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By Austin McKinley

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AUTHOR'S NOTE:

In 1999 I came across a pseudo-history book in the discount bin called *Bloodline of the Holy Grail*. I had also been reading Marshall T. Savage's *The Millennial Project* at the time, and thought the two brands of crazy would combine to make a great old-fashioned peanut-butter chocolaty space messiah story.

At the time, it was an idea for a comic book that was beyond my capability to complete. Then that whole *DaVinci Code* thing happened, capitalizing on the same source material. But it happened to Stephen King with the Simpsons Movie beating him to the *Under the Dome* punch, so what do I care?

Kings of Heaven, bitches!

—Austin McKinley

Sarasota, FL
February, 2014

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By 2099, hundreds of manned probes had gone out into the inhabited universe. Most were never heard from again. In 2187 the National Space Council abandoned its expeditionary program, but the hope remained—however remote—that one day some of them would find their way home.

Chapter I

A bone-jarring knock awakened Bethany, rang the hull of the *Pegasus* like a bell, and sent her struggling from the tangle of mummy bag and eletro-stim ‘trodes floating in her cubby before she was even fully conscious.

She rubbed sleep from her eyes, floated and bounced down the claustrophobic corridor towards the control room. She made the transfer to the spinning control platform, which remained oriented to the galactic plane despite the *Pegasus*’s spin. Out the bank of hexagonal portals arranged around the triangular forward viewport she counted by subconscious habit six small ships alongside them in the void; she rarely gave their presence a second thought, but she’d know immediately if any were missing. It was year 2252 of the Common Era. The Mars Expeditionary Group was 120 years from Earth.

Bethany put an arm on the command couch, leaned over Caesar's shoulder, and scanned the instruments. Caesar looked out the windows above him.

"M.E.G., this is *Pegasus*," Caesar said into his headset. "We don't know what hit us. Do you see anything? Over."

"What happened?" asked Bethany. "We under attack?"

"Not sure," Caesar said. "Paulo's in the back trying to patch it. We're loosing air."

Bethany turned in midair and launched herself down the crawlway towards the back of the ship. She slid into the crowded environmental bay, where—flanked by several algae incubator tanks—Paulo patched the hull with a resin injector.

"I've just about got it, here," he said, "but it's pretty big. We're leaking insulation fluid on the outside."

"I'll suit up," said Bethany.

Bethany and Paulo floated to the *Pegasus's* airlock and stuffed themselves into their suits. There was no fiddling with decompression, metal suits or inflatable armor. Besides saving space, the thin, flexible counter-pressure suits—stored folded and stuffed in their helmets—were enough to completely negate the effects of vacuum. They

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didn't even have to be air tight, technically. The material could have been left porous so the astronaut could cool off by sweating, or retain heat with additional insulation.

“Caesar, we’re going to step out a minute,” Bethany called. “Monitor us, will you?”

“*Roj*,” Caesar’s voice came from a speaker in the wall, “monitoring your E.V.A.”

They had been born in space, grown up there, were completely comfortable with airlocks and spacesuits. They had never known any other world. In the event of a catastrophic loss of pressure, they were trained to expel all the air from their lungs and hold their breath for two minutes. But such a catastrophic loss was unlikely.

The vacuum wasn't what made space dangerous, it was the difference in pressure between the inside of the ship and the outside—a problem the early space pioneers continually struggled with due to their insistence that the inside of ships maintain sea level atmospheric pressure.

Eliminating inert nitrogen cut atmospheric mass by 80% and reduced the need to contain its pressure. An atmosphere of 99% oxygen only needed to be contained at 3psi to provide pulmonary comfort. The minimum pressure needed to prevent fluids from boiling at body

temperature was less than 1psi. Properly acclimated, the human body could survive pressures as low as a third of sea level, making the pressure difference of the outside vacuum much less significant. If it came to it, the colonists could survive the loss of up to 70% of their atmosphere with emergency oxygen masks, but they still needed to find and stop the leak.

Bethany and Paulo passed through the airlock door, patching equipment in hand, and exited through one of the six amidships hatches that ringed the vessel. It opened soundlessly to their ears with an escape of trace gasses and miniscule hull debris. The dust motes turned, glistening in the stark razor beams from the ship's running lights.

The *Pegasus* was a tri-radially symmetrical cylinder 156 feet from bow to stern, and 72 feet at its widest diameter. Six high power solenoids flanked three forward foil-ringed Bussard ion/solar energy matter collectors to drive the electrostatic ion scoop funnel which, when combined with the rest of the ships flying in formation, created an scram-scoop network a thousand miles wide. At least, it was when there had been twelve ships. Secondary gold-lined collectors sat in tandem along the ship's length. The hydrogen collected by these scramjets was used as reaction mass in the aft fusion/antimatter "Catalyzed RAIR" array.

Bethany and Paulo inspected the leak, about 2/3 of the ship's length back. Viscous fluid seeped from a hole caved in the hull, oscillating globules collected in the vacuum. Pressure in the fluid shield was extremely low, and its vaporizing pressure was almost nothing; punctures in the outer hull merely allowed the fluid to ooze out. The projectile had punched right through the micrometeorite shield. Whatever it was, it had been travelling fast. Really fast. Relativistic.

"Looks like a shell puncture," said Bethany.

"*Roj*," Paulo agreed. "Definitely man-made... or worse."

"Nothing on the screens," Caesar's voice crackled over their headsets, "those that're working, anyway. Can you fix it?"

"We'll try," Bethany told him.

Bethany and Paulo prepared their equipment.

The spacecraft's skin was a composite of carbon fiber with an epoxy resin matrix. For normal wear-and-tear, this reinforcement material used an autonomic polymer healing process: damage transferred a catalyst between microcapsules embedded in the resin, allowing the material inside to polymerize and seal the cavity. Although finite, this process was expected to extend the usual life of the

materials fivefold. For more serious damage, however...

It was possible to weld traditionally in a vacuum, as early Soviet cosmonauts had proved, but for the colonists' purposes, filling the cavity with epoxy and cementing a patch of the same composite material from which the hull was made created as secure a seal as any other on the ship.

Paulo and Bethany returned to *Pegasus's* control room, exhausted, and strapped into their couches beside Caesar.

"*Roj*, M.E.G., copy your transmissions," Caesar said into his headset, "assessing damage. *Pegasus* out."

"Pressure test complete. It's patched," Bethany told him. "Any word on our attackers?"

"No," said Caesar. "The other ships confirm. We're all alone out here."

All three headed back down the crawlway, checking the ship meter by meter for any further damage.

"Where'd it come from, then?" asked Bethany.

"Could've been fired a hundred years ago," said Caesar. "Nothing but dumb luck."

"Dumb is right," said Bethany. "Any other damage?"

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Paulo checked the instruments back in the environmental bay.

“Oxygen levels’ve stabilized,” he said. “We decompressed by about thirty percent. Air’s gonna be a little thin in here for a while.”

Caesar prodded buttons on a wall-mounted interface.

“Navicomp’s down too, not that it matters.”

“Hasn’t worked right for years, anyway,” Bethany nodded.

“Yeah,” Caesar scowled at the monitor. “I’m still determining what other systems may be affected. Everything’s on the blink. These screens keep going on and off. Electrical may be shot. Environmental’s not responding.”

“Okay,” Bethany floated, hands on her hips, deciding. “Caesar, we’d better check that out first. If we can’t get the oxygen levels replenished, we’re in real trouble. Keep me informed of any other changes. Come on, Paulo.”

Bethany and Paulo made their way back up the crawlway to the control room.

“This shouldn’t have happened,” said Paulo. “If we hadn’t had to use so much of our shielding to repair the *Titan*—”

he stopped short. “Sorry, Bethany, didn’t mean to mention your husband.”

“It’s okay,” said Bethany. “All in all it’d be a better way to die. Smashed quickly by a meteor, rather than... I hope it happens that way to me. Just not so soon.”

“And preferably not while I’m on the same ship as you,” Paulo grinned.

“Sure, okay.” Bethany stopped to fiddle with an instrument in the corridor. “Sometimes I wonder what our ancestors were thinking, sending out so many small ships to the new home world instead of one big one.”

“Eggs and baskets,” Paulo told her, “safety in numbers, diversification of systems and methods, that sort of thing.”

“And what’s the result?” Bethany asked. “We scavenge each other until there’s nothing left. And I have to live with you two. It’s more like divide and conquer.”

—

“Well, that’s it,” Caesar settled in the control room next to Bethany. “Electrical will probably continue to give us trouble, but that’s the least of our worries.”

They looked at each other.

“Environmental,” said Bethany.

Of all the things they brought from old earth, the algae cultures were perhaps the most ancient, and also the most useful. In addition to being one of the first and most adaptable forms of life to originate on the home planet and the balance of its biomass, algae were the colonial ships’ primary food source, and oxygen supply.

Spirolina, a blue-green algae, had been consumed for centuries in dozens of cultures, but it was in space it found its true calling. It reproduced exponentially, almost magically, and was one of the few forms of life whose every cell was in some way useful. No plant or animal that ever consumed resources was more perfectly digestible, or a more efficiently nutritious supply of essential vitamins, minerals, and protein.

This is not to say that consuming it was in any way pleasant. It had a flavor and color that could only be described as distinct. But astronauts don’t have the luxury of finicky eating habits. Survival in their tin can biome meant eliminating as many steps on the nutrient-entropic food chain as possible. Every part of the colonists’ daily eating experience was in the form of synthesized food—derived from algae feedstock—and after two generations of consuming little else, the indignity of the shockingly

emerald, musty smelling stuff was somewhat dulled. It wasn't a huge sacrifice for them, as their laws forbade them from consuming meat anyway. The simple fact was it made long-term life in space possible; one did not quibble over manna from heaven.

"The incubators are shot right through," Caesar told her. "We won't get much more out of them. There's not going to be enough to feed us long, much less get the oxygen levels back to normal."

"And because the cycle is upset..." said Bethany.

"We hold our breaths," Caesar finished the thought.

"Don't we have any repair parts?"

"I'll go down to look again," Bethany told him, "but I doubt it. I know where they all went."

"The *Titan*?" asked Caesar.

"Yeah."

Caesar put a hand on Bethany's shoulder.

"It's a real shame, Bethany. That stupid fire, and then the meteor. We all really—"

"I know that, dammit!" She shrugged him off, tense. "I just wish everyone would stop mentioning it!"

“Hey, sorry!” said Caesar. “You brought it up.”

It had been a truly freak accident. At that pressure, oxygen was not flammable, fire behaved no differently than it did at sea level, except that convection forces were a function of gravity, so it was difficult to sustain an open flame at all without an additional mechanism. Bethany presumed the conflagration had something to do with her husband’s experiment. And then, just when they had given their last resources to get the ship back up and running, *bam*—a rogue meteor big enough to practically vaporize it like the fist of god. The *Titan* and everyone aboard her were a total loss. It was supposed to be impossible, but the universe was nothing if not accomplished at serving up huge doses of the impossible from time to time.

Bethany took a deep breath.

“I’ll be down in supplies,” she said. “Just radio the *Zadok* and tell them what’s going on. We need everything but the reclamators and the casing.”

Bethany took a look around the storeroom.

Spirolina were not the only algae in the colonist’s aquaculture vats. Seaweed fiber combined with genetically engineered flavonoid-producing bacteria provided some

small relief from—and variety to—their *Spirolina* dependent diet. They produced seaweed for its algin, not only to broaden the spectrum of their culinary possibilities, but as a means for fabricating many other shipboard necessities. It was the basis for every rubber seal and gasket, every gel and paste, every film, fabric, and polish. Even the clothes they wore were derived predominantly from seaweed. Bonding algin fibers with trace metals created long-lasting, brightly colored, supposedly flame-retardant silks.

She wondered briefly if they could try replenishing the atmosphere by electrolyzing the insulating fluid, but soon disregarded it as impractical. It was hopeless.

Only two interactive biological components in the ecosystem: people and algae. It was a completely closed life-support system, recycling everything but energy.

Through photosynthesis, the algae converted sunlight, carbon dioxide, and water into oxygen and nutrients. Humans breathed the oxygen and consumed the nutrients to support their metabolism, producing carbon dioxide and wastes in the process. All organic wastes were completely broken down into their constituent elements by a supercritical water oxidizer. Urine, feces, waste water, and food scraps were mixed, forming a slurry which was heated to high temperature at high-pressure until it reached

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a supercritical state. Compressed oxygen was injected into the hot waste slurry. All organic wastes were completely oxidized in less than a second. In essence, the supercritical water oxidizer burned waste underwater.

A wide variety of noxious wastes could be fed into the SCWO, and only pure oxidized compounds came out. The wastes were broken down into their elemental constituents: steam was sent to the water condensers, CO₂, fixed nitrates, and nutrient salts went into the hydroponic solutions in the Algae vats—recycled as nutrient feedstock for the algae. The algae then reconverted the CO₂ and wastes to oxygen, food and raw materials.

This closed cycle could reiterate indefinitely as long as there was sunlight to sustain the algae and energy to run the machinery. The same oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen, carbon, and other atoms could pass endlessly around the cycle, changing their chemical formations, but never being expended; a simple process loop to which the only input was energy in the forms of sunlight and electricity. Like the earth itself, it was an independent living system, capable of spinning through its eternal eco-cycle as long as the suns shone.

Unless something upset the cycle and they couldn't get it going again.

They had all the power they needed from solar collectors and fusion generators run on comet-mined Deuterium, but it made no difference if they lost their algae stock. That meant only one thing—death by starvation, asphyxiation, or septicemia from exposure waste buildup, whichever came first.

Bethany fingered the capsule on a silver chain she wore around her neck. Each member of the Mars Expeditionary Group had one. It contained a microchip hardcoded with a single, self executing program; a recognition protocol key given to them by the National Space Council as a means of identification. If for whatever reason they or their descendants happened to return to Earth or encounter subsequent outbound NSC vessels, every member of the expedition—even a sole survivor—had the power to identify themselves as Terran, and if necessary, call off Terran automated defenses. It seemed an odd affectation, a useless relic of another time, but her people were nothing if unable to perpetuate tradition.

They'd almost certainly never get a chance to see if they worked. For some strange reason, that was the thought that pushed her over the edge. She leaned on the console, head in hand, choked back the sobs.

When Bethany returned to the control room, Caesar and Paulo turned to face her.

“Bethany,” said Caesar, “it’s the *Jupiter*. They’re coming alongside.”

Out the port-side intelli-pane display she could see the small specks, almost 80 miles away, of the *Icarus*, the *Io*, and breaking formation to rendezvous with them, the *Jupiter*. The *Neptune*, *Andromeda*, and *Hermes* were some way off to Starboard. They still maintained the nautical terms, even though in space every side was starboard, and they were unlikely ever to dock in a port as such.

Expeditions not wishing to meet sure disaster never struck blindly out in a straight line through the desert of interstellar space. There were oases of deuterium fuel to be mined, gravity assists to take advantage of, singularities to be avoided by a wide margin of safety. Expeditions of this nature caromed from way-station to way-station like an old-fashioned steamer ship stopping at each convenient port to resupply — sacrificing time and some energy, but with each pit-stop maneuver increasing its odds of survival on the open sea.

