have landed by now and station security will be looking for you."

"Okay." Pam let out a deep breath. "Me first." Mal didn't object, knowing she'd only insist on going first and by his going second he could push off after her if she needed help.

Not that Pam needed help. Grasping the railing with both hands, she nimbly hopped over. She stifled a groan as her body left the artificial gravity and moved into its weightless state. Shifting her hands quickly, she expertly brought her feet up and against the outside wall of the small platform she and Mal were on. This left only her fingers in the field, which caused a burning sensation from the blood flowing into and out of the field, but was not dangerous,

only annoying. Turning her head, she looked over her shoulder.

“What do you think, Mal? The *Dromedary*?” The *Dromedary* was a hoboken class freighter that floated three decks below and to Pam’s left.

“No, not her. She uses a class 56 fusion engine, and the shields are always running hot, even with engines off.” He pointed to Pam’s right, directly across from the *Dromedary*. “There’s a better bet. That’s the passenger lunar cruiser *Night Sky*. She’s running top of the line class sixteen fast mix reactors. We can scoot all over her hull and never find a hot spot.”

“You’re the expert,” she said agreeably. Her strong leg muscles shoved hard and sure off the wall and her lithe body straightened out into a diver’s position, pointed directly at the *Night Sky*.

Mal clambered over the rail, feeling a knot in his belly as his weight went from eighty kilos to zero in an instant, and positioned himself for launch. Looking over his shoulder, he could see that Pam was nearly halfway to the *Night Sky* and dead on target. Maybe he should have gone first, and let Pam bail him out. Taking one last look, Mal turned his head back to the platform, gathered himself, then pushed off and down.

He was on his back as he flew, looking up toward the airlock doors and the few ships located above him. Twisting himself expertly, he flipped over onto his belly and could see ahead. Like Pam, he’d spent his entire adult life in space, and the many times he’d been weightless made movement in this environment second nature. He was on a direct course for Pam, who was just now swinging her body around to land like a cat against the aft port hull of the *Night Sky*.

She came against the ship, her feet hitting slightly before her hands to take the majority of her mass. Her hands landed an instant later, snatching onto holds and preventing her body from smacking the hull. She waited a moment for her mass to center itself, then scurried out of the way to allow Mal a safe landing. She looked over her shoulder and winked at him as he approached, a big smile on her face. Mal smiled back and was again reminded why he loved her so much. Despite the seriousness of the situation, Pam could still enjoy the small thrills of life the way they were meant to be enjoyed.

Mal struck the hull in the identical place Pam had and seized the same holds. He pointed down to the belly of the ship and began to crab walk, Pam following close behind. It was now nine-thirty on the morning of the *Horizon*’s most important day of her life. All that remained was waiting until the *Horizon* began her mission in two hours.

\* \* \*

“Time?” Duane called out to no-one in particular.

“Eleven fourteen, Captain,” Ensign M’boula replied back.

Captain. A title Duane Stoddard had hoped he would one day be called, but not in these circumstances. His soul winced at the sound, but he did not betray his feelings. Regardless of how he’d gotten the chair, it was important to carry out his duty. Perhaps more so.

"All right. Com, notify station *Gamma* that the *Horizon* is leaving vacuum mooring status and is departing."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Ensign, bring us about to heading one five five mark eight three two. Ahead on manoeuvring thrusters."

"Aye, Captain. Course laid in. Engaging thrusters."

"Captain?" Faria, the second officer, called out. "The *Revenge* is coming about. Looks like they mean to follow us."

"Can't say I'm surprised, Second. Probably under a pretty tight Harting leash." Matheson, the Harting representative who was now sitting at Duane's former station but not performing any duties, gave a disapproving frown but said nothing. Things had not gone any better between them than they had between Matheson and the Captain, but Duane knew they wouldn't pull the same stunt twice without jeopardizing the entire mission. "Well, nothing we can do about it. Keep an eye on them, though."

"Yes, sir."

"How's the hyperdrive doing, Chief?"

"From what I can make of these readouts, Captain," came Soldano's reply, "we're running in nominal state and can activate the drive anytime after we obtain our polar lane."

"Thank you, Chief. Helm, bring us onto a zenith polar route, heading to position zero, zero mark one... what the hell?!" The imminent emergency course change alarm sounded and everyone felt the smothering effects of the emergency restraint field kick in. The *Horizon* made a sudden veer to port, and although no-one felt the momentum change, the sharply swinging stars shining through the bridge's aligned titanium hull gave evidence to the severity of the course change.

"Helm! What's happening?"

"I'm not sure, sir," M'boula said with an excited yet steady voice. "Controls are dead! They've been rerouted to the ship's ripe's control boards."

"Fred!" Duane called out, activating the comlink to Fred's small room in the forward shields. "Status!"

"My apologies for the abrupt course change, Captain." Fred's firm, calm voice poured out over the bridge's atmospeakers. "But starboard thrusters suddenly failed and I was forced to engage the main engines and assume navigational controls to prevent the ship's entry into Earth's atmosphere."

It seemed incredible to nearly everyone that such a thing could happen, and Duane looked questioningly at Soldano, who was already pouring over his instruments and speaking to his engineering crew over the com. He sensed Duane's look and turned to him.

"He's right, Captain. Apparently the Harting crews cross patched the thruster power grid over to the hyperdrive grid to gain an extra five percent. When we went to full thrusters, the

grid started to bubble and shut down the starboard thrusters. We're realigning the grid now and will have thrusters back on line in ten minutes."

"Not good enough, Chief. We have a timetable to keep. Continue repairs, but we'll stay on fusion." He turned his head forward. "Did you catch that, Fred? We'll need you to keep an eye on things until we engage the hyperdrive."

"Yes, sir. I've already computed the proper course to bring us about and am laying it in now." As if to punctuate his statement, the *Horizon* swung ten degrees to starboard while inclining five.

"Thank you, Fred."

"Damn stupid Harting engine hacks!" Soldano swore. He was a very reserved man but had an obsession about his engines that was not unlike his teacher's.

Duane did not share his Chief Engineer's sentiments, however. The Harting engineering teams were competent enough for ground hogs. And they were certainly innocent of the power grid overload. None of them could have suspected the grid would be sabotaged by the *Horizon's* own captain, who had a very keen sense of what was right and what was wrong, and was willing to act on his convictions accordingly.

\* \* \*

"Ready?" Mal asked breathlessly and saw Pam's quick nod. They had spent the better part of two hours huddled in the keel baffling of the *Night Sky*. They had not been too bored, however, since it was evident the search was on for Pam. They'd watched quietly as multiple search teams had moved along the decks, trying to solve her impossible disappearance.

Twice in the last hour, two shuttles had worked their way up and down the space dock, searching for them. But the searchers had assumed Pam was an intelligent person—they probably were still unaware of Mal's presence—and would have worn a powered suit when in such a dangerous place. True, the entire space dock contained breathable atmosphere—it was even kept at a comfortable temperature to minimize condensation—but to trust entirely on one's own muscles and sense of balance to move around was unthinkable. So the search was conducted for the suit and not for the person. What little chance remained of being spotted on sensors was negated by the thick baffling. Realizing the silliness of searching such a place, the shuttles had given up and docked, their crews no doubt adding the already impressive force of people looking for Pam.

Finally the time had come to move, so they'd spent the past ten minutes working their way down the interior of the *Gamma* space dock. They were now hanging onto solar recharging dish of a private yacht which Mal hadn't caught the name of. Below them, less than twenty meters away, were the closed doors of deck twelve's number 14A hold, the hold containing the back up time drive.

"Okay," he whispered. A nonsensical precaution; the odds of his being overheard in space dock didn't exist. "I'll go first, since we have to use my codes."

He pushed off, careful not to overdo it and crash into the metal hull. Flipping over and

around, he came about and landed neatly against the port side of the hanger doors. Two seconds later, Pam was positioned like his mated bookend at the starboard side. Mal flipped open the command access panel and tapped in his code.

It didn't work.

"Geez!" he exclaimed vehemently, looking at Pam quickly. She didn't need a detailed report. Her face became still as she began working out another way to enter. Mal tried again, but the code was again denied. Mal was a wanted man on Mars, and *persona non grata* on Earth for the moment, so his codes had been revoked. A third failed try would lock out all entrance codes. Not even the Premier's codes would work if the system locked...

He gave a small chuckle and tried a third time. The access panel considered his request, then flashed white. The released magnetic locks gave a muffled bang and the doors slowly opened.

Without wasting a moment, both scrambled to the top of the hanger face. Gripping the edge of the bay frame, they twisted their bodies until they lay flat along the space dock wall, their feet pointing up to deck one. Together, they pushed off the facing, holding the frame tightly. Enough speed was needed for momentum to overcome mass.