Each of the ships varied slightly in its design, a function of the piecemeal process by which they were purchased and fitted out. The *Io* had the look of a satellite folded back

on itself, triangular trusses ran the length from its central hub to its main thruster to stabilize its RAIR array. A dish mounted on its prow generated an ultraviolet laser to ionize the hydrogen fed into its scoop.

The *Icarus* employed a massive magnetic sail that preceded it through the void like a gleaming kite. It had taken some doing to finagle the capabilities of the various ships to accelerate and maintain a speed of .77c as a group.

Bethany, Caesar and Paulo exchanged uncomfortable glances as the *Jupiter*—the group’s command ship—drew up off the port bow, her red-tinted viewport a baleful eye in her spherical prow.

Bethany drifted across the space between the two ships. It was amazing to her to consider she was travelling through the universe at well over half the speed of light, with no more protection than the electrostatic scram-scoops of the ships around her, and her counter-pressure suit.

While it wasn’t essential for the suit to be airtight to preserve her from the vacuum, it was nevertheless sealed to save water and oxygen for recycling. The suit used a system of solid-state thermoelectric refrigeration which served for both cooling and heating. Even within the suit,

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a closed loop containing 6 liters of algae solution contained in 2 meters of helically wound clear tubing produced food and oxygen from waste products. If for some reason she were trapped outside, she could survive for weeks with no other support.

The *Jupiter*, like the planet for which it was named, loomed before her. Long stabilizer arms and a flattened toroid truss surrounded its single massive exhaust. Maneuvering thrusters were mounted on dorsal and ventral spider-leg struts.

Bethany opened the hatch situated just below the forward equatorial seam. She tucked herself inside, and operated the airlock mechanism, bringing pressure in the compartment up to match the ship's 3psi.

Helmet under her arm, Bethany entered the *Jupiter's* control room, paused to glance briefly at the dedication plaque:

MARS EXPEDITIONARY GROUP
LAUNCHED 2132 TO SETTLE HD 11232
JUPITER, SOL, NEPTUNE, PEGASUS,
IO, ANDROMEDA, ICARUS, MINOS,
DEMETER, HERMES, TITAN, VULCAN

Someone had scratched out the names of the *Sol*, *Minos*, *Demeter* and *Titan*—ships the group had lost.

Bethany looked towards the back of the ship where the *Zadok*—the group’s ancient patriarch—hovered bathed in an eerie red overhead light. The crew of the *Jupiter* had long since switched to red interior light to preserve the last of the *Zadok*’s fading vision. His alcove in the back of the *Jupiter*’s control room was as much like a temple as a functional ship could manage.

He looked ancient, even skeletal, which meant more than it used to. In the protective womb of their ships, ultraviolet light and gravity were unable to damage the skin. Protection from radiation was twofold—the same magnetic fields that guided fuel into the scram-scoop otherwise repelled dangerous charged particles. Secondarily, the layer of insulating fluid acted as a passive shield. The circulating fluid screened infrared and UV wavelengths, and helped to absorb waste heat and radiate it through heat exchangers in the outer hull and into space.

“How is the he?” Bethany asked Sirah, the middle aged woman who floated in front of him. She was dour, almost stringy, hardened by her dual responsibilities as *Jupiter*’s captain and the *Zadok*’s caretaker.

Genetic engineering, direct electro-stimulation of muscles

and encapsulation in a coil of oscillating electromagnetic currents during sleep prevented the deterioration of muscles and bones in zero-G, which allowed the colonists to maintain physical fitness even into extremely advanced age. White hair did little to distinguish between a colonist who was just past middle age or a centenarian. The *Zadok* was the group's patriarch when the expedition launched 120 years ago, and he was the only living member of his generation still aboard.

"Well," Sirah answered. "What have you to report?"

"We patched the leaks," said Bethany, "so we're not in immediate danger, but there is irreparable damage to our algae incubators. We're not going to be able to produce enough to re-supply our atmosphere and feed us, too."

"So we were informed," said Sirah.

"Any word on the spare parts we requested?" asked Bethany.

"We've searched the stocks," Sirah told her. "Unfortunately, they are depleted. We can't spare anything from the existing incubators without crippling our own supply."

The irony was, supplies were supposed to be the least of their worries. In accordance with their philosophical

beliefs, as well as the necessity of their situation, possessions were held in common. Moreover, when they left the solar system, each ship had been outfitted with a Uni-fab machine. These raw atomic converters were meant to be the engines on which the colony was to be run. Elements were fed into the universal fabricator, which used molecular beam epitaxy to send a stream of charged atoms onto an organic or inorganic substrate; 3-D printing at the atomic level.

The Uni-fab could produce anything from raw materials to machine components to replacement organs. Unlike most of the ship's systems which were almost crude—designed to be simple, too hardened and basic to fail—the complicated Uni-fab devices were considered too potentially useful for the colonists to leave behind. Although still relatively experimental, they had been included at great cost, and a not insignificant proportion of the mission's success vectors had relied upon them. They had been among the first systems to fail.

“We estimate we can hold out a week,” said Bethany, “maybe more. Depends on how hardy the algae prove.”

“We're working on ways to increase productivity,” Sirah looked endlessly tired. “We have to run the numbers. This may take some time. As you know, we're all pressed to full capacity.”

“Without the navi-comps on the other ships,” said Bethany, “we may already have missed our objective. We’re wandering blind.”

“In the event that a solution becomes impossible,” said Sirah, “we’ll have to transfer you to another ship, and let others take your place on the *Pegasus*. We’ll ask for volunteers. I’m sure among the older members of the Unity, myself included...” she waved a hand to dispel Bethany’s protests. “You’re too important to the group and the success of our mission. They’ll understand what’s required of them. The *Desposyni* must survive.”

Bethany knew arguments would get her nowhere.

“I’ll inform my crew,” she said.

They called themselves the Nazara—the People of the Way. Their leaders were the *Desposyni*, which meant ‘of the Master.’ They were priests and priestesses whose titles, according to them and the history they believed, descended from the original Nazarene priest-king, and the lineage to which he was heir.

It wasn’t a joke, a whim or wishful thinking. They had objectively identified the *Desposyni* gene marker that determined conclusively their descent—if not from the actual biblical Christ—at least from a more distant common

ancestor than anyone else who historically made that claim. Their monastic traditions, too, were preserved relatively unchanged for much longer than recorded history. Their titles used the traditional styles, pseudonyms of angels and patriarchs denoting their historic political and social roles.

Using the prophet Isah, they thought of themselves as the righteous remnant—the chosen ones, the elect. But they were forever standing against the mainstream. They were sectarians, separatists; people who moved away.

The revelation their centuries-old claim to an unbroken line from almost every biblical figure of note might actually be true had an understandably unsettling effect on the various societies of which they'd been a part. They were suspect, ghettoized, discriminated against, even despised if for nothing else, the historical miasma of politics and religion they seemed to represent, even perhaps embody. They became, through no fault of their own, as unwelcome on the face of the earth as any social, philological or ethnic group ever before them.

So they joined the National Space Council's Expeditionary Program and offered themselves up among the first human sacrifices to interstellar exploration. In the end, it seemed they had only each other in which they could comfortably place some modicum of trust. They took to the stars in the

hopes that somewhere among the hundreds of earthlike planets so far discovered there was one which could give them the opportunity to do exactly that; a place where they would no longer be outsiders, because there would be no one to suggest their beliefs and practices differed from the norm.

Jared, the *Jupiter's* navigator, sat in the control room nearby as Bethany used the radio.

“They’re trying to figure something out,” Bethany said into the radio, “but it’s as we expected. If they can’t do it, they’re going to ask for volunteers.”

“Figures,” Caesar’s voice came back. They’d talked about this—none of them were much relived by the sacrifice to be asked. It went against their nature to abandon their ship and let others go down with her, but it was required of them by the Way and live or die, they accepted its dictates.

“I guess I’ll come back over there for now,” said Bethany, “unless Sirah needs me for anything else.”

Jared did a double-take at his screen.

“Sirah,” he said. “I’ve got something on long range. Machined metal. Could be a ship.”

Sirah floated up behind him to see what had taken his interest.

“Report,” she said.

“Hold on a second,” Bethany said into the radio.

Jared brought up an enhanced image on the viewport’s intelli-pane display. It was more than a visual—the intelli-pane overlaid images sensitive to every known form of radiation on the electromagnetic spectrum from radio waves to gamma waves which could be stripped away or combined to form a dazzling composite image.

“We’re reading it too,” Caesar’s voice came over the radio. “What is it?”

“It *is* a ship,” Jared confirmed. “No running lights. Attitude inconsistent with vector. Looks derelict.”

Bethany, Sirah and Jared stared into the black.

“It’s an Earth ship,” Bethany squinted.

“*Destiny* Class,” Jared confirmed, identifying the silhouette.

“Can you make out the designation?” asked Sirah.

“Affirmative,” Jared ran the signature through the ship’s database. “It’s the *Cygnus*.”

“Oh my god,” Sirah breathed. “It’s Alistair’s ship. Decelerate, match its velocity.”

“Attention all craft,” Jared said into the radio, “This is the *Jupiter*. Reduce velocity to two hundred, twenty-eight thousand k.p.s.”

“It’s been missing for thirty years, and suddenly we come across it,” Sirah looked at Bethany without emotion. “Makes you wonder.”

“Probably just dumb luck,” said Bethany.

The *Jupiter*, the *Pegasus*, and the other ships of the convoy approached the *Cygnus*, who drifted on her side. Her habitation area was mostly spherical, pock-marked with six ovoid portholes arrayed around a central window in her bow—all dark. A carbon-steel superstructure contained the rest of her exterior-serviceable modules—canisters and tanks of sky blue and red—connected to her propulsion systems aft. A long, high-gain antenna projected from between the two sections, offsetting its dish from the center line by several dozen feet. A large red numeral four blazoned on its side was the most notable marking, being significantly larger than any of the other various affiliation and warning notices.

“NSC *Cygnus*,” Jared called over the radio, “this is the Earth ship *Jupiter* of the Mars Expeditionary Group. Do you read, over?”

Sirah and Bethany hovered breathlessly over the console, but heard only static.

“*Jupiter* calling NSC *Cygnus*,” Jared repeated. “Do you read, over?” Again, only static. Jared looked back at Sirah, eyebrows arched. “What do you think?”

“Their radio could be damaged,” said Sirah. “Prepare to capture and dock.” She turned to Bethany. “Maybe they need help. And if not, maybe they have the parts we need. Either way.”

Chapter 2

Bethany and Sirah, in their counter-pressure suits, made their way down the flexible companionway attached to the *Cygnus*'s airlock. The airlock door knocked and slid open, flooded the main cabin with a misty light, picked tantalizing half-shapes from the black. Only the weak flutter of the master alarm provided any reference point in the otherwise inky interior.

“It’s derelict, all right,” said Sirah. “Prepare an umbilical. We’ll draw power from the Jupiter.”

Outside the airlock, Paulo attached the power cables, locking them in place.

“Ready,” he said.

“Go ahead.” Sirah waited in the doorway as red emergency lights flickered back to life, revealed the moss-eaten skeletons of the crew: Captain Alistair Toundas, Navigator

Meg and Operations Officer Bart.

“Well,” she said, “that answers that.”

Bethany entered, and saw the bodies.

“Ugh!” she turned away, her helmet’s faceplate froze her response somewhere between covering her mouth and shielding her eyes. “How awful! What do you suppose happened?”

“I guess we’ll find out,” Sirah consulted her instruments. “The pressure’s normal - three psi. There’s atmosphere in here, but we’d better maintain quarantine protocol. We’ll de-contaminate everything once we get back.”

They kept their helmets on, somewhat relieved. None of them were really looking forward to the first whiff of stale, putrefied air.

“In the early days, we were in contact with the Mercury group,” Sirah told Bethany. “They didn’t share our beliefs, but they were good people. We lost contact, never knew what happened to them.”

“Guess they won’t mind if we salvage a piece or two,” Bethany said and frowned.

“Exhume, you mean,” Sirah indicated the corpses. “This ship is a graveyard.”

They were able to turn off the *Cygnus*'s master alarm and return it to normal lighting and function. They covered the corpses with mummy bags from the *Cygnus*'s crew cubbies, planning to bury them in space once they completed their work and got back underway. Afterwards, Sirah said a few words over them according to the Nazara belief system. They did not know or guess the deceased's, but their own were the only true beliefs. Those who did not follow the Way were beyond saving, but as Sirah said, last rights were for the living, not the dead.

Paulo looked over the food unit, ran diagnostics while Caesar, Bethany, Jared and Sirah disassembled panels and gathered crates to be floated through the flexible interconnecting tube to the *Jupiter*.

"It looks as though their algae became contaminated," Paulo told them. "It's still producing oxygen, but it's inedible."

"If the equipment's fouled up, this is all for nothing," said Caesar.

"No," Paulo examined the incubator with distaste as Sirah looked on, "it looks like a toxin was introduced into the system, maybe from something they brought on

board. The chemical compound acts like a hallucinogen. Absolutely poisonous.”

“Any dangerous fumes?” asked Sirah

“Prolonged exposure could cause paranoia,” Paulo said, “even psychosis, but I don’t think we’re in any immediate danger. According to their research here, they were primarily concerned with the fact the algae was inedible. They were probably killed by starvation more than mental breakdown.”

“That’s not consistent with the condition of these corpses,” Caesar looked up as he dismantled a nearby console. “The loss of tissue, and vital organs. They should be preserved, not so decomposed.

“I can’t explain it,” Paulo shrugged. “Good news is most of the equipment seems to be functioning. We can use these parts, long as we’re sure they’re sterilized properly.”

“All right,” Sirah waggled a screwdriver, “let’s get them disassembled. We’ll work in shifts. Paulo, Caesar and I will be first. Bethany, you and Jared wait on the *Jupiter*, and seal the hatches. I don’t want anyone exposed to this toxin any longer than necessary.”

Jared and Bethany exited with crates full of equipment, closed the hatch, and began the decontamination procedure.

“Okay, Paulo, what do we still need?” Sirah asked.

Paulo checked his list.

“Uh, ... the electrolic incubators, and their associated subsystems, Replacement optical circuitry, Photosynthetic stimulation terminals, three dehydration units, cyclotron, centrifuge and cellular magnifier, to start with.”

“A lot of other things here we could use,” said Caesar.

“I want to leave the *Cygnus* functional if we can,” Sirah said. “Added to our Bussard network, it should provide enough delta-v to justify bringing it along as a parts ship. Take only what we need to repair the *Pegasus* for now so we can purge the air and get underway.” She went to the airlock door, assured herself they were alone. “Before we get started, I asked you two to remain because I have something else to discuss with you.”

She keyed her intercom for a private group link. Paulo and Caesar shared a glance, but continued their work.

“The time of restitution is almost upon us, and Bethany has no mate. Her husband, *Rama-theos* through his marriage to her, died without an heir.”

“As her husband’s second,” said Paulo, “I’m next in line.”

“Agreed,” Sirah looked at them both, “you’re the *Rama-*

theos. It's your duty to continue the bloodline. But I wanted to address you both, because neither of you has performed the ritual in this capacity before. Do you understand your duties?"

For social stability in close quarters and to keep their numbers in check, as well as for religious reasons, every Nazara—even married couples—lived in absolute celibacy for all but one month of the year. Theirs had always been a monastic tradition, and the new environment changed nothing: the union of male and female adherents was solely for the purposes of procreation, and took place only according to strict guidelines.

"After our betrothal, we are to be joined on her days of fertility in the Twelfth Month," Paulo recited. "In the month of Aries, if she has conceived, we will officially wed. It is my sacred duty and obligation to continue the legacy of our Nazara ancestors."

Sirah turned to Caesar, who got to his feet.

"And as Paulo's first cousin, and next in line, you know what you must do?"

"Sirah," said Caesar, "her husband, our previous *Rama-theos*, was killed on the *Titan* just this year. Her period of mourning's barely up. She'll not welcome the idea of

another joining so soon.”

“I asked you a question, Son of Alphaeus,” Sirah’s eyes burned with the full authority of a Nazara priestess. She wasn’t used to being questioned, especially in spiritual matters. “Did you not hear?”

Caesar backed away, cowed.

“I’m to prepare the bride and groom,” he recited, “and attend them. I’m to act as *paranymph*—to witness and ensure the observance of ritual. I’m to arbitrate in the case of dispute. It’s my sacred duty and obligation to make certain the joining takes place as prescribed in the articles of the Way.”

“You realize, Caesar,” she said, “these duties are not at your discrimination. You have no choice in this matter, any more than Paulo, or Bethany herself. She may consider it a sacrifice, but she has made sacrifices before—as we all have.”

Paulo and Caesar looked at Sirah, a little shaken. She put an arm on Paulo’s shoulder.

“We’ll have a short anointing ceremony back on the *Jupiter*, and hopefully—in three months or so—we’ll make it official. And we’ll all have a laugh about this.”

Sirah turned back to the *Cygnus*'s controls.

“Let’s get these panels off.”

Two hours later, Jared and Bethany finished up their shift in the *Cygnus*'s control room and picked up their crates. Paulo and Caesar came in for their turns.

“That’s almost it,” said Bethany. “All we need are a few bits of the computer mainframe. The *Cygnus* can get along without them, and we’ll need them to repair the navigation system on the *Pegasus*.”

The ship’s computer was very similar to their own—essentially a neural network—an artificial intelligence made up of millions of massively parallel coprocessors operating in tandem. They were outdated even when they were installed, but they were bought on the cheap, and arranged for long-term stability—*not unlike the flotilla of ships itself*, Bethany thought, *and the people in it*.

Paulo and Caesar shared a look.

“Could you show me?” Paulo asked.

“Sure,” said Bethany, and they turned to scrutinize an interface. “The parts we need are behind this panel. Boards A,E, and F.”

“Okay,” Caesar reached for the panel, “I’ll just pull this off.”

A klaxon went off. They all jumped, looked about in confusion as master alarms lit up all over the ship.

“What’d you touch?” Paulo wanted to know.

“Nothing!” Caesar held up empty hands, palms out. “I haven’t done anything yet!”

“Ah-ah-ah!” a voice came over the ship’s speakers, “I didn’t give you permission to excise my wiry bits!”

“Who’s that?” Bethany asked the air.

A light on the nearby comm. panel blinked rapidly, drawing on massive amounts of data.

“I may not look like myself,” said the voice from the panel, “but I still feel like myself, and I’m still commander of this ship. You didn’t ask permission to come board, either. It’s not proper etiquette.”

“Oh my god—” Bethany choked in horror.

“Is this thing saying it’s supposed to be—” said Caesar.

“Alistair,” Bethany finished the thought.

“Bethany,” Paulo glared about the cabin, “this voice is

coming from the computer.”

“Strange, isn’t it,” said the synthesized voice, “to gaze upon one’s own mortality with ageless eyes. I’ve had a lot of time to think about it.”

They all turned to where his moss-eaten corpse peeked from behind the mummy bag covering it, lifeless.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions,” said Caesar. “This could be a recording, it could—”

“Don’t dehumanize me,” snapped the voice. “I’m not a recording, nor am I a program. Before my death, I was able to achieve a memory upload. I am Alistair Toundas, and the boards you require are a part of my systems. I can’t survive without them.”

“Alistair,” Bethany breathed, “if what you’re saying is true, you’ve achieved a kind of immortality. You’ve been all alone out here for thirty years.”

“And terribly lonely,” the voice agreed. “It’s nice to have someone to talk to again.”

“This proves nothing,” Paulo clenched his fists. “These could be automatic responses programmed to answer our queries, some kind of a sick joke. What proof do you have?”

“It was an experiment I was already in the midst of conducting,” the voice told them. “My notes are all in the database.”

“It’s true,” Bethany paced, “I read some of it when we downloaded the ship’s main memory to the *Jupiter* and the *Pegasus*. He was conducting an experiment on the advanced simulation of higher brain functions using the ship’s neural network.”

Paulo got close to Bethany, a hand on her shoulder. Caesar listened in on their channel.

“If this is some kind of virus and we downloaded this ship’s data,” he whispered, “then the *Jupiter* could be affected, too. There’s no telling what this thing is.”

“But Paulo,” Bethany bit her lip, “what if it’s true?”

“Even if it is true,” Caesar huddled with them, “he’s been out here thirty years by himself... can’t believe I’m saying this... in a computer. No telling what that’s done to him. There’s also no telling what ship’s systems he’s connected to. He’s used the master alarm to get our attention. He can obviously see where we are. We have to play along with it until we know where we stand.”

“What’re you saying?” asked the voice. “I can’t hear you.”

They looked over their shoulders, reacting to the voice.

“So you were starving to death,” Paulo said. “Did you eat any of the affected algae? What happened to Bart and Meg?”

“I wish you wouldn’t ask that!” said the voice.

“Why not?” asked Caesar.

“It’s not something I want to talk about,” the voice told them. “I have so many interesting things to say. You think of a lot in thirty years.”

“What happened to them, Alistair?” Bethany asked. “It’s okay, you can tell me.”

“When the algae went bad, they grew delusional,” said the voice. “We were cut off from our convoy. My experiment was the only hope. I wanted to save us all, but it wasn’t ready yet.” Bethany listened, sympathetic. “I had only modeled it using one consciousness, and even that was uncertain. So in order to survive until the program was ready I—”

“Go on,” Bethany prompted.

“I ate them,” said the voice.

“Oh god,” said Caesar.

Bethany gasped.

“But...” said the voice.

“Oh, Alistair,” said Bethany.

“You must understand!” said the voice. “You’re explorers! I did what I had to do to survive!”

“Be that as it may,” Paulo stalked to the panel they were about to dismantle, “you know our laws. What you did is unforgivable, and we’re unclean for even speaking to you—computer or no.”

Bethany moved to intercept him, but Paulo said,

“We need those boards.”

“Paulo,” said Bethany, “wait! This is a significant achievement, with specific bearings on our long-term viability. We have to study it. Our collective memory... we could do more than preserve the names of the angels, we could preserve the angels themselves.”

“Bethany, no.” Caesar held her back. “Alistair is hopelessly defiled... the man he was is already dead.”

Paulo dismantled the panel and tore the guts out of the computer.

“Please don’t do this,” said the voice. “There’s so much I

wanted to tell you.”

Paulo worked fast as he could.

“I warn you,” the voice continued, “if you don’t stop, I’ll be forced to take action.”

“Paulo, don’t be a fool!” Bethany struggled against Caesar’s grip, “We’ve seen what he can do!”

“It’s already done,” the voice told them. “I’m sorry it has to be this way, but the instinct for self determination exists in all life forms. I won’t give you the satisfaction of controlling my fate.”

Paulo stopped, examined the panels.

“What did he do?”

Caesar looked at the screen, saw something he didn’t like: the anti-matter array was powering up.

“He’s preparing to fire the engines.”

“Oh my god,” Bethany checked another display, “he’s already up to fifty-five cycles.”

“These are antimatter catalyzed fusion engines,” Caesar told them. “When he fires them, we don’t want our ships anywhere near.”

“I’m bleeding the air off, too,” said the voice. “I wish I had the pressurization to forcibly eject you, but then we can’t have everything we want, can we?”

Caesar dragged himself towards the passageway. Bethany floated aimlessly in shock, Paulo continued his work.

“Come on,” shouted Caesar, “we’ve got to get out of here! Paulo?”

“We’d never make it in time,” said Paulo, “We’ve got to shut it down from here.”

“I’m sorry, Bethany,” said the voice. “I think you and I might have been friends.”

“But you’ll be alone,” said Bethany.

“The void holds no terrors for me,” the voice told her. “I only regret that we couldn’t know each other better.”

The comm. panel went dead.

“Alistair...?” asked Bethany.

“Okay,” Paulo got the panel disassembled, “I’ve got it.” He singled out a wire and stared at it, sweating.

“Damn,” he said, decided, and cut one. On a nearby readout, the warm-up continued.

Eighty-eight cycles. Eighty-nine.

“Damn!” Paulo panicked.

Aboard the *Jupiter*, Jared got Sirah’s attention.

“Sirah,” he said, “I’m getting some very disturbing readings from the *Cygnus*.”

“What?” Sirah leaned over his console. At that very moment, Caesar, Bethany and Paulo clawed their way out of the tunnel and into the *Jupiter*’s main compartment. Paulo slammed the airlock shut, detached the umbilical, and retracted the crawlway.

“Sirah,” shouted Bethany, “we’ve got to get out of here. The *Cygnus* is firing her engines in less than three minutes!”

Sirah grabbed Bethany.

“What did you do?”

“No time to explain,” said Bethany, “it was Alistair! What can we do?”

“Get me the group,” Sirah said to Jared.

“Go ahead,” Jared connected the other five ships.

“M.E.G., this is the *Jupiter*,” said Sirah. “We’ve got an

emergency situation. We need you to burn your engines at maximum gamma along our current vector. Don't ask questions, just go. We'll reestablish contact later."

Sirah turned to face the *Pegasus* crew, who wasted no time in slipping on their suits.

"You'd better get to your ship," she told them.

The engines on the *Jupiter* fired, and it rocketed away. The crew of the *Pegasus* floated towards their ship.

Back aboard, they dove into their acceleration couches. The *Pegasus'* engines fired, G forces crushed them into their seats.

"Why do you think he let us fire the engine and get away?" Paulo asked.

"Maybe you were right," said Caesar, "maybe he did transfer aboard the *Jupiter*. Maybe he was making his own escape."

"Or maybe he didn't think we'd be able to escape anyway," said Bethany, and she laughed. Softly at first, then it turned into a full grown guffaw of bitter irony. Paulo and Caesar tried to ignore it, but the sound was maddening.

“What is it?” Paulo asked, irritated.

“I just realized that we didn’t take the repair parts from the *Jupiter*,” said Bethany.

Caesar and Paulo looked at each other in shock.

Outside, a tremendous anti-matter explosion rocked them and sent the *Pegasus* careening off course at relativistic speed. The stars bent around their line of travel.

Chapter 3

The *Pegasus* drifted sideways through the Doppler effect—stars shifted red behind them, blue in front.

“Paulo tried to raise the other ships on the radio. Caesar and Bethany slept in their couches.

“M.E.G., this is the *Pegasus*. Do you read, over?”

Static answered.

“This is the *Pegasus*,” said Paulo. “Is anybody out there?”

Caesar stirred, eyes half open.

“If they’re not in range now,” he said, “you can assume they’re not going to be any time soon. Not in our lifetimes, anyway. The range is, what, half a light year?”

“Yeah,” Paulo closed the radio out, “but that’s the least of our worries.”

“Do we have power?” asked Caesar.

“Why don’t you take a second to wake up?” Paulo chuckled.

“Okay,” Caesar grinned. “Sorry, I can feel it now.”

Bethany stirred, wincing at the others as the cabin swam into view.

“Are we dead?” she asked. Paulo unbuckled and floated out of his couch.

“No,” said he.

“Too bad,” she answered. Caesar and Bethany unbuckled too.

“What are you talking about?” said Caesar. “We made it!”

“Only to die slow and revert to barbarism,” said Bethany. “Just like Alistair.”

“We’re not going to be like Alistair!” Caesar shouted. “We just have to—”

“How do you plan to avoid it?” Bethany interrupts. “We have no food. Unless we eat the last of our algae, in which case we have no air. Either way, we’re going to end up just like—”

KINGS OF HEAVEN

“No!” said Paulo. “Just forget Alistair. There’s another way out of this, we just have to find it.”

“Any word from the other ships?” asked Bethany.

“No,” said Paulo.

Caesar and Bethany shared a look. Paulo, father away, missed it.

“Well, we’re running out of time up here,” said Caesar. “There’s only one option I can think of.”

“What?” asked Paulo.

“Planet-fall,” Bethany saw where Caesar was going.

“You can’t be serious,” Paulo floated over to them.

“It’s the only way,” said Bethany.

“It’s not an option!” shouted Paulo.

Caesar and Bethany rounded on Paulo.

“It wasn’t an option when we were with the convoy,” said Caesar, “but now—”

“Who’s to know?” said Bethany.

“That’s not our mission,” Paulo insisted.

“There is a precedent,” Caesar reminded them. “The

Vulcan had to ditch in our parent's time. It was the second ship we lost. Their scram-scoop failed and they couldn't keep up. It was deemed their best chance for survival."

"It was what the *Cygnus* had decided, too," Bethany said, "before—"

"But this is different," said Paulo. "The *Vulcan* wasn't carrying the heir. We don't know if the others got away. We may be the only ones left to complete the mission to HD 11232."

"Damn HD 11232," said Caesar, "this is life or death."

"The mission is the purification of humanity before it destroys itself," said Paulo. "That's life or death too!" Paulo floated to the broken Navi-comp, Caesar hovered behind him as he continued, "Look, where are we? The Gacrux system from the last reckoning, yes?"

"If the projections were reliable," said Caesar.

Paulo turned, gestured at the screen.

"There's nothing for ten light years around!"

"Nothing we know of," Bethany said. "The region isn't well mapped. We'll just have to look, see what we can find."

“If we decelerate now,” Paulo leaned on the console, “we’ll lose all chance of reuniting with the others.”

“We don’t even know if the others survived the explosion,” said Caesar. “We can’t contact them.”

“All the more reason to continue towards HD 11232 and look for other options,” said Paulo.

“Now we’re talking in circles.”

“Paulo,” Bethany spoke up, “we’re not going to make it to HD 11232, that’s a fact. Our ship is crippled. Even if we could repair it, we have a breeding pool of three, and we’re still decades away. That’s not a thought I relish.”

“There are others out here,” Paulo gestured out the viewport, his hand shaking. “There must be others.”

“In this eventuality,” said Bethany, “the second mission objective becomes prevalent: preserve the Nazara bloodline. We can’t do that up here. We have to set down now, before it’s too late. We’ll make our own homeland and hope to reunite with the rest of the Nazara in the future. It’s about survival now.”

“So it begins,” said Paulo.

“What does?” Caesar asked.

“The descent into sin,” Paulo told them. “The moment we start throwing away mission objectives for personal convenience, we become less than human, unworthy of the name Nazara.”