Like dancers in a ballet, their bodies swung in a graceful arc toward the hanger opening. When they had swung a half circle, and now had their firmly planted hands directly above them, their bodies hit the gravity field on the parallel. Done this way, it was a simple matter to release their holds and land on their feet on the hanger floor only one meter below. Mal was thankful the time drive was in a light duty hanger. The larger hangers also had larger entrances, and they'd have been forced to execute the more difficult approach landing jump.

They hit their feet and rolled to the floor. Mal sprang up quickly, determined to throw up on anyone who might be guarding the time drive. But there was no one, so Mal forced down his retching stomach. All these gravity changes in the past weeks were going to take a serious toll on him. But if he could hold it off for another three or four hours, he'd have all the time he would need.

"There it is, Mal." Pam said quietly. Her face was ashen and sweaty, but Pam would never let something like gravity sickness affect her duty. Mal looked after Pam's pointing arm. As though caught in a dream, they slowly approached the object of their exertions, grief and hope; the time drive.

It was small for a drive, was Mal's first thought. Not more than eight meters long and two meters wide, it stood only one and half meters in height. It was divided neatly in two, connected by a floor plate. Each side only two meters long and a perfect rectangle save for control panels. In the center was an open area, occupied only by a glowing green ion power sphere less than a meter in diameter. It seemed incredible that this small device—it's mate, rather, on the *Horizon*—could be the key to man's future.

Mal stepped up to the panels, hoping he'd be able to decipher them in time. The synchronometer on the display said he had less than ten minutes before Fred would trigger the beacon that indicated it was time to activate and use the drive.

He breathed a deep sigh when everything was exactly as he had anticipated. With growing

excitement and joy, he began configuring the drive for the jump.

Standing just behind him, Pam looked on with a mixture of admiration and wonder. How quickly Mal grasped the concept! Already he looked the expert on the drive, his hands and fingers moving in a sure, choreographed blur as he made it his own private domain. Everything mechanical bowed to Mal's wishes. She was very glad he'd never used his abilities in the wrong way. Which tickled her curiosity.

"Mal?" she asked, not wanting to disturb him, but unable to hold herself, "how did you get those doors to open? After you failed the first time, I was certain ITA had cancelled your codes."

"They did, Pam," he replied, not taking his eyes off the display nor even slowing down. "I used my old Fleet Chief Engineer codes." He chuckled. "ITA needs a good war pretty soon. They're getting sloppy with their security."

The drive gave a sudden ping and Mal smiled. "There! Almost set! The drive is configured for the two of us. We'll need to stand near the sphere when the time bubble appears in about eight minutes."

"About?"

"Uh-huh. Since me 'n Fred can't be in contact, we set this to be coordinated on the beacon. He sets it off, then we got fifteen seconds to enter the field. The beacon will send a second tone to trigger the drive and we'll be off the *Gamma*."

"And breathing *Horizon* air and not vacuum, I hope," Pam added.

"Yeah, I'd kinda prefer that myself, too." Mal continued work on the drive. "All that's left now is to access the hanger sensors, calculate our mass, and work out the amount of power to send to the sphere. I also gotta configure it so the sphere only takes you an' me and not the drive. There's already a drive on the *Horizon*, so I imagine it might be a little crowded in Engineering."

"Fine. You stay at that and I'll..." her voice trailed off and she turned her head toward a corner of the hanger that was piled high with assorted equipment and crates.

"You'll what?" Mal asked.

"I'll take care of our unwanted guest."

Mal jerked around and saw Pam's hard look. Emerging from the darkened area was a small, lean man, his hatchet face unnaturally pale, almost translucent. His loose walk reminded Mal of the Pisces seeming ability to shake off gravity. The small man smiled thinly, his eyes locked on Pam.

"Unwanted? You have no idea who I am and you call me unwanted?" His smile widened, showing perfect, white teeth.

"I know who you are," Pam said with a coldness in her voice that chilled even Mal. "I've been waiting for you to crawl from your hole for over a week now. You're the killer who murdered Margaret Harbreath and her two children."



He blinked his eyes quickly, surprised at the certainty in her voice.

"Now how do you come to that conclusion, Captain Carlson?"

"You're an Outcast," she said, not answering his question. "You're a failed soul servant, a masterless reject, brought here by the *Revenge* to continue doing your dirty work."

"You are wrong," he said viciously, his smile vanishing. "I have a master! I serve Harting Enterprises and they..."

"A soulless master for a soulless servant," she interrupted, her voice still hard and insulting in its frozen tone.

"You know nothing!" he hissed. "You have a soul servant, but he is not here! He's left you to die at my hand! And you will die!"

"Not likely, outcast."

"Such ill-placed confidence! You stand on the edge of death, as your precious friends on Mars did, and have no..."

His voice broke off suddenly and he narrowed his eyes. He then gave a humorless laugh.

"I am impressed, Captain!" He laughed again. "You bait me and anger me and push me, fearing nothing, and I am nearly trapped. You hoped to anger me into carelessness, giving you an imagined edge. And you bait me with your cruel insults, buying time for Commander Stewart to finish his adjustments to your time drive."

Pam said nothing, letting him talk.

"But now my anger is gone, and I will kill you as I should, with little emotion. And then I will kill Stewart. He wastes his time. I have notified Harting of your attempts and they are sealing off this deck, leaving you to my attentions. You'll never use the drive." A thoughtful look crossed his face. "Though I may toss your bodies into the transport area, just to see what will happen." His face went blank. "And now you die."

Pam closed quickly on the man. Since carrying an energy weapon would have triggered the alarms when the search began, Pam carried only a knife, sheathed behind her neck. She chose not to bring it out, instead waiting for the right moment, just before a lethal attack.

The moment arrived almost at once, but for him rather than her. Pam's scything foot caught the man in the chest squarely and should have disabled him. Instead, he merely grunted and twisted his torso, grabbing Pam's leg and throwing her effortlessly against the nearby equipment crates. She struck hard, her left arm getting wrenched as it became ensnared between two crates. She jerked free and forced down the pain, congratulating herself. Despite his outwardly calm demeanor, Pam had touched a nerve and roused his anger. He was toying with her, letting her know he could kill her whenever he wished.

She did not turn around and go into an attack position, instead relying on spontaneity to give her an edge. She fell back at him, then swung around hard and stooping, both protecting herself and targeting his knees.

They weren't there when her fist arrived for he'd stepped back slightly and was preparing

to attack. She dropped to the floor and continued the movement, and felt a surge of victory as her booted foot came up hard against his knee cap.

Again it was a fully connecting hit, and again it seemed to have no effect. He brought his hand down in a slashing movement and clipped the back of Pam's lower leg, numbing it instantly. She let out a yelp and rolled quickly toward the boxes. Sensing the moment had come, she rolled once more and used the action to draw and throw her blade.

She nearly made it. The blade flickered in the light and sliced a centimeter into his neck as it passed, covering him with a sudden spurt of blood. He jumped back, aborting his attack, and claspng his neck. He brought his bloody hand away and stared at it, then looked at Pam with new respect in his eyes.

"Captain, you've cut me!" he said in delighted surprise. "Not one of my previous forty-six targets has so much as scratched me, and here you nearly kill me. Again, I am impressed. Bravo!" He clapped his hands together, blood spattering out as they hit, and then his eyes went cold. "But I'm afraid that means you'll not live to try again. I'll kill you, then Stewart, and then watch as the *Horizon* dies."

Pam rose to meet his attack, but her leg was still crippled and he was far too fast. She sagged back to the floor and stared at him, unflinching and unafraid. Over ten meters away, and tied to the controls that had to be set, Mal looked on desperately. With incredibly swiftness, scenting only the kill, the outcast lunged.

There was a hollow thud and he fell back, clutching his chest underneath his left arm. Pamela sensed a presence behind her and turned to see Nicholas Jenkins calmly step from the crating and place himself between her and the grimacing killer. He smiled down at her.

"My apologies, Captain. I could not come to your aid until I could place myself between you two. Had I come out earlier, he might have had the chance to kill you before I could intervene." He swung around to the still grimacing killer.

"I think, outcast, that you have overestimated your abilities and underestimated my mistress's will."

"Jenkins!" he croaked, an evil gleam coming to his eyes, with small flecks of fear tainting the glow. "I thought you'd been safely tucked away in the brig!"

Jenkins said nothing, instead taking the moment to close. He came to within a meter of the outcast, then suddenly sprang back. Pam saw that his right pants leg was cut high on his thigh, blood ebbing from the ten centimeter wound the outcast had somehow inflicted. Pam immediately thought Jenkins had been repelled, and had missed his chance, and that the fight might still belong to the outcast.

That's not what the outcast thought. He gave out a small groan and staggered back further, now holding both sides. His face was ashen with the white of death. The evil was gone from his eyes and had only the look of a hunted and beaten animal.

Jenkins struck four more times in the next thirty seconds, each attack only half seen by Pam yet fully felt by his enemy. Jenkins was now bleeding from both legs and his face. He also had several fingers mangled and broken on his left hand. His opponent took no pleasure from the damage, however, for it had come at a very high price.

The outcast was now standing by will power alone. His hands had fallen numbly by his sides, for Jenkins had broken eight of the man's ribs, each break occurring under one of his arms. Pam and Mal—who had now finished his work—watched in horrible fascination as Jenkins continued to execute the outcast in the most terrifying of ways; the Martian heart squeeze.

Again Jenkins closed, and again the outcast gave out a muffled grunt. There was a dull popping sound as two more of his ribs were cleanly snapped. His back slammed against the interior bulkhead and he leaned against it heavily. Looking at Jenkins in resigned agony, wishing only for it to be over, the killer waited. Jenkins, showing no emotion, stepped up slowly, his right hand coming back, fingers splayed.

"Wait."

The outcast's eyes turned away from Jenkins and toward Pam, who had stayed his execution. He watched as she struggled to her one useable leg and limped over to them.

"You're too late with your reprieve, Captain," he wheezed out, his voice a hollow whisper. "You waited too long and now you'll have my death on your conscience because of your perverted need to see your puppet kill me." He forced a bloody smile, his perfect white teeth now stained deep red. "I take that consolation with me to the grave."

"You are mistaken, outcast," Pam said, drawing herself to her full height. "You killed my friends, endangered my crew, and are a small, cruel wheel in Harting's corrupt machine. I feel no guilt over your death, nor will I ever. I stopped Jenkins because I wanted to look into your eyes when I ordered him to execute you."

Shocked, the outcast looked up into the most glacial, most merciless eyes he'd ever seen and knew that while he might have killed her, he could have never beaten her. Here was the thing he'd always wanted but had never been capable of: An utter ruthlessness held tightly in rein. She controlled it and was not controlled by it. He looked into the eyes of a true predator, and saw himself as only a scavenger. A vulture to her tigress.

"Kill him," she ordered tonelessly.

Jenkins stepped up quickly, pressing his body against the outcast's right side. His hand shot forward, palm first and fingers splayed and pointed down. It slammed into his left rib cage, breaking free ribs and cartilage. Pressing in toward the center of the outcast's chest, Jenkins squeezed, bending the broken and splintered ribs up and under, rolling them into the man's lungs and heart.

The outcast rose off the floor, gasping as Jenkins compressed his organs into a smaller and smaller area. Suddenly, the outcast made a gurgling sound as the bone shivers tore free from their cartilage and stabbed through his lungs and into his heart, bursting it. He coughed once, still staring into Pam's remorseless gaze, and died.

Jenkins stepped back, releasing his hold, and the outcast's body crumpled to the floor, where it lay in an insignificant pile. Pam looked down at it, content she had done what was needed, in the way it needed to be done. She turned to Jenkins and gave him a small smile.

"Thank you, Nicholas. You have done your duty and I'm proud to call you my friend and protector."

Nicholas blushed and bowed his head. "Thank you, Captain. That means a lot." He stooped and picked up the body. "Let me dispose of this. I'll wait until you're both on the *Horizon*, then turn myself in." He gave a quick grin that made him look even younger. "I've got another couple of days to serve for that bar fight."

Pam laughed. "When we're finished on the *Horizon*, I'll swing around and get that sentence suspended. I want you back on board, where we can keep an eye on each other." She gripped his shoulder briefly, then walked over to Mal. The numbness in her leg was finally fading, and her limp was nearly gone.

"Whoa," Mal said in a dry tone, still looking at Jenkins carrying the body to the storage area to be hidden until later. "Remind me to never get on your bad side, Pam."

"How long, Mal?"

"Any minute now, Pam." They walked to the control panel of the time drive. "When Fred sends the homing beacon, we'll have fifteen seconds to step into the temporal field. Until then, we just wait. It's up to him, now."

\* \* \*

"It's up to you, Fred," Duane called out from his chair. The convoluted flight path Fred had been taking the *Horizon* on was now coming to a conclusion, and both he and Fred knew the lives of Mahlon Stewart and Captain Carlson depended on the ship being in the right place at the right time.

"Yes, sir. We're in the pipe and will engage in eight seconds."

"Eight seconds?" Matheson spoke up for the first time. He was standing beside Duane, having been out of the way until now. "We're a lot further away from the polar route than eight seconds. Even I can see that." His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What goes on, Stoddard?"

Duane ignored him, instead staring at the forward shields, willing this most unlikely of allies on in his mission.

Far up front, enveloped in a world far different than anything seen by normal humans, Fred was finishing his work. All about him was the puterverse, as seen only by ripes who could access at level twenty. It was an unreal world that gave real purpose to an artificial person.

The entire landscape was brilliant gold, save for the sky, which was a deep void of black. Tendrils composed of millions of hues of gold and dandelion and smelling of white reached up to Fred, who stood alone on the landscape, watching and guiding all that took place on board the *Horizon*. The main tendril in front of him was glowing brightest and was the ship itself. Entwined around it and pulsing with power were nearly two million threads that represented the course the ship was on, each thread carefully woven into the spatial tapestry by Fred himself. Reaching from the left and right were bright yellow stalks of flowing energy that were the two new drives, the hyperdrive and the now activated—though still disengaged—time drive. Underneath the *Horizon* tendril were the flashing fusion engines that firmly planted the ship to reality. And finally, approaching quickly from the future, was a single pale yellow thread that were the Captain's and Commander's chance at successfully navigating their time

drive onto the ship.

Though a riped being, Fred had programmed emotions, centered entirely on the ship and his duty to her. He was now feeling very satisfied. The time had come for him to activate the beacon and it was clear from the string's vibrations that Commander Stewart had successfully primed and set the drive for the jump. Turning his head to better locate the optimum nanosecond to activate the first beacon, Fred paused, then triggered it.

"Your actions are in direct violation of Harting's superior authority and are now being challenged," a gray scented voice stated from the landscape. There was a flash of misty steel and three psitechs stood beside Fred, the deep black holes in their temples reflecting the emptiness of the sky and the disappointment in his heart.

"You are unfit for further service," one of them—a female—proclaimed, "and your efforts will come to nothing." She reached out a hand and snapped the fragile thread of life that was nearly upon them.

\* \* \*

"Damn!" Mal swore. The beacon that had been coming through for two seconds abruptly terminated.

"We've been discovered?" Pam asked, knowing the answer. Mal nodded and Pam felt a heaviness washing over her. "Then we've lost."

"Damn!" he repeated, his fingers banging at the controls. "I knew this might happen. Damn!" he seemed unaware of his repeated swearing. It had now been three seconds since the beacon's termination. Five since it had started.

"What are you doing, Mal?" she asked.

"The only thing I can, Pam," he answered and hit the last key. "If this doesn't work, press the engage key for the second alternate program." Eight seconds gone. "If it does work, you probably won't remember."

"Remember what?" Realization struck. "You're going to jump blind."

"I'm jumping blind," he acknowledged. "And if I don't make it, you will too, won't you?" She nodded and he smiled. Eleven seconds. "Hey, that's the way we are." He kissed her lightly on the lips. Then stepped to the temporal field.

"Never lead with your right, kid." There was green flash and Mal was gone.

## Chapter Twelve

« ^ »

Never lead with your right, kid," Mal said and then was swallowed up by green. All around him, loud explosions crushed his hearing, jarring his teeth and even his guts from the heavy thuds. The green throb of light quickly faded and all became pitch black, with not so much as a single lumen penetrating the heavy totality of stygian darkness that had swallowed him.

He had an odd sensation of movement, yet could not move himself, locked solidly in place in an instant of time. The sound continued pounding mercilessly on his ears, but he could make out that the explosions were compressed conversations and continuous noises blended into one rolling sound that he heard forwards while moving backwards through time.

Then the sound stopped. So abrupt was its cessation, that Mal was certain he'd gone deaf. Completely cut off now from all sight and sound, Mal hung for an eternity, neither in reality nor outside it.

And he didn't care.

The total lack of outside stimuli was more than made up by a feeling of overwhelming contentment. Like a drug poured into his system, his movement through time was an addicting exhilaration that destroyed all cares beyond continuing in the time stream, soaking up the surges of each temporal ripple, thrilling at each small bubble of reality as it percolated immutably through the time stream. Had he the ability to control his passage, Mal might have never ended his journey, and continued on forever, if such a concept even existed here.

Fortunately, Mal did not have control and his dangerous travel came to an end. And like an overdosed drug addict going into withdrawal, reality hit hard.