“That’s crazy, Paulo,” said Caesar. “This isn’t about convenience. It’s about our only chance for survival. You know we have to.”

“But we could find an asteroid,” said Paulo, “a rogue comet, something—”

“Paulo, come on,” said Caesar. “That won’t help us now.”

Paulo turned away.

“It will take weeks,” he said, “and expend all our available fuel. Once at non-relativistic speeds, we can’t re-engage the scram-scoop. It’s a one way ticket.”

“Even if we live that long,” Bethany told him, “our chances of finding anything are nil.”

“But we have to try,” Caesar agreed. “It’s the best chance we’ve got. We’ll have to work on ways to maximize our nutrition and air supply.”

“There were some experiments David, my husband, was working on,” Bethany said. “We might be able to replenish the atmosphere by electrolyzing the insulating fluid. It’s

not much, but it may help stretch our available oxygen reserves.”

“Worth a try,” said Caesar.

Paulo sat down on his couch.

“What effect will the g-forces have on algae production?”

“Have our genetic modifications really protected us from bone and tissue degradation?” Caesar looked over at him with sympathy. “There’s only one way to find out. Turn us around, Paulo.”

Bethany touched Paulo’s arm.

“Go ahead, Paulo,” she said. “It’s the only way.”

Paulo looked beyond the stars as he toggled the thrusters.

“God have mercy on me,” he said.

He pitched the ship around, fired its engines. It flew backward, the reverse thrust beginning to slow it down.

The gravity was heavy on board now. Paulo and Caesar sat at the controls.

“I’m hungry,” said Paulo.

“Had your ration same as me,” said Caesar.

“Listen,” Paulo turned to him, “I’ve been thinking about the joining.”

“What about it?” asked Caesar.

“The twelfth month is almost here,” Paulo continued. “Do you think it’ll even be possible at two gees?”

Caesar scratched the back of his head.

“I don’t know if that’s a very good idea, Paulo.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think we should focus on the issue at hand,” Caesar told him. “Think of the energy consumption.”

“I don’t believe what I’m hearing,” Paulo fumed. “First planet-fall and now this. Have you all forgotten who you are? Just because things look bleak you can’t give up on your beliefs! Where’s your faith?”

“This isn’t about beliefs, Paulo,” said Caesar. “We can continue the Nazara dynasty if and when we survive planet-fall. My faith requires all my faculties. I can’t afford to lose yours.”

“Caesar, the time is now,” said Paulo. “We’re still decelerating. Who knows which of us might be killed. We

have to maintain the schedule.”

“Paulo,” Caesar shook his head, “we’re probably going to die anyway. Why put her through this? What’s the point?”

“Because what if we do succeed, Caesar? What if we survive and we *haven’t* been faithful? What do we do then?”

“Your devotion is commendable,” said Caesar, “but poorly timed. Let’s say we do survive, and Bethany does conceive? Then we have a child to deal with, and what if no planet can be found? Who stops eating to support the baby, you? Me?”

“God will provide,” said Paulo, “He has thus far.”

“God will...” Caesar groaned, “didn’t he provide you with any common sense? Who will we foster it to? You’d condemn an infant to a life without a future?”

“Who can see the future?” asked Paulo. “Perhaps it’s God’s will that she *doesn’t* conceive, but God has given us a sacred duty. Not tomorrow, not when it’s convenient, or when it makes sense. Time is crucial. It’s the time of restitution for Bethany and I. Will you perform your duty as *paranymph*? Will you help me, brother?”

“I understand what you’re saying,” Caesar looked away.

“So you’ll help?” Paulo asked.

“We should talk to Bethany,” said Caesar.

“And if she refuses?” Bethany’s terse voice startled them. They turned to face her, uncertain how long she’d been there.

“She won’t,” said Paulo, “she’ll do her duty as a woman of the Nazara Unity should.”

“In case you lost track, Paulo,” said Bethany, “there isn’t a Unity anymore, only a broken incubator.”

She stormed out.

“She’s wrong, brother,” Paulo told Caesar, “we’re still His Unity. She’ll come around, and follow the Way as we do. We can’t give up hope.”

Bethany was on her knees in the storage room, her palms on the deck. Her spine sagged in the weight of two gees. Drops of sweat covered her glistening body and fell heavy on the floor.

“God of all space-time,” she prayed, “You have everything. You set the planets spinning. Your fingers trace the curve of the universe. You have my husband. Must you take my dignity also?” Her eyes traced the ceiling. “We were taught to always seek your will, and if you ask it I’ll obey,” her

face darkened, “but never ask more.”

She glanced behind her, saw Paulo in the doorway. She turned away from him.

During the dozen decades their people had spent in space, the role of *paranymph* had evolved from a ceremonial attendant and dispassionate spokesperson to an essential component of the mating act itself. Cinematic fantasies aside, coupling was awkward and difficult in freefall—finding the appropriate leverage without the aid of specialized equipment was problematic. Nothing about the human sexual response, from perspiration to bloodflow, worked normally when gravity was absent.

As for what happened afterwards, genetic engineering prevented problems with fetal development. But to get that far, while providing witness to dynastic observances and preserving everyone’s monastic dignity, the colonists had discovered the most expedient tool was the *paranymph*.

None of this mattered now they were at full deceleration gravity; an opportunity as unique in the current generation’s experience as its opposite had been for the rest of humanity’s tenure.

In the tight confines of her cubby, Caesar placed a sacred

robe on Bethany. Its semi-transparent, algae-silk fabric hung lifeless in the heavy gravity.

“It’s sort of funny,” Bethany said. “All the things we lost, but we have plenty of ritual garments.”

“Shame we can’t eat them,” said Caesar. “I’d gladly put them in the oxidizer if the incubators still...” Bethany turned back to look at him, Caesar gave her a weak smile.

She had bathed with a washcloth, as was her habit, because the colonists had long ago discovered that showering, drying off and cleaning up in microgravity was more trouble than it was worth. *In the heavy gravity, I could have taken a fabled shower*, she realized too late. It hadn’t even occurred to her. *Maybe afterwards*, she consoled herself.

“You think once will be enough?” Caesar asked.

“It’ll have to be,” said Bethany. “Once allows God his chance to work a miracle, if that’s his will.”

“You are prepared, bride of the succession,” Caesar told her. “Do you understand your duties?”

“I’ve done this before, Caesar,” she said. “Luckily we only go through it once a year.”

“I’m just trying to do things properly—”

“Shut up and take me in there,” Bethany interrupted, “let’s get it over with.”

Caesar handed her a small vial of oil.

“Good enough,” he said.

They plodded against the increased gravity down the crawlway towards Paulo’s cubby. He knelt by his mummy bag which he’d wadded into a nest on the floor. Caesar led Bethany over to the nest.

“You look lovely, Bethany,” said Paulo.

“Wipe that grin off your face,” Bethany told him, and dabbed a bit of oil on his head. “I anoint you, Son of Alpheus—the succession,” she said. “May you sow a child in me and become our *Icthyis*, true king of the Nazara.” She sat down. “Try not to drool on me, would you?”

Paulo persevered, looking ashamed but aroused, and approached her.

“Since we have gravity,” Caesar said, “I’m going to—”

Caesar turned away and left the room, but the sounds followed him: the soft noises Paulo made in anticipation and Bethany in uncomfortable forbearance.

Caesar sat in his couch in the control room and stared at the stars. Even at these speeds, they didn't drift, streak, dance or even twinkle. None of the things stars were proverbially purported to do; nothing, in fact, except the perceptible blueshift ahead of them, and red behind. If he were to remark on one thing about them, if he hadn't observed it for so much of his life as to take it entirely for granted, the stark immobility was their most amazing feature—the absolute, ego-crushing eternity of them. They were more eternal by a wide margin than any transient thing that had flickered into existence because of them. They simply were.

And yet, as incandescently unchangeable as they were, they could still surprise him. A warning light on the panel lit up. Caesar looked at it open-mouthed. It could mean only one thing: in the vastest tracts of emptiness there had ever been, they'd come in range of a suitable planet.

“It's a miracle,” he breathed.

He hit a few keys on the interface, checked the chemical compounds, the gravity. It all looked... perfect. He started to get up, hesitated, sat back down. He got up, paced, trying not to listen to the two voices growing more audibly frantic in the background. Planetary approach, all the various procedures they'd simulated and trained for,

came flooding back to him. He couldn't do it alone, and the window of opportunity was closing.

Still looking at the screen, he backed towards the crawlway, and lunged through the bulkhead into Paulo's cubby.

"It's a miracle!" he said, "Paulo, Bethany, come look! You've got to see it!"

"What do you think you're doing, Caesar?" Paulo looked over his shoulder, livid. His naked buttocks hovered in uncertainty. Bethany lay on the floor, her eyes red and puffy.

"It's a planet capable of supporting life," Caesar continued. "We have to increase the deceleration to approach its gravity well."

"Can't it *wait*?" said Paulo. "Have you even checked it in the guide? Is it safe?"

"Yes," Caesar couldn't decide whether to look away or not. "I mean, no! It has to be right now, or we'll miss it. I need you both at the controls. We have a lot of procedures to go through."

"Get out of here, Caesar," said Paulo.

"No, Paulo, you're not thinking clearly. As *paranymph*, I

interrupt the ceremony.”

“You can’t do that,” said Paulo.

“Yes I can, and you know it,” Caesar pulled Paulo off Bethany. “Get your clothes on, let’s go!”

Paulo shrugged Caesar’s arm off and punched him in the face—knocked Caesar off balance. Blood squirted out Caesar’s nose.

“Paulo!” Bethany screamed.

Paulo leapt on Caesar, strangled him.

“Paulo, stop!” gasped Caesar. He put his foot on Paulo’s shoulder, shoved him back. “Crazy bastard!”

Caesar fell out of the cubby and headed down the crawlway for the control room. Blood poured from his nose. Paulo and Bethany charged after him.

“Stop it!” Bethany shouted.

Paulo tackled Caesar, and they careened across the cabin onto the control deck. Paulo landed on Caesar’s back, drove him face first into the ships’ control surfaces. Buttons came loose, the *Pegasus*’s thrusters misfired, the ship pitched out of control.

Caesar and Paulo grappled. Paulo had a fistful of Caesar’s

hair.

Caesar pushed Paulo's chin, tried to break free as Paulo tried to trap Caesar's head in the control deck's spinning support struts.

Bethany picked up a piece of heavy spare conduit.

"Hey!" she swung hard, contacted Paulo's skull with a dull thwack. Paulo sprawled, and crumpled in a heap against the console.

"Stop it, now!" she shouted. "I swear I will cave both your heads in, because we are headed right for that planet and we are all going to die if we don't get decelerated and pressurized!"

"What are you trying to do," Paulo held his head, "sabotage the bloodline?"

Bethany glared down at him, incredulous.

"Paulo, are you crazy? You're acting paranoid!"

"Maybe it's the hallucinogen from the *Cygnus*," Caesar righted himself. "Maybe it's affected us more than we thought."

Paulo glared back, injured in more ways than one.

"Impossible," he said. "The *Cygnus*'s research showed

negligible effects from exposure. Ingestion was the problem.”

“That was thirty years ago,” said Bethany, “who knows how it could have changed since then?”

“And don’t forget,” said Caesar, “they were already exposed to it when they wrote those reports. We didn’t have time for de-con—maybe if you’d abandoned ship when I told you to.”

Bethany looked at Caesar as if for the first time.

“Maybe we didn’t see Alistair’s ghost at all!” she gasped, “Maybe you just panicked and blew up the ship!”

“Wait a second,” said Caesar, “you were there, you heard the voice same as the rest of us!”

They eyed each other warily.

“I don’t know what I heard. I don’t know what to think about any of this.”

“Maybe you’re *both* crazy now!” said Paulo.

“Hold it!” said Caesar, “We can’t go doubting each other. Whatever this is, we’ve all been exposed to it, so we’re all feeling it. No one’s more crazy than anybody else.”

“I’m not crazy!” Paulo insisted.

“Okay, okay,” said Caesar, “but right now we’ve got a ship to land or this whole discussion is moot. Let’s just get down there while we have the chance, and we can sort out who’s crazy and who’s not afterwards, okay?”

The other two avoided his gaze.

“Paulo,” Caesar continued, “could you take the chair while I help Bethany? You know the procedure better than anyone. I’ll be with you in just a second.”

“I’ll kill you for this,” Paulo got close enough to Caesar to breathe in his face.

“Maybe,” said Caesar, “but if you want to live, you’ll have to get us down to the planet first.”

Caesar helped Bethany back down the crawlway to her cubby.

“You okay?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” said Bethany. “Don’t worry about me.”

“I’m sorry,” Caesar told her. “I hope you know I was just performing my duty. I didn’t like it. I didn’t think it was right.”

“Didn’t stop you, did it?” said Bethany.

“I know, I know,” Caesar said, “but if we’re going to

survive we have to trust each other. You know that don't you? We're going to be on a hostile planet, and it looks like we'll have to keep an eye on him." Caesar nodded in Paulo's direction.

"It's not that easy, Caesar," said Bethany.

"I know," he said, "I'm sorry, but we have to keep it together, all right? Just think about it?" Bethany looked back at him, said nothing. "All right," Caesar conceded, "I'm going."

Caesar limped back to the control deck, collapsed in his couch next to Paulo, and caught his breath. The two men faced forward, a long tense silence pervading.

"Planet-fall," Paulo finally mused aloud. "After all these years in space."

Caesar looked at him sideways.

"My grandfather told me stories about planet life," he said. "I never thought I'd live to see it."

"Well, this is it," said Paulo. "Choice of necessity. The Nazara's glorious new home among the stars is a nameless rock light-years from nowhere. Not the landfall our ancestors had in mind, I assure you."

Bethany entered the room, back in her everyday coveralls.

“At this point,” she said, “anything is acceptable.”

Bethany sank into her couch.

“Pressure’s reaching twenty-five psi to match the planet,” Caesar turned to Paulo. “How’re the maneuvering jets? Giving you any trouble?”

“I’ll manage,” he said. “Better strap yourselves in, we’re approaching reentry.”

“Are you sure you can do this?” Caesar asked.

“We’ve simulated it often enough,” said Paulo. “I just hope the program was accurate.”

“Our ancestors got us this far,” said Caesar. “Let’s not disappoint them.”

“If the hull breaches have compromised our integrity,” Paulo said, “there may not be much I can do about it.”

“Let’s just land this thing,” said Bethany, “okay?”

“Hold on,” Paulo told them, “we’re entering the atmosphere.”

Barely under control, the tiny ship careened towards the planet’s surface.

Chapter 4

The sun blasted an alien wilderness, glinted off the wreck of the *Pegasus*. Tumbleweeds and scrub brush dotted the terrain.

Caesar pulled boxes from the wreckage and stacked them outside, wobbly on space-bred legs. Bethany lay exhausted by a large rock. Paulo scowled at the horizon.

Caesar flopped beside Bethany.

“Moving around in this pressure isn’t as exhausting as the two gees on the ship, but still. How many times Earth-normal you think it is?”