He found himself hanging again in midair, but this time both reality and gravity had a firm grip on him, and he fell a dozen centimeters to the floor. He landed awkwardly, unprepared for the fall and still overcome by the effects of time travel. He lay on the decking and sobbed as the memory of the experience ripped at his soul. Yet even now he was forgetting everything.

Forgetting what? he thought dully. He sat up and looked around. He was back on the *Horizon*! He was in the forward engineering storage bay, sealed off from main engineering but it didn't matter; his beloved drives were once again under his care.

No! Time again crossed the point when he made his decision to make the jump and Mal instantly remembered the reason for his trip. He was here to trigger the beacon and guarantee the safe transport of Pam and—incredibly—himself. He had only moments left!

Dizzy and disoriented, for he was now on both the *Gamma* and the *Horizon*, Mal scrambled to his feet and staggered to the time drive control panel. The beacon was set, but had been disengaged. Knowing he had little time left, he leaned on the transmission switch, wondering what the next few seconds would do to him, or had already done to him. Fear raced through him, and horror, at the thought of meeting himself, but he continued to send the beacon, knowing that there was no price too high to pay for the safety of the woman he loved.

\* \* \*

"There's the beacon, Mal!" Pam said excitedly. "Fred must have re-established it. Let's get in position!"

She tugged at Mal's arm, but he remained motionless beside the control panel, having just gone over there to determine why the beacon had cut off. She stared at him, frightened. What could have happened to him? He'd not had the chance to get involved in the fight, so there was no possibility of his being injured. Perhaps the outcast had released a type of nerve agent into the atmosphere that was only now...

Suddenly, she remembered! Mal had stepped into the time drive and jumped blind! Fred hadn't fixed the beacon; Mal was on the *Horizon*, sending it. Yet he was standing here, beside her.

Shaking her head to keep her increasingly confused thoughts in line, she pulled at Mal and was able to guide him like a drunken sailor to the ion sphere. The field had yet to form, which meant they still had time. Time! She shuddered in pain as the conflicting memories in her mind tried to resolve themselves. Dimly aware of the importance of getting into the field, she pushed him in, then collapsed at his feet.

There was a crackling sound, followed by a series of hollow booms in pitch darkness, and then Pam felt herself suspended in a void, her heart pounding with excitement as wave after wave of temporal pleasure crashed over and through her being. She forgot about the *Horizon*, Mal, even herself, in her burning desire to continue living in the time stream and never leaving.

She shuddered and retched as the temporal drug was abruptly pulled from her system, to be replaced by the hard plating of the engineering deck beneath her body. Sobbing with pain and a whirlwind of memories, Pam began...

Began what? She'd forgotten the past... no. She'd forgotten the future. But she couldn't have forgotten something that hadn't happened, could she? Whimpering like a lost child, the after effects of the temporal drug still lingering, Pam shook her head. Then the present caught up with the future and she relived the moment in her memory. Yet the drug of the time stream was denied her this time, so her memories continued unfolding without incident and within seconds, it had receded into the past, and Pamela was again herself, with only two sets of memories to mark this most unique of passages.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and looked up to see Mal smiling down at her. Then he looked up, toward the control panel of the time drive, terrified yet unable to stop himself. Feeling an unnamed horror, Pam also looked.

There was no one there.

Pam rose shakily to her feet. "What... what happened, Mal? Did you really jump blind? Or did we both go into the time drive with the beacon solidly locked on to here?"

"Yes," Mal said simply.

"So, were you lucky in your jump, or did the knowledge that you'd send the beacon guarantee the success of a blind jump?" She shook her head. "Or do I even want to know?"

"I'd like to know, Pam," Mal replied, looking at the location he'd first landed at, then the slightly different location he'd landed at with Pam. Why hadn't he seen himself complete the jump, since both jumps were at the same time? Like Pam, he shook his head. "But I don't want to know either. Tell you what, though, darlin'. I don't want to go through that again just to find out."

"Yes," she agreed, "once in a lifetime—or was it twice?—is too many." The ship gave a sudden shudder and they both staggered. Pam stood straight, turning toward the still closed storage bay doors. "That wasn't a course change. Someone's attacking us!"

Mal was already at the time drive, shutting it down. "I don't know how, but I'll bet the *Revenge* has figured out what we've done and has orders to destroy us." He looked at Pam with hard eyes. "They figured this to be a one-way trip for us, regardless."

"Sorry, Mal, but I always go round trip." She sprinted toward the doors, which opened at her approach. "You take care of things here, Mal! I'll handle the bridge!"

"Aye, aye, Captain!" he shouted after her, feeling a sense of energy and confidence hit him. He was finally where he was supposed to be. He finished shutting down the time drive then ran through the bay doors and into main engineering, where he was stared at by his shocked crew. He waved aside their dumbfounded looks and began issuing orders. They had work to get done and precious little time to do it in.

\* \* \*

"The *Revenge* refuses to respond, Captain!" Norcham, the third officer had taken over the com station, and was futilely trying to raise their erstwhile companion, now turned attacker. As if to punctuate her statement, the *Horizon* again shuddered as a high energy plasma beam struck the backside of her forward shields, just abaft the number two spike. Overhead, the *Revenge* swooped less than fifty meters past the bridge and began coming about to make another attack run.

"Send out a universal distress call!" Stoddard ordered, then brought his attention to helm. "Ensign! Keep our bows on to the *Revenge*! If she opens up with her hull laser, our only chance is to let the forward shields take it."

"I'm trying, Captain!" M'boula exclaimed, "But the helm is sluggish, and I think the ripe navigation has failed!"

Not failed, Duane though grimly. Destroyed. Fred had told him of the possibility of being attacked in the puterverse once Harting divined their true purpose in forcing the thruster grid overload. He'd seemed confident he could handle himself in the puterverse but admitted to being unable to also navigate the ship if attacked. They were on their own.

"Captain on the bridge!" came an incredulous shout from Faria. Duane twisted in his chair and his eyes immediately locked onto the proud form of Captain Carlson. She was banged up and her uniform was filthy, but the fire was in her eyes. She smiled at Duane and saluted.

"Captain Stoddard, as the senior line captain of ITA, I am seizing command of this ship under Article 28 of the ITA Ball Chaser Regulations. Sir, you are relieved of command!"

There was no hesitation in him. Had she said she was taking control based on winning a game of ore, tabinal, scissors, it would have been good enough for him. He came to attention and gave a wholehearted salute.

"Captain Carlson, I stand relieved. Welcome aboard!"



“Thank you, Duane. Well, let’s start cleaning up Harting’s mess, shall we? Status.”

Duane began rattling off the situation, but was stopped by Matheson.

“You do not have command here, Carlson! Stoddard’s command is a field commission and as such he cannot be relieved of it during battle! Your orders are totally worthless and you yourself are being sought by the law on two different planets!”

“Mister Matheson! I have had quite...” Pam swore. “The hell with it.” And brought her fist up hard under Matheson’s chin. His head snapped back and he dropped like a rock. Pam shook the pain from her hand, admiring her handiwork. “Now that felt *really* good. Continue the status report, Duane.”

By the time the *Revenge* had circled around to begin another attack run, Pam was in her chair and in full command.

“Helm, keep us aimed at the *Revenge*. Maintain speed.”

“Aye, Captain.” M’boula’s hands flowed over the control panels and the nose of the *Horizon* lifted slightly, her gigantic duranium shields blocking line of sight. The *Revenge* appeared on the main viewer, no more than a dark blotch in front of the sun, looking lean and nasty.

“Steady on, helm,” Pam called quietly. The *Revenge* had halved the distance and was beginning to veer to her starboard in an effort to rake the *Horizon*’s port quarter with a broadside. M’boula tried to counter, but the *Revenge* was too nimble.

“I’m losing our shield placement, Captain!” she called out.

“That’s fine, Grace. You’re doing fine. Keep bringing us to port. Steady on... steady on... NOW! Accelerate to 1200 kps and bring her to starboard!”

The inertial dampeners kicked on and the *Horizon* shot forward, going into a slew. The *Revenge* flashed by, but had only the small stern of the ship to shoot at, and was unable to fire.

“Cut main engines!” Pam barked. “Continue bringing her to starboard!”

The *Horizon* continued veering, coming about in a ponderous slide, her suddenly silenced engines doing nothing to halt the flat spin she was about to begin.

“All right! Bring engines on line, 500 kps, and bring her to port. Get the shields lined up with the *Revenge*!”

“That was brilliant, Captain!” shouted Soldano, working furiously at the fusion station to prevent the grid from bubbling. “We not only kept the *Revenge* from firing, we’ve brought our shields around to face him!”

“And we’ve got the sun at our backs, too, Chief.” Mal stepped off the eledisc and took the other engineer’s station, bringing the controls online. “The problem is, every pass is a guess and the first time we guess wrong, our cabin is cut wide open by their hull laser.” He looked at Pam, who nodded her head grimly.

“Only now, it’s not a guessing game anymore.” The power lights for the ball chaser station snapped on and the readouts aligned themselves, indicating a charging subspace field. “Now,

we play for keeps.”

“You can’t!” Soldano leapt to his feet, squaring off at Mal. “You can’t create a ball inside a solar system! The resulting gravity well would at best warp the orbits of the interior planets and at worst pull them apart!”

“I’ve got a pretty good idea what can happen, Chief,” Mal replied softly. “I also know what this ship and her engines,” he broke off and smiled, “what *your* engines can do. Don’t you think we should let the *Horizon* fight for her life?”

Soldano stared at Mal, both anger and admiration coursing through him. This was Mahlon Stewart; the first ball chaser. This was the man who’d shared with him—Soldano—so much of his hard won experience. As a young man, Soldano had admired Stewart’s courage and resourcefulness, wanting to one day be like him.

And now that day was here and Soldano hated it. It was one thing to admire brilliance and unorthodox solutions from a distance, and quite another to be at the moment of decision. Did he have the same courage as his mentor? The moment hung, and then Soldano felt it blend into him. He made his decision.

“I am the Chief Engineer, Commander Stewart,” Soldano said with a calm that surprised even himself. “I will operate the ball controls. Please man the fusion station.”

Mal nodded his approval. “Yes, sir!” They switched positions.

“She’s coming around for another run, Captain,” M’boula announced. “Attack in twenty seconds.”

“Very well, helm. Slow to 10 kps. We’ll draw them in. Chief, how long for the ball?”

“We can generate a 2% ball in fifteen seconds, Captain,” Soldano shot back, “It’ll only last for five seconds before bleeding off, but that should be enough.”

“What about our acceleration, Captain?” Duane asked. “Even five seconds on a 2% ball will push us five or six light minutes.”

“I know, First,” Pam replied tersely. “That’s why we have to give the *Revenge* one more free shot at us and why we have to have Fred back on line. I only hope,” she added pointing to the front screen, “that Fred will be back. Otherwise things will be getting very warm in here.”

\* \* \*

Although he would never think it in a way that could be understood by humans, Fred was also hoping to make it back. He’d anticipated an attack by two psitechs, but had not fully prepared for three.

The beacon had been cut off by the female, but Fred did not try to re-establish it. From the ground there came another thread that reached for the *Horizon* stalk. That would be Commander Stewart, making a blind jump. Fred must protect that tendril at all costs. He concentrated on the thread and it changed color, matching the background shade to within one sixty-four trillionth of a hue. Although it would probably cause momentary sensory deprivation to anyone traveling the thread, there was little other danger. He turned his

attention to the psitech.

“Your presence here is neither warranted nor tolerated,” Fred stated pleasantly. “Please vacate this secured sector immediately.”

There was no threat given nor implied in his tone, for none was needed. A ship’s ripe always defended his area to the death.

None of the psitech responded. Instead they approached the time drive tendril and began fabricating a shield around it. Fred released himself from his platform and teleported to them, appearing beside the two male psitech.

“You are requested to erase your program and return to a non-ship puterverse address immediately.” They ignored him.

Bringing his hand up, Fred inserted his finger into the temple plug of a male psitech, and downloaded a copy of his entire file system in two nanoseconds. He’d worked out this strategy from his discussions with Commander Stewart. “Fred,” the commander had told him twenty-six times in the past fourteen point one six Terran years, “Too much knowledge can be a bad thing. It clogs up the decision making process and slows down reflexes. Believe me, philosophy has killed more than one lion tamer.”

In point of fact, Fred was never able to determine that philosophy had killed any lion tamers at all, let alone multiple ones. There were certainly no coroner reports that indicated that. Most lion tamers died from a single prolonged session of extensive contact with an animal that had a point of view contrary to the tamer’s. Yet the gist of the analogy had reached Fred and this attack was the result. If the psitech was able to assemble and organize the data Fred was giving him, the psitech would then be able to return the attack and destroy him.

Fred’s independent conclusions and resulting test of his theory through application proved successful. The psitech’s body snapped straight and exploded into thousands of slivers, peppering the area with sharp data fragments that destroyed the partially built shield. Feeling satisfied with his field test, Fred turned to the remaining two.

“Your project has been cancelled. Please return to the public domain.”

“You no longer have authority here, ripe,” the female psitech stated, her body beginning to take on a glow as she pulled power directly from the ship’s interface. “We have been commissioned to replace you and are now compelled to destroy you.” As one, they both advanced.

Fred teleported to a position three meters beyond their reach and away from the *Horizon* stalk. He was curious to see their program priorities.

His curiosity turned to dismay when he determined his destruction was second priority. They did not change course and veer toward him. Instead, they approached the *Horizon* stalk and began dismantling the course threads that sheathed the ship’s main systems. He would be able to repair all damage, but for only six billion, eighty-five million, one hundred and ninety-four nanoseconds at their current rate of destruction. He immediately teleported to their sides and inserted his finger into the temple plug of the female.

He sensed a feedback and disengaged before committing to download. She had write

protected her mind and set an ensnarlment routine. She stopped her destruction, increasing Fred's damage repair time by nearly three billion nanoseconds, and counter attacked.

A crimson power spike appeared seventy-one point three four meters above Fred's position and plummeted down toward him at the speed of light. It was a slow, clumsy attack, and Fred easily avoided it. He prepared his own counter and pointed his hands at the female, only to see a slash of a smile on her face. He only then understood the power spike had been a diversion.

Fred felt his feet suddenly straighten out as he lost contact with the puterverse surface. The female had rotated the plane and Fred was falling back toward an exit portal. If he fell through it, he would be ejected to the physical reality. Not only would that turn ownership of the ship's domain over to the psitechs, the substantial decrease in his reaction time would prevent him from reentering the puterverse in time to undo the damage done by them.

He knew he could not stop himself from passing through the portal, so he abandoned thread repair and used all his resources to construct a program in the twenty-eight nanoseconds remaining.

It was a crude and sloppy program—less the forty million hex crystals in length and verified only thirty-six times before implementation—but it worked. Fred passed through the portal and instantly appeared beside the *Horizon* stalk. Instead of trying to change the function of the portal, Fred instead altered the parameters. It was still an exit portal, but instead it exited him from the trap and not the puterverse.

The psitechs had dismantled nearly forty-eight point six one six percent of the course threads, but Fred was no longer concerned. Commander Stewart's blind jump thread had attached to the *Horizon* stalk and was now crumbling away. In its place a new, stronger thread—unbreakable according to Fred's calculations—was reaching toward the stalk.

The female psitech, aware of Fred's presence, sensed his interest and turned. She saw the thread and advanced on it. Her hand went forward to seize the new thread, but passed through instead.

"Your attempts to erase the temporal shift thread will be futile because they have already failed. What you are attempting to destroy no longer exists."

"Then your efforts to prevent destruction of Carlson and Stewart were successful," she acknowledged. Fred nodded.

"No matter," she answered. "There are many more points to achieve the same goal." She opened her mouth and emitted an ultrasonic tone that was bright green in sound and smelled of gray.

The remaining male psitech ceased his now useless efforts and stiffened. He began rotating on his center of gravity, emitting an ultrasonic tone identical to the female's. Fred recognized it as a bandwidth attack. Though it meant the destruction of the male, interface bus speed was reduced from attoseconds to milliseconds; a decrease in efficiency of 15 orders of magnitude. By slowing down the interface, the psitechs hoped to disorient Fred enough to disrupt his access. Indeed, it had a profound effect on time perception outside the puterverse reality. For while the puterverse time worked at milliseconds now, physical reality was accelerated greatly from Fred's perspective.

But it was this tactic that assured Fred of victory. He would still need to hurry, however. Inside the *Horizon* stalk there came a deep black glow, indicating the sub space field was being activated. This could only mean Captain Carlson intended on engaging the singularity drive.

"You are clearly experts in temporal travel," he stated, walking slowly toward her. "No doubt your duties included oversight of the temporal jumps Harting has been conducting at its Cuban and Himalayan facilities. Had we met in a temporal interface, you could have defeated me.

"We are not in that interface, however, and your attempts at defeating me are, in human speak, pathetic. My access capabilities far exceed yours, human. Further, I have optimized this interface to work at speeds that allow for real world interaction. I will now demonstrate."