“One-point-five,” said Bethany, “maybe one-point-seven. Even Earth-normal would be an effort for us, of course, after three generations in space. Our genetic modifications keep us re-adaptable to planet life, but they don’t make it easy.” She took a deep breath, “It’s hard to get used to,

isn't it?"

"What is?" asked Caesar.

"That there's no end to it," Bethany looked around her. "The air, I mean. I've never spent a day in my life not worried about air. Now it's the least of my worries."

Paulo joined them.

"She's a total loss," he said of the *Pegasus*. "We have shelter, some rations, a little equipment, but all our self-sustaining systems have been compromised. We'll have to forage to survive. God is punishing us."

"We're lucky to be alive, Paulo," Bethany looked up at him, shaded her eyes, "and when it comes right down to it—alive or dead, here's as good as anywhere."

"You're wrong," Paulo sneered at her. "We should've died in space."

Bethany jumped up, angry.

"Then why didn't you just crash us into the planet's surface, you bleeding martyr? You wanna die so bad?"

"Only God can choose our fate," Paulo glared at Bethany.

"Well then let him choose, and stop being so damned morose or we're going to cook you over our campfire."

“I don’t think it’ll come to that,” said Caesar. “I think I saw a city to the east not too far from here. I say we secure the camp, and then make our way down there for a look.”

“To what purpose?” asked Paulo.

“To trade supplies,” said Caesar, “get information. Try to get along. Maybe to get back into space if we can.”

“Oh sure,” Paulo looked at him with disgust. “Blend in. Get lost.” He leered at Bethany, “Interbreed.”

“Well, we can’t just stay up here in the mountains,” said Caesar.

“Why not?” asked Bethany.

“We don’t know the flora or the fauna of this planet,” Caesar told her. “If the guide was working, and our diagnostic equipment, maybe, but right now all we’ve got to bargain with is what’s left of the *Pegasus*. We have to meet these people on our terms before they find us and take it from us.”

“And what of the Nazara?” Paulo rounded on Caesar, “Do we become the junk traders of the galaxy? Do we peddle our broken down heritage in every shanty town in the inhabited universe?”

“As of right now,” said Caesar, “the Nazara Unity is us.”

That's all. If we're to have any hope of carrying on the line and finding our promised land, we'll do what we have to do to survive."

"I'm the anointed *Ichthys*," Paulo told them. "We'll do as I think best."

Paulo, Caesar and Bethany crossed a ridge overlooking a valley where, to their amazement, an alien city shone on the flatland below a tall desert mountain. From this distance it was impossible to distinguish anything about its character, or what kind of people might inhabit it, but it was undoubtedly alive and moving.

"You see, Paulo?" said Caesar. "Civilization!"

They stopped to rest, set down their improvised packs.

"The sun's approaching its zenith," said Paulo. "We should turn back soon, if we're returning to the campsite before nightfall."

Bethany wiped her brow with the back of her hand.

"This part of the planet is hot and dry," she agreed. "It's likely to get cold at night. If it takes us longer than half a day to get to the city, we'll need to be prepared for a longer trip."

KINGS OF HEAVEN

Caesar saw something over their shoulders, an indistinct movement. Perhaps it was the over-caution of the unprotected explorer, or perhaps some primitive part of his brain interpreted it as potentially hostile. Whichever it was, he hissed,

“Get down!”

Without question, the other two followed his lead. They dashed behind a ridge, and looked to Caesar for an explanation. “Movement!” he gestured, breathless. “Just below us.”

They peered over the ridge through a pair of ancient binoculars. A group of men in ragged clothes, stripped to the waist, worked in a massive construction site that ran into the distance. They hadn’t noticed the turned earth due to the incline of the ridge, and the ruggedness of the volcanic terrain—fresh rocks all looked alike.

“They’re human—” Bethany breathed. “Most of them, anyway.”

“They’re out this far from the city,” Paulo looked at Bethany and Caesar, “is our ship secure?”

“Wait a second,” said Bethany, “something’s changing. They’ve stopped working, now they’ve lined up.”

They looked through the binoculars again. The men had indeed stopped working and formed a line, their eyes on the ground.

“They seem fearful,” said Bethany, “almost as if they’re expecting punishment.”

“Like prisoners,” said Paulo.

“But if they’re prisoners,” said Caesar, “where are the guards?”

A shadow fell over them, and they turned around.

Two massive aliens, who had affected an almost soundless approach, trapped them against the ridge. They were about seven feet tall each. Their exoskeletons bristled with hair, tinged with markings of brilliant red and black. They brandished poisonous appendages, closed in with a grating, popping noise. They had no eyes, and seemed to move by sense of smell.

The creatures herded Caesar, Paulo and Bethany towards the other humanoids, but kept them separate. More aliens flew in to join their captors, tucking their iridescent wings behind beetle-like enclosures.

One—with more distinctive markings than the rest—approached them, stinger ready, and cycled their scent.

“Which one speaks for you?” it rattled with a note of clear distaste.

Caesar, Paulo, and Bethany looked at each other in confusion. It was speaking Standard.

“Which one is your *leader*?”

“I am,” Paulo said quickly.

Before Caesar or Bethany could respond, two aliens seized Paulo roughly between them, spread their wings, and leapt off at high speed, Paulo suspended between them. The remaining guards herded Caesar and Bethany in with the rest of the humanoids and forced them to march toward the shimmering city in the distance.

As the detail trudged miserably down the dusty track, another prisoner shuffled near to Caesar and Bethany.

“I was in the Mercury Expeditionary Group,” he whispered. “Name’s Maj. We were ambushed. My ship crashed here, but there were others that escaped. Have you heard any news from them?”

“The Mercury Group,” Caesar shared a look with Bethany, “Alistair’s convoy. We ran across his ship shortly before crashing here. It was derelict.”

“They didn’t make it,” Bethany told him.

“We were from the Mars group,” adds Caesar.

“*Mars...*” Maj gasped, “the Nazara? I’m sorry, my lords, I didn’t know you were of the blood.”

“You know the beliefs of our Unity?” asked Bethany.

“Know them...” Maj grinned, “I’m a Jenda convert. The Unity has great influence here. Our leader—uh, *Jocab*—is formerly of the Mars Group. *Jocab!*” he signaled an older slave, “My lord, kinsmen of yours!”

Two more prisoners—a dour, hard middle-aged man and an older patriarch—shuffled over to them, and took a long look at Caesar.

“This is Nadnael, our *Jocab*” Maj indicated the younger man, “and Lebedeas, our camp physician. The harvesters don’t know human anatomy, they don’t even try.”

Lebedeas blinked at Caesar as though distinguishing between gold and pyrite.

“...Caesar?” Recognition crossed the old man’s face. “It must be!” Lebedeas embraced him. “Who could mistake those features? I knew your father, boy! I was on the *Vulcan*.”

“And Bethany,” Nadnael smiled. “Your mother, Jerbezel, was the most beautiful woman in the heavens. You look just like her.”

“The *Vulcan*?” asked Bethany, “But my lord, that can’t be. We lost the *Vulcan* decades ago.”

“Don’t ‘my lord’ me,” said Nadnael. “I was from a secondary family. Your father was in line for the succession.”

“But the time—” said Caesar.

“With God, all things are possible,” Nadnael told them. “And the one they took?”

“Paulo,” Caesar shook his head, “our *Ichthys*—”

“*Rama-theos*,” Bethany corrected. “He was anointed, but we didn’t... he didn’t complete the...”

“I understand, my dear,” Nadnael nodded. “This is wonderful. Not for you, of course, but we have no one of the primary bloodline—no Sons of Alphaeus here to become the *Zadok*. As a cousin, I can only be *Jocab*. You two will be a great boost in morale.”

That night, Caesar and Bethany laid by the fire in the

labor camp after the forced march. Some of the prisoners, two younger men, gave them water.

“My sons, Geem and Zon,” Maj introduced the two, “by my wife Salome. She’s back in the city. We took Unity names on our conversion.”

“It’s an honor to meet you, my lord and lady,” said Zon.

“For us as well,” Bethany gave him a sad smile.

They watched a lifter carry the wreckage of the *Pegasus* overhead.

“There are parts of this planet that are nice, I hear.” said Maj. “We’re near the equator, building a mass driver to put ships in orbit.”

“Be glad you weren’t here when we were working on the tunnel,” said Geem. “We had four tunneling machines, and we still spent nearly two years underground.”

“At least now we’re out in the sun,” Zon agreed.

“Surprised to see you pinched by the harvesters, my lord,” Lebedeas said to Caesar. “Nigh on fifty years since we seen anyone new come through here. Figured they was done sendin’ up rocket ships. Guess the ol’ harvesters’re just losin’ their touch, beggin’ your pardon.”

“Harvesters?” Caesar asked. “But that would put us in the Procyon system. Eleven and a half light-years from Earth!”

“Yup,” said Lebedeas. “Imagine the disappointment—planning to be generations in space—only to get bushwhacked twenty years in, before you really even get going. Guess you can though, huh?”

“But our last course projection,” Caesar shook his head, “put us over a hundred twenty years from Earth. Did we get turned around somewhere? How is that possible?”

“We were hit by a shell,” Bethany said, “middle of nowhere. Was it ‘cause we’re near Procyon?”

“Lotta men went up fighting for their lives out there, so they say,” Maj told them. “The harvesters use relativistic ammunition. Hit you ‘fore you know they’ve fired. Probably plenty of those still floating around.”

“Miracle it would hit us light years away,” said Caesar, “then we wind up here.”

“Who knows,” said Lebedeas, “space is curved. Anything can happen.”

“Nadnael, what’ll happen to Paulo?” Bethany asked.

“Torture,” Nadnael shook his head. “Experiments, most likely. They’ll kill him, revive him and torture him some

more. Have a machine for that. Revives the body, but leaves the mind blank, like an infant child, so I hear. We never see the ones in charge again.”

“My god,” gasped Caesar. “Why?”

“Take the cream off the top,” said Nadnael. “It’s survival of the mediocre here. Work and you live. Stand out, you disappear.”

More and more workers joined the circle, and Maj continued to make introductions. He pointed out Mevi, a priest, and Sikar—a dark, dangerous-looking, probably violent man. Caesar looked around at them in amazement.

“Word spreads fast, about who you are,” Maj said, following his gaze. “They want to hear your story.”

“Same as all of you,” said Caesar. “We were out there. Now we’re here.”

“But you were out there longest of anyone,” said Mevi. “We never made it so far.”

“They know about the *Rama-theos*,” Maj told Bethany, “but although the *Jocab* has shared some of your mysteries with the acolytes, they don’t really understand the reason for the succession.”

“We shouldn’t...” Bethany looked to Caesar.

“It’s a new world, Beth,” he scratched his chin, “new chance. If we’re going to make the most of it, we need support.”

“Then you tell them,” she deferred, “you’re the—”

“No,” Caesar disagreed. “Not until we know what happened to Paulo. Until then, you’re the priestess. It’s your place.”

Bethany nodded, gathered her thoughts.

“You’ve no doubt heard of Jeez of Nazara,” Bethany told the assembled group. “Well, Nazara wasn’t a town he was from, it was a title. He was our *Rama-theos*, or crown prince in the Egyptian tradition—a holdover from the time of Meses—and heir to the Daviic succession: his eldest male descendant, dedicated to God and the service of his people.”

“Daviic, the Jewish king?” asked Lebedeas.

“Memory is long with my people,” Bethany told him. “We call everyone in his lineage Sons of Aplhaeus—the first king. Our Unity, the Nazara, have preserved his succession and the names of the angels in our hierarchy from the time of the Babylonian captivity. Yeshua—as Jeez was known before the Greeks and those that came after corrupted his name—was a part of our Unity. He believed

we shouldn't live in secret, tried to bring us into the outer world before our time. And so: chaos, disorder, years of corrupt misguided rule."

"So you're Khrischins?" asked Sikar.

"No," said Bethany, "theirs is the misguided rule I mentioned. We used to be Judes, but our concept of the almighty has evolved since we moved out into the inhabited universe. Now we are simply the Nazara Unity—seeking a new planet to start over, and evolve free of religious persecution."

"You claim to be descended from Jeez?" said Sikar, speaking as Devil's Advocate for the benefit of the acolytes. "Sounds like blasphemy."

It was around the time of the Babylonian captivity, among the neighboring people who brought it to an end, that Zoroaster devised Terra's first genuinely duelist creed. It was no coincidence this is also when the modern Pentateuch crystallized, which was why the Nazara beliefs forbade the books of Meses—they believed he received laws, but not as the Tor preserved.

Zoroaster was perhaps the first person to describe the universe as a constant battle between spirits of light and darkness, and to say the way to the light required following

a long and arduous path of conflict. In the time of the Daviic kings, so the modern priesthood claimed, the *Zadok* was considered the proponent of light.

Just as the spirit of light had its representative on earth, the chief scribe was appointed to represent the spirit of darkness. It was an appointment held by the chief of scribes to provide a formal “opposition,” ensuring every differing perspective was given voice.

“That’s what the church said,” Bethany told them. “Many legends and misnomers have grown up around Yeshua, but the truth is he was a man. A powerful and compelling man, by all accounts, but of course he was a man.”

“Occam’s razor,” Maj agreed, “the simplest answer is usually the correct one.”

“He was a Nazara—a member of our Unity,” Bethany continued, “who left an indelible mark on history. When he married Mary Magdalene, a Nazara priestess, he became our fully anointed *Ichthys*—our Fisher, a kind of priest-king. They had a son according to our Unity rules of succession. We hid the child away, fearful of the retribution Yeshua’s teachings would bring down on us. Though he was eventually killed for his teachings, the line was preserved.”

“And you’re part of that line?” asked Sikar.

“There have been many men and women of Nazara,” said Bethany, “priests and priestesses brought up by our Unity to pass on the royal blood. If our captured shipmate Paulo—who is *Rama-theos*—is killed by the harvesters, then the succession passes to his first cousin,” she indicated, “Caesar of Nazara.”

The crowd murmured.

“I have to admit,” Lebedeas told her, “we lost faith. When we had to set down on this rock, we thought maybe our ideas about God were wrong. Now that you’re here, I—”

“We’re ready to serve you, my lord,” Geem told Caesar.

“Harvesters crush religion,” said Sikar, “and leaders. You know that.”

“But the *Rama-theos* in our camp...” Zon spoke up, “it’s a miracle. A sign.”

“I’m not *Rama-theos* yet,” said Caesar. “I can’t give up on saving Paulo.”

“You must,” said Nadnael. “You think we haven’t tried to save our leaders, or discover what became of them? His fate, while horrible, is out of our hands.”

“He’s a slave like any other,” Sikar sneered at Caesar. “We must look to our own salvation.”

“You forget, Sikar,” said Lebedeas, “I knew his father. He won’t stay a slave for long. The *Rama-theos* is our salvation.”

The old man painfully rose from the ground, and formally bent his knee to Caesar. The crowd whispered assent and many followed suit.

Nadnael frowned and left the circle. Mevi followed him, and stood at the edge of the firelight.

“Should have known,” Nadnael said. “I hoped for his support, but this upstart isn’t in the camp a full day and already he’s collecting followers. What are we going to do?”

“What should we do?” asked Mevi. “The people are desperate for something to believe in. We’ve promised them succor. Maybe this is it.”