Fred side stepped and swung his arm back toward the now blurred form of the male psitech. He did not look away from the female psitech, but the reflection in her eyes as she observed the fate of her remaining companion allowed Fred to witness his attack. A slice of light shot down from the obsidian sky and followed the axis of the psitech, causing it to glow white. Fred widened the axis diameter until it was eight centimeters thick, making a white cylinder penetrating the center of the psitech. Within the cylinder, Fred altered access time from milliseconds to seconds. Immediately the psitech's steel gray glow turned red, and the ultrasonic tone dropped several octaves until it became a very audible scream. Then the scream ended and there remained only a pile of fading data and ruptured programs gathered in a small, neat cone on the floor of the puterverse.

The female swung her eyes back to Fred and sensed an emotion she had worked years to eliminate from her psychological profile: fear. He had defeated her and her masters at every turn, and now her life was forfeit.

She had also eliminated bravery from her make up, however, and replaced it with logic, so all was not lost. She knew it was time to leave.

"Your treasonous actions will be reported to Harting chain of command and ITA. You can expect to be harvested and submitted to the riping pool within forty-eight hours. Farewell, ripe!" she said and opened an exit portal. Giving one last half-smile, she stepped through. An instant later, she was back in the puterverse.

"My apologies, female." She stiffened noticeably at Fred's choice of descriptor. "My earlier exit program seems to have had global settings instead of the more proper local settings." Fred returned the half-smile and brought up another portal. "You may now exit. I do request, however that you leave your temple access plug behind."

Fear returned as she understood why he called her female and not psitech.

"Idiot!" she spat out. "To do that would mean my death! I can no more live without my plug than you can without your forehead access bar! I'll leave according to my criteria and not the delusional requests of a ripe."

"I fear you misunderstand. I should have not used the word 'request'. 'Insist' is far more accurate." He smiled pleasantly. "Farewell, female."

The portal swept toward her. She tried to dodge, flinging herself back and to one side, but was unable to avoid the termination routine. Her body passed through the door, feet first, then

torso and finally her head. There was a metallic chime as her access plug, now torn free from its cranial mounts, struck the floor of the puterverse, and bounced several times before rolling to a stop. It lay there for several milliseconds, then was quickly absorbed into the puterverse energy matrix, the red stained portions being the last to fade away.

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## Chapter Thirteen

« ^ »

Here she comes again, Captain,” Ensign M’boula reported. Despite the strain of piloting a defenseless ship into the continuing onslaught of a faster, more manoeuvrable attacker, Grace had done her ship and Captain proud, and would until her last breath. “Straight out of the sun, this time.”

“All right,” Pam acknowledged. “We don’t have a choice. We’ll do this without Fred.” She looked over her shoulder. “Drive status?”

“Subspace prongs fully charged, Captain,” Soldano replied.

“Thrusters are operational again, but fusion is still out, Captain,” Mal reported. The last pass had given the *Revenge* ample time to fire and she had done serious damage to the main engines. “It’ll be another thirty minutes to bring ‘em back on line.”

“Keep at it, Mal. Chief, stand by for my command.”

“You plan on warning them, Captain?” Duane asked.

“No.”

Nobody was surprised, not even Matheson who had regained consciousness and was leaning sullenly against a railing. As Mal had said, they were playing for keeps.

“Relative speed and distance to the *Revenge*?” Pam asked.

“The *Revenge* is twelve thousand, four hundred kilometers dead ahead and closing at an attack speed of five hundred kps. She’ll open fire in twenty seconds.”

“And how far are we from Earth?”

“Less than half a million kilometers, Captain.”

Too close. It was far too close. But there was no opportunity to get further away, the *Revenge* could easily catch up and destroy the *Horizon* at its leisure. And that was with the fusion engines on line. Right now, they had only momentum, and precious little of that. At least they were going away from Earth.

“On my mark, Chief,” she repeated.

The bridge fell silent, all eyes turned toward the forward viewing screen, where the magnified form of the *Revenge* could be seen, closing rapidly. Beneath her bows, a plasma

cloud of purple, white and dark red formed as her hull laser charged to full power, intent on laying the *Horizon* open like a slaughtered pig.

"Fifteen seconds to fire," M'boula called out.

"Engage the ball," Pam ordered.

From deep within the belly of the *Horizon* there came a low rumble. Building quickly, the sound traveled from stern to bows in a wave that could be felt. It reached the end of the sub space rod and launched itself into the field maintained by the prongs only one meter in front of the ship. The brilliant blue field suddenly flashed, and a blinding white light shot out from the center, only to be seized by the very field that had created it and dragged back into the new and hungry singularity that would consume everything save the ship it obediently pulled behind it.

\* \* \*

There was a sense of accomplishment among the crew of the *Revenge*. Captain Wilkes raised himself up from his combat couch and looked up at his first officer, Ensign Scott Davenport, who manned navigation and the as yet inoperable hull laser.

"How's it coming, Scott?"

"Got her fixed, Captain and I'm charging up now. The *Horizon* will look like a hoboken freighter after our next pass."

"Good! I'm getting a little tired of their dodging around." He rubbed his chin. "Though I gotta admit, Carlson really fooled me on that slew tactic. I'd have never guessed a ball chaser could manage that. I'll have to remember that one."

"All charged, Captain!" the first officer called down. "We're twelve thousand kilometers and closing. We can fire in twenty seconds."

"Good. Continue present course. We'll pass under her number five spike this time. She's gonna guess wrong sooner or later, and I'm betting sooner."

"Captain?" Gunners mate Louca looked up from his couch, sitting below the Captain's and on the port side. "Their sub space field is fully charged." He paused, "You don't suppose..."

"No, I don't suppose, Sergeant. It's all bluff. There's not one chance in a million that Carlson would charge up her ball inside a populated solar system. She doesn't have the nerve or the..."

Whatever he was going to say would never be known, for it was at that instant that there came a flash from the bows of the *Horizon*. A flash followed by complete darkness and a sudden lurch by the *Revenge*.

"Shit!" Davenport screamed. "They just engaged their singularity drive!"

"Emergency full power astern!" Wilkes ordered. "Bring us about to..."

But it was far too late. Caught in the irresistible pull of a black hole, the *Revenge* plunged

helplessly toward it. At less than ten thousand kilometers, she never had a chance. Gravity forces beyond understanding pulled at her bows. Shooting forward at ever increasing speed, it was over in less than two seconds. Pulled apart by the gravity's variance due to distance, then crushed into non-existence once it crossed the event horizon, the *Revenge* and her crew ceased to be in this universe. Whether they were transported to another place or compressed until their atoms became a single mass occupying a single point in space would never be answered fully by those who had not made the journey themselves.

\* \* \*

"Full bleed, Chief!" Pam barked. The ball had only just been created, and it was at less than three percent of normal operating mass, but right now the lives of billions depended on her fast response.

"Full bleed, Captain!" Soldano shouted back. "We're sloughing at point nine one five..."

"FULL bleed, I said! I want one to one *now!*"

Soldano didn't hesitate. He'd feared this, but had prepared for it, having entered his authorization codes in advance. The final command was only a finger tap away, and Soldano slammed his fist on it, opening up the slough to a fatal one to one ratio. The *Horizon* was now bleeding off singularity mass as pure energy.

The visible spikes, pouring out ignited red plasma, suddenly brightened. Heat and blinding light poured through the clear hull, making everyone cringe. Everyone but Pam and Mal, who would stay by their ship until it killed itself trying to save them.

The spikes were now venting pure energy and had become white hot pinnacles of slag. The duranium shield, where the spikes were attached, began melting, throwing off tons of the thick alloy into space. Fortunately the spikes—or what remained of them—were set far enough out that none of the wreckage struck the ship itself. Not that there would be a ship in a minute, Pam thought grimly.

A loud grinding sound echoed through the ship and she began to veer. As they watched, spike one, directly above them, fell free! Spinning, its point smashed into the bridge hull, but did no damage. The molten metal had become so soft, it merely coated the aligned titanium with the special venting alloy, blocking view from that portion. It tumbled free and out of sight.

"Speed!" Pam demanded. A new problem had arisen; they were getting dangerously close to the sun.

"Eleven point three FTL!" M'boula called out, having never once taken her eyes off her station. "Less than thirty seconds before we're in the Sun's corona!"

Well, Pam thought grimly, at least we're safely away from Earth and Mars. There was another agonizing groan and the ship lurched again.

"Spike four is gone!" Mal shouted above the banshee wails of the dying ship. "And we're losing..." his voice broke off abruptly.



As loud as it had been, everything suddenly went silent and dark. The spikes had burned off the remainder of the ball and were now giving out just a dull glow. As everyone looked up in wonder, the stars suddenly appeared as the *Horizon* fell below the speed of light.

It was a brief respite. Once again, the bridge lit up as the closest star, now just over three light minutes away, filled the forward view. Only the duranium shield, blocking the Sun out save for its mighty corona like an unmarsly eclipse, prevented the crew from being instantly blinded.