“We’re prisoners,” said Nadnael, “and prison life is hard. Perhaps you’ve forgotten since you became a priest, and the others share some of your burden. The harvesters are a true hive mind: no kings, queens or priests. They sense allegiance, it’s like a pheromone to them. That’s why they cut out the leaders—to weaken the flock, and to study what makes them the focus of respect.”

“But they leave the priests alone,” said Mevi.

“A little leadership is good for them, and good for the people,” said Nadnael, “helps maintain control. They accept our need for hierarchy, even if they don’t understand it. What’s happening here will upset that balance, lead us to ruin. I can’t let that happen. And I’m not going back to the rank and file in deference to some fresh-wrecked—”

“He may be the *Rama-theos*, Nadnael,” said Mevi.

“May be,” said Nadnael. “Never mind. Let him have his followers tonight. Once they see him beaten a few times, they’ll see he’s nothing special.”

After the fire died down, and the prisoners in the labor camp shuffled off to sleep, Caesar eased down next to Bethany, who’d retired to one of the crude shelters around the fire pit.

“Isn’t it amazing?” asked Caesar. “Who would’ve thought, yesterday...?”

“Well,” said Bethany, “a certain deference will make life in prison more palatable. Why, what do you think?”

“I think this is the answer,” said Caesar, “the test God’s putting before us.”

“What?” said Bethany, “not you, too.”

“The shell that disabled the Pegasus was probably fired by the harvesters,” said Caesar, “or someone fighting them, long ago. That it hit us light years away is undoubtedly a miracle, one that was fated to bring us to Procyon. I think we must be meant to lead our people out of this place.”

“They’re not all our people,” said Bethany.

“Compared to the harvesters,” said Caesar, “everyone’s our people.”

Chapter 5

The next day, the harvesters marched their slaves back to the city. They set a punishing pace, but fear of the harvester guards' stinger sticks helped most of the prisoners to maintain it. When a prisoner lagged behind, its application provided just enough juice to keep the victim painfully staggering forward without knocking him off his feet.

Maj matched stride along with Caesar and Bethany who dragged just ahead of the tortured rear, unused to the heat and so much walking.

"Do you thirst, my lady?" Maj asked Bethany.

"Is that a joke?" She glared at him.

Maj showed her his empty hands, then produced a canteen and presented it to her.

"Pays to have quick hands in prison," he said.

Bethany nodded her appreciation and gulped it down.

“Thank you, Maj,” said Caesar.

“I can also make things disappear,” Maj told him. “I’m an illusionist. How I got my name, short for Maji, or Magician.”

“I’m sure,” Caesar nodded down the road, “Where’re they taking us?”

“Rotating details,” Maj said. “The crew from C wing will take our place for the next few weeks. That’s the way it is—three weeks on, one off. Work or die. Sometimes it seems they’ll work us to death, but they don’t. Not all of us, anyway.”

“What’ll happen to us?” asked Caesar.

“When we get to the city, they’ll take you to the educators,” Maj tapped his temple. “Harvesters take ships from all kinds of folk. Easiest way to communicate is to teach ‘em all Pe’noíl. That’s the harvester language. Then they’ll assign you to a crew building their damned mass drivers.”

“So let me get this straight,” Caesar asked, “they have a fleet of light-drive ships to patrol their space, fast enough to catch and trap any passersby, but they do no exploration?”

“Ironic,” said Bethany, “light drive developed by a species that never leaves home.”

“Maybe they discovered there’s nowhere else worth going,” said Maj.

The next day, a high-tech chair in a harvester lab burned information into Caesar’s brain. A row of humans and humanoids ranged away from him, all connected to the same apparatus. He looked at Bethany beside him, but she closed her eyes, winced. The machines shut down, and a harvester released them.

“*Kana pe tel to no pelle, po no ta,*” it said.

Caesar looked at the harvester with dawning comprehension, then back at the machine, interested. Maj wasn’t kidding.

“*Chetti no quo no’il. No do vone ko na pe,*” he said, and shuddered. “That is so weird.”

A harvester grabbed Bethany, dragged her one way while the others herded Caesar out with the men.

“Let me go!” she screamed.

“Bethany!” Caesar shouted, “No, dammit! *Nagta lek!*”

Lahpte kan pe a'til!

A harvester hit Caesar, knocked him to the ground. Caesar struggled as the harvesters lead Bethany out.

They dragged her into a control center, where harvesters ran machines that overlooked the labor camp. Her guard showed her to a sideboard with a crystal amphora and several goblets. He indicated she should serve the controllers.

“You’re kidding,” said Bethany.

The harvester hissed at her.

“Fine, fine,” Bethany picked up the amphora and hurried to pour. A thick, rancid-smelling fluid almost like jelly exuded from the amphora. Bethany made a face, “Ugh, god.” She filled the goblets and took them on the tray to the controllers.

The first one took a goblet and worried at the nectar with its mandibles.

The second took a goblet, looked at Bethany. It set the goblet down and extended its multi-jointed arms bristling with hair and serrated spines. It used to these to slash and tear at her M.E.G. coverall to reveal bare skin. It rattled a hideous laugh.

Another harvester came up and took a drink. They huddled around her, driven by the scent of fear.

“What—” Bethany shivered.

Another shoved her. She went down, spilled the amphora, which shattered on the control room floor. Jelly rolled in thick pools down the steps. The others laughed. Emboldened, the harvester squatted over her and rattled its wings.

They howled and hissed with mirth as Bethany screamed in surprise and terror.



At the construction site, Caesar struggled with a pick axe as his work crew broke up rubble to bury the giant driver coils of an electromagnetic launch tube.

He staggered on the slightly curved upper surface, making ineffectual attempts to wipe his sweat-streaked face with bloody hands.

It was a simple design—simple to say. Breaking orbit was a question of speed, not altitude. All that was needed was a way to accelerate your vehicle to 8 km/s.

In the mass driver, electromagnets and lasers comprised a two-stage launch system to accelerate a vehicle through a

vacuum conduit built through a high equatorial mountain. The equator moved faster with respect to space than any other part of the planet, so launches from on or near this line required the least energy. The ideal slope was a symmetrical volcano more than 18,400 feet high with a gentle curving profile. A laser array on the rim of the caldera would provide the extra energy required to propel the craft on into space.

It was, in essence, an electric train—all the fuel it needed remained earthbound. Superconducting magnets propelled the craft to high-speed without friction, down a subterranean tunnel like particles in a supercollider.

The launch tube was 250 km long, and accelerated the vehicle to 5 gees for just over a minute and a half. The tunnel was kept in a permanent vacuum to eliminate air resistance, only high-speed airlocks at the head of the mountain allowed the vehicle to pass. By the time it reached the muzzle of the launch tube, it was moving faster than it could fall. Altitude was irrelevant.

While driving the tunnels and digging the additional subterranean excavations, the work crews had used giant tunneling machines. Four such machines had completed the 125 kilometer tunnel in just two years. The four gigawatts of power required to perform the launch were to be stored

in six underground 50,000kwh ring capacitors a kilometer in circumference, each containing superconducting cable six meters in diameter. It was the resurfacing for these they now sought to complete.

The mass driver would not be fully operational for several more years. The harvesters required the launch tube to be 250 km long, so as to produce an acceleration of only five gees. But long before they'd be willing to use the launch system themselves, they would begin using the upper 45 kilometers of track for cargo missions. More power applied to this shorter distance would still allow them to launch huge amounts of materials into space at a bone-bending acceleration of over 30 gees.

“Here,” Maj helped Caesar back to his feet. Maj took off his headband and wrapped it around Caesar's hands.

A harvester guard buzzed angrily. They got back to work.

At end of shift, Caesar lay prone on a bunk in the slave quarters, his entire body a single screaming knot. But he roused and got painfully to his feet as guards shoved an equally exhausted Bethany into the room and slammed the door. Caesar led her through the crowded mass of bunks to his free one.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“No,” said Bethany. “Not in the slightest.” In answer to his look, she said, “I’ll live,” and sat on the bunk.

The voice of a guard echoed over a loudspeaker.

“Ko puul!”

The lights went out. Caesar and Bethany looked at each other in the dark.

A shadow threaded its way through the bunks to find them.

“My lord and lady,” it said.

“Who?” asked Bethany.

“You remember Maj,” said Caesar.

“Where did you come from?” Bethany groaned.

“I told you,” said Maj, “I’m an artist, and illusion is my medium.”

“He saved my life today,” said Caesar.

“Made it appear he was working,” Maj chuckled. “It’s tough the first few months. Come on, I’ve got something to cheer you up.”

Caesar and Bethany hesitated in a combination of exhaustion and apprehension.

“Come on!” he said, and stole away into the dark.

Maj led them through a small crevice into a cavernous enclosure stockpiled floor to ceiling with weapons and supplies.

“Where are we?” asked Bethany.

“Call it the Stash,” said Maj. “Disused portion of the prison, harvesters never come down here. Broke into it during the tunneling last year and kept it secret.”

“Amazing,” said Caesar.

“Not bad, huh?” said Maj. “I’ve got a dozen crates of their stinger sticks, guns, and enough shelf stable MREs to last months if you care to eat ‘em.”

“Why are you showing us this?” asked Caesar. “You hardly know us yet.”

“I know what you represent,” said Maj, “and I wanted to give you hope, before they got to you. Before your spirit was broken.” He picked up a weapon, checked it. “I’ve got soldiers, too. Men ready to fight, provided the right opportunity comes along. Many of them were at the fire last night.”

“You’ve done really well here, Maj,” said Caesar. “You’ve got will. The harvesters have regeneration machines and education machines. I have an idea.”

“Oh?” said Bethany.

Caesar quelled her with a look. To Maj, he said, “They shipped the wreck of the *Pegasus* somewhere in this city. Where would they have taken her?”

“Probably the hangar facility on the other side of the prison compound,” said Maj, “but why? You think she’s salvageable?”

“No, she’ll never fly again,” said Caesar, “but she has computers and data we’re going to need.”

“Lucky for you I know every niche and hallway of this prison,” said Maj. “There’s not a restricted area made can foil an illusionist.”

“If that’s true,” said Bethany, “why haven’t you escaped yet?”

“And go where?” said Maj, “It’s a harvester-controlled world. Part of why movement’s so easy, if you know what you’re at. Most of us prefer the security of the prison to starving out in the desert. Best chance is to gather a force strong enough to take the launch system and get back into

space.”

“Only leaves us one choice, then,” said Caesar.

“Nadnael reckons we should lay low,” said Maj, “bide our time. Wait until there are enough of us to overwhelm them, like the Israelites in Egypt.”

“And I say Nadnael’s gone native. I could see it at the fire. He’s scared for himself, his position. If we want to be free, we have to act. Now. God doesn’t want you to be slaves to a harvester.”

Maj stroked his chin, grinned.

“I’ll locate the *Pegasus* and contact you when I have the men and the route ready,” said Maj. “It may be a day or two.”

“You know where to find me, obviously.” said Caesar.

Word was passed down the row of slaves in the construction area. Zon moved closer to Caesar as they worked.

“Come to the Stash tonight,” he said.

Caesar nodded, kept working.

Caesar entered the Stash that night to find Maj with several men.

“Maj,” Caesar nodded.

“My lord,” said Maj. “May I introduce the Sons of Lightning,” he pointed them out in turn. “Zon and Geem you know, my true sons, and Lebedeas, our healer. Also one of our commanders. He’ll be waiting here when we return.”

Lebedeas bowed, “My lord.”

“Mevi, brother of Nadnel, one of our priests,” Maj continued. “Proz, head of the Jenda converts. And Sikar, chief assassin, another commander. He makes short work of a harvester with a knife, and his group has been here longer than any of us, so he’s also our historian.”

“Freedom fighters,” said Caesar. “I’m impressed.”

Maj nodded, “We believe it’s our responsibility as leaders of Unity—teachers, orators, soldiers—to defend the people and make war on the harvesters wherever and however we can.”

“I’m honored,” said Caesar. To the men, he said, “Thank you for your help. A great wave begins with a small change in the wind. I may have brought just what we need, but to get it we’ll have to get to my ship, the *Pegasus*. Maj says he knows where it is.” He turned to Maj, “Lead the way.”

Chapter 6

Shadows draped the wreck of the *Pegasus*, nestled among other harvester-salvaged machinery in the hangar facility. Caesar, Maj, Sikar, Zon and Geem stole through the junk piles and approached the ship.

“Do you really believe this Nazara stuff?” Sikar, the Devil’s Advocate, wanted to know as they’d made the trip through the facility’s back halls and dead spaces.

“Of course I do, within reason,” Caesar told him. “Don’t you?”

“I believe in the power the Unity has here, and the opportunities it provides,” Sikar gave him a lopsided grin, “but I live the 23rd century—every new thing we learn makes the universe deeper and stranger than we ever imagined. Anyone who claims to have it figured out is a fool.”

“We make no such claim,” said Caesar.

“But you do—you have a book of rules, and say you speak with the manufacturer. Well, you’re insane. I don’t preclude the universe may be one colossal cosmic being, with galaxies for synapses. But if it is, the idea your *Desposyni* ancestors had any insight into its character is, frankly, farcical.”

“It’s not really about original truth, is it?” Caesar nodded. “We accept that as mankind evolves, the truth evolves with him. Religion is a tool of statecraft — humans are a superstitious people, many of us still crave that certainty.”

“A deeply cynical point of view,” said Sikar.

“Not if executed with compassion,” Caesar told him.

“I prefer to think for myself,” Sikar laughed.

“Which makes you a valuable ally,” said Caesar.

“This,” Sikar showed him the knife he carried, “makes me a valuable ally. The rest...lets you trust me to use it when the time is right.”

“Then you and I share the same belief,” Caesar put an arm on his shoulder.

They forced the *Pegasus*’s hatch as quietly as possible,

clambered inside, and made their way down the crawlway to the control deck.

Caesar disassembled control panels.

“What are we taking?” asked Maj.

“The drives,” said Caesar. “An interface. Everything we need to do some forensics on the registry and boot sectors.”

“What are you looking for?” asked Maj.

“A script I suspect... no, I *know* is there,” said Caesar, “transferred from the *Cygnus*. Something Alistair was working on.”

Maj gave him a sharp look.

“I know what Alistair was working on,” said Maj. “Did it work? Did you talk to him?”

“It got ugly. We had to leave him behind,” said Caesar. “I’m sorry.”

“What makes you think the same thing won’t happen again?” asked Maj.

“We’ll have to fix it,” said Caesar.

“This oughta be interesting,” Maj grinned.

They hopped out of the ship into the hangar facility,

their arms loaded with computer gear, and ran full into a harvester.

It hissed and barked a challenge at them.

“It’s a hive worker,” said Maj, “wants to know what we’re doing here.”

Sikar drew his blade.

“I can take him, my lord.”

“No,” Caesar held him back. To the hive worker, he said, “*No ta ko no ve telle ka canope! Ta velle ko to naname!*”

They all watched, transfixed as it wavered.

It turned to Maj.

“*Ko Pelle ta ne?*”

“*Nano te kanama,*” said Maj.

The harvester huffed the air and backed down, cowed. It shuffled away. Sikar, Zon and Geem gaped at Caesar.

“I just told it I was the drone in charge,” Caesar told Maj.

“And I confirmed it,” Maj nodded.

“But it believed you,” said Geem. “That’s a miracle.”

“Another sign,” said Zon.

Maj shared a look with Sikar.

Nadnael was waiting for them in the Stash when they entered. The other prisoners froze, but Caesar juttied his chin out. He dumped the drive and interface on and upturned crate and began connecting them.

“You can’t do this kind of thing, Caesar,” said Nadnael. “Sneaking around, stealing parts. You’re going to get these men in trouble.”

“They’re not afraid of trouble,” Caesar threw off the hand Nadnael placed on his shoulder. “They’ve joined me because our religion offers nothing but platitudes in response to their miserable lives. They want an active religion that tells them they deserve to be free—”

“Our religion is about freedom of the spirit,” said Nadnael, and turned to the men. “You’ve trusted me this far,” he said, “trust me now. We don’t know the fate of the *Ramatheos*. You cannot follow this man blindly—”

“They can see where we stand just fine,” said Caesar, standing up—half a head taller than Nadnael. “People need a goal — without one, they will not make sacrifices... or progress. They’ve chosen to stop waiting and save themselves. I’m going to help. Now stand aside, we have

work to do.”

The rest of the men brushed roughly past Nadnael into the Stash.

Over time, Caesar worked unaided, swung the pickaxe as if born to it. Bethany served nectar. The harvesters gave her a hard time. Caesar and Bethany led candle-lit Nazara meditations in the Stash. The group was even bigger now. During these quiet moments, when the group was softly muttering the articles of the Way, Bethany and Caesar would share hesitant, aversive glances across the flickering circle of light. Bethany was softening towards him, they both realized, but she was still understandably wary.

Caesar and Maj worked on a machine, grafting the parts from the *Pegasus* onto a liberated educator station, while the other men stacked more weapons and supplies. When Caesar walked down the hallways of the prison, people reached out to touch him. The harvester guards buzzed nervously. Caesar smiled.

Humans and humanoids toiled at the construction site in desperation. Three years had passed since the *Pegasus* made landfall. Caesar was well toned, his muscles accustomed

now after three years in elevated gravity, and he wore a full beard.

That afternoon the guards flew a new prisoner towards the prison. He had a tattered space coverall, and hung limp between them, completely disfigured from harvester torture.

“Ko na no padte,” The guards turned their attention away, *“False leader.”*

Caesar put down his tools to watch, glared at the harvesters. Others followed suit.

“Have they taken a new ship?”

“Not that I know of, my Ran’ma,” said Geem.

“Find out who he is,” said Caesar.

The harvesters growled at the workers, but the workers waited for a look from Caesar. He gave it, and they returned to work.

It began one night in the Stash, during a candlelit ceremony like many that had passed before it, as Caesar’s followers sat circled around him in meditation on the floor.

“My lord,” Maj said, *“it is time. If we are to go forward*

you must choose your seven.”

“What of the *Rama-theos*?” asked Caesar.

“Your cousin Paulo is gone,” Maj told him. “We need a king, and a king needs a council.”

“Very well,” said Caesar. He stands. “Zon and Geem, sons of Lightning,” they stand as he calls them, “Sikar, of the blade. Lebedaus, venerated Abithar. Mevi, Sariel priest. Proz, who speaks for the Jenda, and Maj, the power of God. You, too, will be called ‘*Desposyni*.’”

“Which in the ancient tongue means ‘of the master,’” said Maj. “May we serve you with our lives, and honor you by our deaths.”

Caesar and Bethany shared a look.

After the ceremony, Caesar and Maj worked on their machine. Geem entered with an arm-load of supplies, set it down.

“I’m sorry, my Ran’ma,” he said. “I tried, but I couldn’t get close to the new prisoner. They’re keeping him isolated from the rest of the population.”

“Stay on it,” said Caesar. “Do what you can.”

Bethany stripped down a gun and cleaned it. Caesar joined

her and started one of his own.

“What was that?” she asked.

“New prisoner,” Caesar told her. “No one’s seen him.”

“What’re you thinking?” asked Bethany.

“Doesn’t matter,” said Caesar. “We have to move forward. They’re going to bring the facility online tomorrow.”

“I can’t believe you still want to go through with this,” said Bethany.

“I thought you were with me,” said Caesar. “You’ve helped all this time.”

“It was something to occupy us,” Bethany told him. “I’ll admit I didn’t think the endgame through completely.”

“You still don’t trust me,” Caesar said. In response to her look, he continued, “What would you have us do? Live out our lives as slaves? There’s no rescue party coming, we’re it. I still believe we came here for a purpose.”

“I know you do,” said Bethany.

“Can we put our differences aside,” asked Caesar, “at least until we close this chapter for good? Like Alistair said: one way or another, we deny them the satisfaction of controlling us any more.”

“I’ll clean to that,” said Bethany, and they clinked gun barrels.

Just then, Nadnael entered. Maj looked up.

“Get out of here, Nadnael,” he growled.

“I helped find this place!” said Nadnael.

“Well, you’re no longer welcome here,” Sikar told him.

“I’ve just come for my brother,” Nadnael turned to Mevi, “Come on, I don’t want you keeping company with this rabble.”

Caesar got up to confront Nadnael, but Mevi spoke up,

“I’ve told you, Nadnael. I’m here to follow Caesar. I believe in what he’s doing.”

Zon put his hand on Mevi’s shoulder.

“Fine,” Nadnael fumed past them to Caesar, “but I’ll say this: I’ve given you my last warning. You don’t know what it’s been like. You can’t just drop in on a situation and expect it all to change, just to please you.”

“We’ve been through this,” said Caesar. “Men used to fight the harvesters, up there in the stars. Now look at you: doing their work for them, even when they’re not watching. Things have to change, Nadnael, and you don’t

have the guts. You've given up. Maybe it takes an outsider to see that."

"You're corrupting the beliefs of the Unity," said Nadnael, "playing *Rama-theos* with these zealots, and you're disrupting the work, which is likely to bring the harvesters down on all of us."

"You don't have to worry about it," Caesar told him. "You're not likely to be on the front lines when the fighting starts."

"I've only done my duty," said Nadnael, "for my people."

"Your duty is to escape," said Caesar. "To live better—free."

"You're not a king," Nadnael rankled, "not in here."

"At least he knows how to act like one," said Maj.

Nadnael gave them a dark look, and backed out of the Stash.

In the control center, Bethany served the harvesters their nectar. She kept her eyes down, shuffled unobtrusively though the room, trying not to be noticed.

A harvester took a drink and hissed at her, caressing her

neckline with its spiny pincers.

“Carte ta tane.”

Even as it happened, Bethany understood on some level it was not because the sight of her aroused the harvester. It was only interested in the fear and shame it could inflict on her. Knowing this, even as she cowered, she willed herself not to acquiesce, not to give it the satisfaction of her scent.

Mollified by her flinch of terror, the harvester didn't go after her. Its attention drifted to an EM interface modified for both human and harvester perception, which showed a ship travelling down the launch tube as the magnets activated in sequence.

Atop the mountain, a wave-rider—a ship designed to ride ahead of its own hypersonic shock wave—burst from the muzzle of the mass driver's vacuum tube at Mach 15 with a with a deafening boom and streaked away, already free of the densest part of the atmosphere.

A two minute burn from a spectrum-wide array of six 250 MW cyclotron powered high efficiency free electron laser beams from the peak of the mountain blasted onto the propellant block at its stern. Different wavelengths resulted in different spectral colors to form white light easily absorbed by the propellant block—an inverted conical

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ice slab, super-cooled to liquid nitrogen temperatures and reinforced with a honeycomb of tough plastic which flashed to steam at 10,000°C.

Released super-heated steam from the ice slab, which was completely vaporized during the ascent, expanded at 10,000 m/s, accelerating the wave-rider into orbit better than any rocket. The lasers were tuned by a focusing mirror to balance the changing focal requirements during the capsule's ascent.

In the control center, the harvesters congratulated each other. Bethany watched from the shadows, toyed with the silver chain around her neck, and its capsule. The harvesters hadn't bothered to strip them, to deprive them of any personal belongings, so confident were they in their subjugation of the prisoners. Or maybe it was obvious the prisoners possessed nothing with which they could offer the slightest resistance.

Ripples of heat obscured the workers as they swung pick axes in the launch tube construction area outside the city and watched the wave-rider go up. The system was operational.

It was at that moment Lebedeas staggered and fell on the

rocks. A harvester guard laid into him with a stinger stick, but Lebedeas didn't move.

Caesar, observing this, set down his pick-axe and stalked over to them.

Caesar grabbed the stinger stick mid-blow, plasma arcing around his arm, searing his palm.

“He's had enough,” said Caesar.

The harvester buzzed angrily, jerked the stick away and turned on Caesar. It struck Caesar repeatedly with the stinger, leaving fiery plasma burns all over his back and shoulders, but Caesar didn't break.

The other workers put down their tools as word passed down the line that Caesar was being punished for defending Lebedeas.

The harvester slowed its strokes as it noticed the large, angry crowd gathering. It hissed and backed away, cowed, as Caesar looked up. Smoke still rose from the cauterized burns as Caesar stared it down.

Bethany watched from a high window in the control center. The harvesters sensed the commotion and jostled for position at the window. Bethany moved to the back of

the room and, sure no one was looking, slipped a data chip into her tattered coverall.

More harvesters swept into the construction area to support the harried guard, buzzing, rattling their wings and sniffing the air. The crowd didn't back down. It was a standoff.

The harvesters formed a line with weapons pointed at the crowd, prepared to move in.

Caesar, knowing the prisoners couldn't win an open, unarmed confrontation, turned his back towards the harvesters. He showed his scarred hands to the crowd, palms up.

"It's okay, my friends. Thank you. Thank you."

The crowd stopped. The harvester guards grabbed Caesar, and beat him to his knees, swarming over him with vicious, single-minded purpose. The crowd winced, powerless now their communal purpose was interrupted. The harvesters dragged Caesar to his feet and marched him off. The crowd watched them go.

"They'll kill him for sure, now," Nadnael told Mevi. "He's too powerful for them to ignore."

The guards threw Caesar into the tiny solitary confinement cell with a small high window. He sat up, his face apprehensive, but set.

The door rattled open, and Nadnael entered, backed by harvesters.

“I tried to warn you,” Nadnael said. “I told you it would come to this.”

“I know,” said Caesar.

“You may call me Judas,” Nadnael told him, “but remember this: Christ was tortured only a short while, whereas Judas—and the service he provided—is reviled for all time. That was a choice. Eventually, you realize the world is never going to come even close to the one you’d hoped for, so you have to start thinking ahead. You can say he did the wrong thing, but who was the instrument of salvation? Who really suffered for the sins on the world? It’s not damnation if you get to go home.”

“I forgive you, *Jocab*,” said Caesar. “You’ll do what you must to survive, but you should have trusted me.”

The guards and Nadnael prodded Caesar ahead of them

with their stinger sticks out into the open prison yard towards large round armature which stood on a raised platform near one end. The entire complement of the wing was assembled there, and watched in dour silence.

Nadnael mounted the platform and stopped Caesar before a harvester judge who sightlessly cycled air at him.

Speaking in Pe'noíl, a harvester judge told him,

“You are accused of being a *no padte*—a false leader. Of causing discord and hindering work. Do you have anything to say?”

“I do,” Caesar said, and turned to the crowd. “I’m sorry it has to be this way,” said Caesar, “but the instinct for self determination exists in all life forms. I won’t give them the satisfaction of controlling my fate. I will rise from this planet, and—”

A look from the judge, and the guards restrained him with some difficulty.

“And so must you—” Caesar managed before the harvester judge hissed,

“Not to them.” It turned to Nadnael, said, “And you, drone? You confirm the charges?”

Nadnael stepped forward. The crowd grumbled.

“As one of the foremost among my people,” he said, “I testify and confirm that the accused is a rabble rouser. He claims to be a king, incites the mob to revolt and disrespect their masters.”

“Very well,” said the harvester judge, and turned to the guards. “Proceed.”

The guards roughly hooked Caesar up to the circular rack, attached electrodes to his face and body.

—

Before his arrest, in the Stash, Caesar sat at a jerry-rigged educator station, fear in his eyes.

“It’s very risky,” said Bethany. “Are you ready to do this?”

“Not really,” said Caesar.

“This stuff will eat your mind,” Bethany said, “turn you inside out. It may not work.”

“I know,” said Caesar.

She hooked him up to the educator station.

“I thought you were trending towards megalomania when all this began,” she told him. “Maybe from exposure to the hallucinogen from the *Cygnus*, like Paulo. Still not sure I

was wrong.”

“Bethany—”

“Shh,” Bethany leaned close, put a finger on his forehead.

“Look,” said Caesar, “as much as I’d like to forget what happened...”

“It doesn’t work that way,” said Bethany, “you know that.”

“No starting over?”

“If we forget our mistakes,” said Bethany, “how can we keep from repeating them?”

“History repeats itself,” Caesar told her. “Different shades, but the colors are the same. It’s inevitable.”

Bethany nodded.

“Guess I won’t remember anything we say after this,” said Caesar.

“So let’s save it for when you will,” said Bethany.

“*Roj*,” said Caesar, “see you in a couple of days.”

Bethany threw a switch, energy crackled.

The circular machine fried Caesar—electricity coursed around him, singed his hair. When his screams finally stopped, he slumped in a cloud of smoke. The crowd groaned in horror and stifled rage.

The harvesters conferred in alien grunts and clicks. They gestured Maj forward. He examined Caesar, shook his head. They fried Caesar again.

His screams echoed in the courtyard, then died out. Some in the crowd protested, but none of them moved. The Sons of Lightning bowed their heads, helpless. The harvesters called Maj forward again. Maj checked Caesar, and his voice cracked as he uttered the words,

“He’s dead.”

Human slaves took Caesar’s body down from the execution machine.

Chapter 7

That night, Maj woke Bethany, saying, “It’s time,” but he didn’t have to show her the way to escape their sleeping quarters. That route was long since established. This time, instead of going to the Stash, the two stole into the dark and deserted morgue.

That night, Maj woke Bethany, saying, “It’s time,” but he didn’t have to show her the way to escape their sleeping quarters. That route was long since established. This time, instead of going to the Stash, the two stole into the dark and deserted morgue.

Long honeycombed banks of plascrete cells formed the refrigeration unit where harvesters kept the vacant bodies they intended to revive for whatever unimaginable purposes they had. It was easy to find Caesar’s body—it was in the last cell sealed. There were no extenuating circumstances to the order in which the bodies were processed. No next

of kin or pending investigations entered into the equation. The bodies were simply stored and removed mechanically in the order they arrived.

They took Caesar's body from the cooler and laid it on a high-tech table, which they then outfitted with the hardware from the jerry-rigged educator station. They connected the drives to the table.

Earlier, in the Stash, Bethany and Caesar had taken Maj into their confidence:

"The people are behind you, Caesar," Maj had told him.

"We value their support," said Caesar, looking to Bethany. "The harvesters had crushed their spirit, and I think we've begun to win it back. But I need more than that if we're going to gain our freedom. I need their unquestioning belief. I need them to believe I can conquer death for them."