"Raise light filters!" Pam ordered. Norcham clawed her way to the environmental controls and soon had the filters up, bringing the light to a more tolerable level.

"How long until we're in the corona?"

"Calculating now, ma'am," M'boula responded. "Uh... we're still doing point eight seven FTL, and we're three point zero one light minutes from the Sun, just inside Mercury's orbit..." her voice broke off.

"Oh, my god..." she whispered.

"What is it, Ensign?"

"It's Mercury, ma'am! We're only three million kilometers from the planet itself!"

Horror shot like a lance through the bridge personnel. Though the Earth had been far closer at the time the ball was generated, it had been left behind almost instantly, with the *Horizon's* protective sub space fields further deadening the effects. But since they were approaching Mercury during the FTL run, and Mercury being only a fraction the size of Earth was more susceptible to the effects of the ball.

Pam looked to her right, through the hull. Mercury hung like a dot, nearly blotted out by the Sun's glow. "On screen, filters at maximum." Pam said calmly. The screen wavered and flickered, then Mercury filled the entire screen.

It was not the Mercury they knew. It now had half a dozen moons trailing behind it—rubble torn free from the planet's crust. It also had a very noticeable rotation.

They stared at it for a few seconds, until Mal broke the silence.

"Uh, Captain? This ain't exactly the best time to admire our handiwork. We've got more pressing..."

"You're right, Mal," Pam agreed, tearing her gaze away from the damaged planet. "How long, helm?"

"We're three minutes, fifty-five seconds from the outer corona, Captain."

"Fusion engine status?"

"Deader than we are, Captain," came Mal's definite reply.

"Can we generate another ball, Chief?" She didn't want to—another dose of singularity might well destroy Mercury—but was willing to risk the existence of a dead planet for the safety of her crew.

"Yes, Captain, we can," Soldano answered. "But we wouldn't be able to bleed it off. Spikes one, three and four are gone, and the remaining three are operating at less than ten percent efficiency. Worse, even if we did generate a ball, we wouldn't be able to create enough mass in time to avoid being pulled into the Sun."

"Then I guess we have no choice," Pam sighed and hit the ship wide hail button.

"All hands, prepare for hyper space travel."

"What?!" Matheson came to his feet, the predictable thorn in everyone's side. "You're crazy, Carlson! With the *Horizon* in this condition, making a hyperspace jump is suicide!" He turned to Soldano. "You! You said three of the spikes were still partially operable. Couldn't we just do a long slow bleed?"

Soldano looked at him impassively and said nothing.

"Mr. Matheson," Pam said quietly, "I am Captain of this vessel. She obeys my commands, or dies trying."

"But you can't..."

"Mr. Matheson," Pam repeated with a deathly quiet in her tone. "The next words you speak go on your tombstone. Be very careful what you say."

Matheson caught himself. Now, at last, he realized what he was against. Carlson had just snuffed out the lives of the *Revenge*. His own life hung just as precariously. Stunned, he stepped back, and stumbled against a railing mount, falling to the ground, his widened eyes never leaving hers.

"Captain?" came a pleasant, assured voice.

"Fred!" Pam exclaimed, turning her attention back to her ship. "About time you showed your face!"

"My apologies, Captain. The Harting psitechs were more of a challenge than I had anticipated. I am, however..."

"Let's chat later, Fred. Right now, we're less than one light minute from the sun, and about to engage the hyperspace drive."

"I would advise against that, Captain." He paused. "I see the problem. I advise entering hyperspace as quickly as possible, Captain."

Pam smiled. "I thought you might. Please work out a theoretical flight path and destination, using only manoeuvring thrusters and ship momentum."

"Yes, Captain. I recommend risking a blind jump, while I work out a solution once in hyperspace."

Her stomach turned at the sound of "blind jump", but nevertheless agreed. She turned to Soldano.

"Chief, I'm sorry to do this to you, but I want Mal to oversee the hyper space drive operation. He..."

Soldano waved aside her apology. "I would have requested it anyway, Captain. I'm Chief Engineer, but he's Mahlon Stewart." He gave a thin smile. "Perhaps one day people can say the same about me."

"I think one day they will, Chief. Thank you." She turned to the fusion engineering station. "Mal, get down to..."

But he had long since left.

\* \* \*

Main engineering was an organized mess when Mal arrived, jumping off the eledisc before it had even stopped. Not surprisingly, Bobby Keane, Mal's bright and cocksure apprentice, was overseeing repairs to the fusion engines and burned out ball chaser controls. He flashed a quick smile at Mal when he entered, but otherwise continued with his work. Knowing his normal engines were in good hands, Mal went to the newest member of his family; the primary interface of the hyperspace engines.

The interface itself looked similar to the fusion controls. Indeed, Mal spotted immediately, they were just an overlay of the mature fusion technology. Underneath the switches, readouts and holopanel was where the real differences were.

He had only moments to familiarize himself with the controls. A hopeless task, but one to which he gave no thought. He punched up full display, fastest possible scroll, and within five seconds of arriving in engineering began soaking up twenty years worth of experimental research. What he saw was very encouraging.

"Captain?" he shouted out.

"Yes, Mal?" Pam's steady voice came over the link.

"Do you have any navigational control whatsoever on the bridge? I mean for hyperspace?"

There was a brief pause. "No. Ensign M'boula has manoeuvring thrusters at her command, but other than that, we're helpless."

"Good thing, too," Mal said flatly. "Harting forgot to mention to us that using fusion engines inside hyperspace would collapse the corridor."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that hyperspace consists of nothing. And I mean nothing. Everything repels everything else. The best drives in hyperspace will use magnetic thrust. Anything that uses fuel or expelled mass will pollute the corridor. My guess is the pollution would extend for some distance, maybe forty AU's or better."

"So that's where Harting would make their money. With the only useable hyperidors being located outside the solar system, and hyperidor ships not being built for the rigors of extended physical space travel, they'd make countless trillions as a shuttle service."

"Not to mention the jumping stations, merchandising and t-shirts," Mal added dryly. "We can use limited thrusters—the corridor can take some pollution, I'm guessing, but we'll have to

be careful.”

“All right. When can we jump, Mal?”

“Anytime, Captain. The insertion routine is loaded and the drive is charged. The grid says we’ve got enough juice for an eleven minute trip.”

“At least they didn’t lie about that,” Pam said acidly, causing several crew members to look up surprised. Mal cracked a smile. They didn’t know what she’d been through in the past three hours. “Very well, stand by for my mark, Mal.”

“Yes, ma’am!” he said, feeling the old love firing up. This is what he’d missed! The not knowing. Ball chasing, for as much as he loved it, was becoming routine. Even a star as remote as 18 Scorpii had been visited twice. With this new hyperspace drive, mankind could begin a serious settlement of the galaxy. And that meant expanding frontiers for people like Mal and Pam to explore.

“Engage.”

Not knowing exactly what would happen, and loving it, Mal signalled his crew to look outside the portal and then engaged the hyperspace drive.

There came a deep tone from within the drive that quickly ascended the scale, going beyond human hearing within moments. Constantly scanning the drive controls, Mal slowly increased power, pulsing it into the sub space prongs that only minutes before had held the ball. The pulsed energy immediately enveloped the *Horizon*, holding it in a strengthening structural integrity field.

A second sound, also deep but matching the pulses of energy, crept within hearing range. Although more deliberate, it too went up the scale until it was ultrasonic. The prongs, now fully charged with ionic based energy, accepted this second surge and began projecting the field forward of the ship. Less than a kilometer in front of the bows, and maintaining distance, a fragment of the sun disappeared as a hyperspace corridor opened up, nothing but solid black inviting them in.

A third sound now began echoing through the ship. It was a constant tone, it’s volume keeping time with the pulses. Pleasant and methodical, it did not come from the engines, though it seemed to have a purpose. Mal cocked his head to one side, then smiled broadly as he figured out its source.

“Mal? What’s that sound? It wasn’t mentioned in any of the reports. And it didn’t show up in our test runs.”

“That’s the ship, Captain!” he said excitedly, “the energy fields are harmonic, and they’re using the prongs like tuning forks! The *Horizon* is singing!” He gave a laugh, the weight of the past weeks falling off, forgotten. This was what he lived for! “Let’s give her something to sing about, Pam! Entering the hyperspace rift in fifteen seconds!” Humming the sound in his throat and soul, Mal quickly and playfully attuned the drive for final entry into hyperspace.

On the bridge, Pam was also excited. Here, then, was the moment that others had so hard tried to deny mankind forever. Looking at the forward screen, Pam no longer saw her crippled

ship, damaged by greed and deceit. Here was the pure spirit of exploring. A veteran in exploration, the *Horizon* was about to enter a new area; a new horizon.

"Ten seconds," Ensign M'boula said quietly, herself caught up in the sight of the approaching rift.

"Com," Pam said, almost as an afterthought, "notify ITA that the *Horizon* is entering the hyperspace rift in ten seconds and we'll contact them once we emerge. Advise them that we'll need assistance returning to Earth orbit, but don't elaborate."

"Yes, Captain."

She'd only just finished sending when the *Horizon* slipped into the rift.

Though seemingly too narrow to fit the broad shield, the *Horizon* entered without difficulty. Immediately, the bridge was flooded with light. Pure, unadulterated white light. Despite the light filters—already running close to maximum—it was enough to make the bridge personnel cover their eyes. Then the filters went to maximum and the light faded. Still blinking, Pam looked outside the hull.

Nothing. She could see the ship, but there was nothing else. Yet it was not the black of space that filled the void, but the pure white of Terran snow. There was no sense of movement.

"Speed?"

Ensign M'boula rubbed her eyes to clear the spots, then read the display.

"30 FTL, Captain, and steady."

"Course?"

"Unknown. All instrumentation has put itself into diagnostic." She ran her fingers over the panel, then shook her head. "I took it off diagnostic, but it re-entered immediately. My navigational controls think we're no longer in space."

"They might be right." She turned her head up. "Fred? Can you talk?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Good. Do you have a solution for us?"

"Yes, Captain. I believe I have calculated a rudimentary way to navigate. Though not useful outside of uncharted systems, it should work for a short, inter-system journey."

"Then where are we?"

"By my new charts, I estimate we're nearing Neptune's orbit and..."

"That can't be, Fred. Not unless our velocity gauges are incorrect."

"I think that they are correct. We are traveling at thirty point one times the speed of light through hyperspace. Our speed is much greater than that when compared to physical space. From that point of view, our velocity is closer to 150 FTL."

Pam's mouth went dry and a lump formed in her throat. 150 FTL! And in mere moments!

The *Horizon* could cruise at 150 FTL, but it took nearly two days to build that speed up, and then it was a safe maximum. A hyperspace ship would be able to exceed the *Horizon's* speed five or six times over. Like Mal, Pam could feel the excitement of youth fill her again. But now wasn't the time for delirious enthusiasm.

"All right, we've got something to show off when we get back. For now, Fred, just get us back."

"Yes, Captain. Commander Stewart and I were just working on that. I'll notify you when we're ready to engage our navigational model. Fred out."

\* \* \*

"Lunar Sixteen to the *Horizon*. Lunar Sixteen calling the *Horizon*. Please respond, *Horizon*."

"Anything yet, Corporal?" Lieutenant Hobbins had not left the communications room since the *Horizon's* distress call had come through nearly twenty minutes prior, but that didn't stop him from asking again, more to vent frustration than to learn anything more.

"No, sir. Last communication was eleven minutes ago, when she reported her intention to enter hyperspace." He returned to his comlink and continued sending out his request for acknowledgment.

No more satisfied than before, Hobbins turned out toward the window. Lifted twenty meters above the highest peak of the van de Graaf crater, the Lunar Sixteen scanning facility offered excellent range for their multitude of sensor and communications equipment, a stunning view and little else. Right now, however, it was the focal point of two worlds, a moon, and many millions of people.

For better or for worse, when the distress call came through, Lieutenant Hobbins had, on his own initiative, relayed the message through public channels. By itself, that was not considered contrary to standard operating procedures; all distress calls were piped through public channels for fastest response time. That the prototype gunship *Revenge* had been specifically named in the first broadcast did classify the transmission. But this was the *Horizon*! Though it might mean the end of his career, Hobbins was not going to let that historic ship be lost simply because ITA wanted to hide its dirty laundry.

And now everyone waited for word. It had been only twenty minutes, but it was the most well documented twenty minutes in recent memory. First the flashes in the sky as the initial attack had taken place, followed by the odd tingling sensation felt by every man, woman and child on the daylight side of the world. No one knew what it meant at first, but when the sky lit up only minutes later in the tell tale six ribbons of light, everyone understood that the *Horizon* had actually used its ball inside the solar system! And then the final message, followed by silence.

"Lieutenant!" the corporal suddenly shouted.

"What?!" he said, jerking back toward the com center. "Have sensors picked up something?"

"Sensors, hell!" He pointed out of the huge viewing pane. "Look at that!"

Hobbins followed the pointing arm and stared in disbelief. There was a huge gash in space; a ragged black scar with flickering edges that seemed less than ten kilometers away. And as he watched, he saw the *Horizon* suddenly emerge from the center of it, the tear collapsing back into normal space. She was battered and burned, but she was still under command, for she began a lazy swing around to establish a lunar orbit, the sunlight flashing off her sides. The com link suddenly crackled, making both men jump.

“Lunar control, this is the ball chaser *Horizon*, Captain Pamela Carlson commanding, requesting permission to secure lunar orbit. We’ve had a long, hard ride, and it’s good to be home.”

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## Epilogue

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...and so it is with great pride and joy that we award the Cross of the Stars to Captain Pamela Sarah Carlson for bravery and resourcefulness far beyond the line of duty. Because of her, and the efforts of her crew, mankind has new horizons to explore, new vistas to behold.”

Admiral What’s-His-Face finally stopped yammering and smiled hugely at Pamela, who rose for the fifth time in twenty minutes—the first four times being false alarms—and limped up the stage to accept the brilliant, star-spangled medal. She’d have traded it in a second for a beer and short speech at the Chamber Pot, but didn’t feel that expressing that would be appropriate. Her body had long since healed over the past two months, but the smothering gravity of Earth was something one never got used to. The medal, when hung around her neck, felt like it had a singularity embedded in it. Still, she was able to stand straight and snap a sharp salute while thousands upon thousands cheered. Knowing the obligation of fame, she turned to the crowd.

“On behalf of my crew and myself, I thank you.” Her voice thundered over the huge grassy mall, magnified hundreds of times over by the atmospeakers. “We did our duty as we saw it and are looking forward to the next mission.”

She looked up into the sky, toward the orbital station where the *Horizon*—fully repaired and outfitted—awaited her crew and captain. In dock beside her lay the keel for the first exploratory hyperspace ship, the *Emily*.

“In the past weeks, I’ve heard over and over that Earth... that... mankind has entered a new age. I disagree.” Silence fell abruptly and Pam saw reflected in their eyes the sway she held over them. It made her catch her breath. It was too much power. Too much power for one person.

“We have a new technology available to us. There are countless new horizons to explore, incredible new vistas to gaze from. These horizons are much further away, yet they are open to more people. And I hope many of you explore the stars and discover what it is that pulls us there. But that in itself is not new.

“It’s not new technology that drives us, no more than it is the ball that drives my crew and me to explore. It is what we are inside. Hyperidors do not make us explore, any more than ball chasers do, or wagon trains or reed rafts or even a vague trail cutting through the red dust of Mars did. We ourselves are the true driving force. Let us never forget that.” She gave a quick smile, seizing the moment and giving in to personal temptation. “And while you’re out there, don’t trip on your petticoats.”

She turned away and walked down the stage to Mal and the bridge personnel, who waited just out of sight. Behind her, the crowds were deafening.

“Awful!! Just awful!!” Mal laughed, he and the others applauding, causing her to blush.

“Yeah, well, there’s a downside to every job.” She pulled off the medal and passed it over to ABS Jenkins. “Let’s get out of here. I’ve got the itch and it’s time to chase the ball!”

“You lay in the course, Pam,” Mal said, wrapping an arm around her, “and I’ll take you there.”

Horizons

Begin thread.

Closure of project 458G34—alternate 217: Isolation of humans to native planet.

Resolution of project: Failure. Humans are now able to travel to class M planets at a rate that will reduce native planet population at a high rate, reducing the scope of influence held by This Unit.

Potential impact of project resolution to This Unit: Possibility of This Unit being exposed is one instance per three hundred thousand. Possibility of This Unit being endangered is one instance per eight hundred thousand. Possibility of This Unit failing to achieve final solution is one instance per five billion.

Potential projects resulting from analysis of project 458G34—alternate 217: Three potential projects. Access to class M planets will allow This Unit to contain non-immigrants through actions that breed paranoia and isolationism. Project failure indicates insufficient monitoring of puterverse and independent computing systems. Solution: Increase positive climate for continued riping of humans and existing ripes for use as puterverse monitors. Project failure indicates hostile, organized nucleus that is possibly aware of the existence of This Unit. Most likely hostile: Four hundred eighty one scenarios per five hundred indicate the Pisces race is the hostile. Solution: Elimination of Pisces race will increase possibility of survival to This Unit.

Begin project.

Begin project.

Begin project.

End thread.