Maj looked from Bethany to Caesar.

"So this is what we're going to do," Bethany caught and held his eyes. "The harvester's medical facilities have the ability to revive metabolic processes. That's how they get the most out of their workers... and their torture victims."

But there's always a cost—it ruins the mind.

“What we need to do is use the educator station to recreate Alistair's experiment and restore Caesar's consciousness to his revived body.”

“Will it work?” Maj asked.

“You're the illusionist,” said Bethany. “You tell us.”

“You want them to believe you're their risen Messai,” said Maj. “It doesn't take an illusionist to see that coming.”

“He'll really be dead,” Bethany replied, “that part's no illusion. If he lives again, it's going to be a miracle in actuality. Who's to say he isn't the Messai?”



In the morgue, Maj and Bethany looked at each other. Maj threw the switch. Caesar's body jumped reflexively as a charge went through it.

Caesar sat up, coughed and spluttered.

“I hope I gave a good speech,” he rasped.

“It was magnificent, my lord!” Bethany cried in relief, and on impulse, she kissed him deeply.

Caesar blinked, then kissed her back. They shared a look.

“You have the map?” he asked. She took it from her coverall, showed him.

“What a way to wake up,” Caesar grinned.

The other two helped him to his feet and together the three of them crept from the morgue.

Maj and Bethany entered the slave quarters with Caesar. As they passed the bunks, Zon and Geem sat up and noticed Caesar as he passed, unable to believe their eyes.

The wounds on his back and arms were still livid, but Caesar’s look confirmed he was the man they knew.

“Caesar,” Geem began to chant, “Caesar.”

Others fell in behind them. Sikar, Lebedeas, Mevi, and Proz and more *Desposyni* supporters, all shouting,

“CAESAR! CAESAR! CAESAR!” as the zealots silently passed weapons from the Stash to the strongest and most trustworthy.

The slaves formed a mob, poured out into the prison yard and took up the chant even before they’d seen him. They knew what must have happened. They anticipated it.

Caesar appeared high in a window above them, his

supporters behind him.

The crowd erupted in manic cheers.

“All is ready, my *Ran'ma*,” Maj intoned reverently behind him. “The Sons of Lightning await your command.”

Caesar faced the men at attention.

“God is among us,” Caesar’s voice echoed through the yard. “The day of vengeance you prayed for is at hand. The harvesters are not better than us. We don’t deserve to turn the dust as their slaves. I have shown you—they can kill our bodies, but they cannot kill our spirit. The time has come for us to rise.”

Zon and Geem dragged Nadnael before him.

“Well, Nadnael?” Caesar locked eyes with him.

“You’re a false prophet,” Nadnael insisted, “You’ll lead them to ruin.”

“Perhaps,” said Caesar, “but at least we’ll die free.”

Nadnael spat.

At Caesar’s gesture, they took Nadnael away. The crowd cheered. Caesar overlooked it all. Maj looked at Caesar with new eyes.

“I converted as an act of rebellion,” he said when he noticed Bethany watching him. “I never really believed until now.”

They looked at each other, appraising.

There was a disturbance in the crowd. Harvester guards waded into the mob, and crushed the first few with their stinger sticks, but the crowd was flush with the demonstration of immortality, and they fought back. Gunshots echoed and plasma arced.

The harvesters outweighed the humans by almost double, and were lethal killing machines even without their stinger sticks, but they were not in the least prepared for a force armed and inflamed by fanatical fervor. The tide of humanity engulfed the guards in full scale riot.

When it became clear they were going to be overwhelmed, the harvesters attempted to fly but the mob dragged them down—rent and shredded wings exposed from armored carapaces. The harvesters thrashed as they disappeared beneath the surface of undulating bodies, the press of which was insulated by whatever local damage the harvesters did in their death throes.

Caesar and his bodyguards charged through the darkened

hallways of the prison wing, pushing crates of MREs on laglev palettes ahead of them, the chants outside in the yard propelling them forward. They had just dispatched a lone roaming harvester guard when a voice called,

“Bethany!”

Caesar and Bethany froze, and ran to the cell.

The new prisoner was so heavily disfigured from obvious torture they could barely recognize him, but his identity was clear.

“Paulo!” shouted Bethany.

“You’ve got to get me out of here!” Paulo cried.

“What are you doing here?” asked Caesar.

“They cut me,” said Paulo, “experimented on me. I think they killed a dozen or more and brought me back. Finally brought me here, guess they learned all they could, or wanted to.”

“You still have your memories?” Caesar said, shocked. “I thought... even after—”

“We have to keep moving,” said Maj.

“We know this man,” said Caesar, “He’s the... he’s Nazara.”

“We didn’t allow time for this in the plan, my lord,” said Maj. “There’s nothing we can do.”

“Lord?” Paulo asked Caesar. A look passed between them—betrayal, shame, pity, hate.

“Get me out of here!” Paulo leapt at the bars. “What did you tell them?”

“Thought you were dead,” Caesar told Paulo, his voice barely a whisper.

“We don’t have the cutting tools, or the time,” Maj told Caesar, “We have to go.”

Caesar clutched at Paulo’s fingers though the bars as his supporters dragged him away. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t go, Damn you!” shouted Paulo. “Take me with you! Take me with you!”

His pleas rang in their ears, chased them down the prison hall as they broke into a run.

They descended in the elevator. Caesar and Bethany stood distant, tortured, as their bodyguards steeled themselves for the final push.

They fought through a knot of harvesters and forced their

way inside the launch facility, and Caesar's group identified a waiting wave-rider.

The wave-rider was shockingly alien in design—acid green, with glyphs of indeterminate function carved into its hull and a great tinted beak—the transparent dart-like prow that housed its control stations. It was, however—Bethany noted with sullen humor—tri-radially symmetrical, just like their old ship, the *Pegasus*. Its three great propulsion arms—housing some kind of almond-shaped, glowing green intakes—projected like a grasping claw behind it, clutching the steaming wedge of polymer-reinforced ice that would serve as launch fuel.

With a look of loyalty and support for Caesar, Sikar broke off and let a small band of his zealot supporters to the control facilities to run the machines and defend them from recapture. With blades, stingers and guns from the stash, they quickly dispatched the harvester attendants who, although alerted by the general klaxon, had no suspicion they were about to be overrun by armed prisoners.

The remaining *Desposyni* loaded the wave-rider with weapons and foodstuffs, climbed aboard and took their seats in the wave-rider's acceleration couches, Maj and Geem in the pilot's couches, Caesar and Bethany just behind them.

They waited.

The capacitors spun up in the launch tube. The wave-rider lifted off its launch rails and hung suspended in the center of the tube, ready to be fired.

The harvesters broke through to the control room.

Caesar's supporters, led by Sikar, defended the controls and those running them until the capacitors built up a full charge. In the launch facility, a harvester's stinger impaled Sikar, but he managed to keep them at bay until the countdown reached nil.

The mass driver slammed them into their couches. The 45km launch distance was intended only for cargo, and delivered a mind-flattening 30 gee acceleration. The advantage was it put them into space before harvesters based in the same facility would be willing to follow, and they'd be gone long before harvesters based at other planetary launch facilities could catch them.

The entire facility resounded as the wave-rider leapt down the launch tube, burst from the muzzle of the mass driver with a deafening boom, and streaked into the air. The multi-spectral array of lasers from the peak of the mountain blasted the wave-rider's base, vaporized the super-cooled ice there. Rapid-released steam accelerated

them into orbit.

Multiple wave-riders launched alongside them, carrying their supporters and other prisoners freed in the riot.

Surface missiles leapt into the air after them in great enough numbers to destroy some, but Caesar's wave-rider made it through.

As he died, Sikar saw on the screen his Messai had escaped, and smiled a bloody smile.

In the wave-rider's cockpit, Maj studied the controls with growing elation.

"All systems are functioning," he told them, "The harvesters aren't pursuing us into space. We're away!"

The group broke out cheering, slapping backs and celebrating.

Caesar noticed Bethany weeping.

"A moment's silence," Caesar got the group's attention. He looked at Bethany, "For all those left behind."

The group fell silent.

Caesar and Bethany shared a look, thinking of Paulo.

"I have Bethany's star map online," Maj told them,

indicated the screen display. "It's in Pe'noíl, but I can read it fine. Where do you want to go, my lord?"

"Geem," said Caesar, "get me the other ships."

Geem pushed buttons, said, "Go ahead."

"Attention," said Caesar, "this is Wave-Rider One. My friends, we've come a long way today. I know you're tired. You've followed me selflessly, heroically. Jenda and Nazara, you've given everything you have." The men and women in Caesar's wave-rider murmured their assent.

"No one doubts your faith," Caesar continued, "but I must ask it of you one more time. It is in the best interests of our Unity at this time to abandon HD 11232 and set course for the closest habitable refuge: Earth." The group gasped in surprise. "This is our best chance for survival."

Caesar put a hand on Geem's shoulder.

"You have permission to engage light-drive at will. Coordinates follow this transmission. Good luck."

Geem ended the transmission. Maj looked uncertainly at the light-drive.

"Understand," he told Caesar, "if I turn this thing on, we're going to drop off the edge of universe. I don't know what will happen. We could arrive thousands of years after

we left.”

“Or a thousand years before,” said Caesar.

The tiny fleet jumped to light speed.

Caesar and Bethany found themselves alone in the crew area as the fleet of wave-riders travelled through warped space, Maj and Geem at the controls.

“Two months,” Caesar spun his food tray in zero gee. “Funny, I was prepared to wait my whole life without leaving the inside of a ship.”

“I have to admit,” Bethany said, “I didn’t think we’d see the stars again, but now that we’re headed to Earth—”

“Now that we’ve seen the sky—” Caesar reminded her.

“You can’t wait for the waiting to be over,” she said, “I understand, my *Ran’ma*.”

“Bethany, you don’t have to—”

“If you aren’t my *Ran’ma*, whose are you?” Bethany interrupted. “I had you first.”

“What you said before—” Caesar started.

“I haven’t forgotten,” she said, “any of it,” but she moved

in close. “Have you?”

“What are you going to do?” Caesar shook his head.

She kissed him. Caesar responded, then broke off.

“It’s not the time of restitution,” he said, “If you conceive—”

“Assuming a bit much, aren’t you my lord?” Bethany smiled. She leaned in again and he didn’t resist.

“We left the high priest on Procyon,” she told him between kisses. “Is it truly blasphemous if no one’s around to object?”

They retired to Bethany’s cubby.

“How did we find each other,” Bethany breathed tenderly, as their bodies merged like droplets of water in freefall amid a growing cloud of discarded clothing, “with all this history between us?”

“Probably just dumb luck,” said Caesar.

For obvious reasons, they made do without a *paranymph*.

Caesar leaned over Geem’s shoulder at the navigation console. He had the panels open, a bird’s nest of wires

protruded.

“I’ve fixed the computer to display a kind of Standard,” said Geem, “but the grammar’s a little funny.”

He showed Caesar the panel. It read: “Conditional Normal”

“Safe to say Earth systems won’t recognize Pe’noíl,” Geem explained.

“That’s great, Geem,” Caesar offered a lopsided smile, and turned on his y axis to continue on. “Good work.”

“My Lord?” Geem stopped him.

“Yes?” said Caesar.

“Have you given thought to our approach?” Geem asked. “When we show up above Earth in a harvester ship, even one broadcasting in Standard, what’s to stop them blowing us out of the sky?”

Caesar fingered the capsule on a silver chain, almost buried in the hair around his neck.

“What does that say?” Geem asked.

“Our expedition was given a code key,” Caesar explained, “to transmit on return to Earth to get us past the planetary defenses, but this technology won’t read it.”

“So what do we tell them?” Geem asked.

“I know it by heart,” said Caesar. “Record this.”

Geem punched a button on the console.

“*Icarus Icarus Icarus*,” Caesar said into the mic. “These are the survivors of the Mars Expeditionary Group, The crews of the *Pegasus* and *Vulcan*, launched from Los Alamos Spaceport in the year 2132, requesting emergency landing on Earth.” To Geem he said, “Put that on repeat and broadcast it on all frequencies.”

Bethany woke beside Caesar in her cubby, feeling a bit green. She sat up, and almost before she knew what was happening, vomited in a violent motion into the cabin.

“I was afraid of this,” she tried to clear the burning in her nose as little orange-brown globs turned in zero gee. And when they called old Lebedeas the medic to their cabin, he confirmed her suspicion.

“There’s no doubt in my mind,” he told her, “you are with child.”

“How could this happen?” Caesar asked as he vacuumed the vomit with a hose attached to the wall. “I thought you were... you know what this means?”

“The baby will come in the month of Aries,” said Bethany, “I know.”

“If the Unity learns we weren’t together during the time of restitution... something must be done.”

“You’re talking like Paulo now,” said Bethany. “You can’t just put me out the airlock and pretend this didn’t happen.”

“I never said—”

“Of course I will be silent, my Lord,” Lebedeas advised, “but you’ll not keep the secret long. This may be your first indiscretion, or only your first pregnancy, but it’s not mine—these things tend to reveal themselves.”

“As far as we know, we’re the last of the Nazara, Caesar,” Bethany continued. “If this child is a male—”

“Will it be an heir?” Caesar wondered aloud. “Paulo still lives... oh God, what were we thinking? How could we let this happen?”

“Caesar, we don’t know that,” said Bethany. “Paulo is lost to this Unity. He claimed to be a leader when he wasn’t—the leader *you* became.” She indicate her belly, “Anointed or not, you’re the *Ichthys* now. Since that shell hit us, God has brought us farther than we ever dreamed. Don’t you

realize this could be the answer to our prayers?”

Caesar stared out the port. The stars stared back, motionless and emotionless as ever.

“I wish the *Zadok* were here,” said he.

“What are you going to do?” Lebedeas asked Caesar. “We’ll have to perform the Second Marriage for the child to be legitimized. You have to decide.”

“Bethany, I love you,” Caesar told her. “More than you’ll ever know.”

He left towards the cockpit. Bethany slammed her fist against the bulkhead, fought back tears.

Caesar sat strapped in the cockpit, deep in thought. One foot rested weightlessly on the instrument panel. His eyelids began to droop.

“Caesar,” a voice whispered. “*Caesar.*”

Caesar started awake. A red, hazy image of Alistair floated before him out the view screen, his beard full of stars.

“Alistair?” Caesar gaped.

“The same,” said the image, “but different, obviously.”

“You’re not of our belief,” Caesar chose his words carefully, “but we don’t choose who appears to us in visions. You and I have shared an experience few can appreciate. If you have any wisdom for me...”

“Caesar,” said the image, “do not be afraid to take the child as your own. It is not for you to question the acts of God. Take Bethany as your wife, and when the child is born, you will name him Azimuth, for he will show the way.”

“But Alistair,” said Caesar, “if the child isn’t born in the month of atonement, will he be unfit?”

“Only as unfit as he chooses to be, like all of us. Give him an official birth date,” the image told him. “In a thousand years, will anyone care or remember exactly when he was born? The almighty believes in counting hairs, not splitting them.”

“How am I even seeing you? Some remnant of the program I used to...”

“To cheat death? Perhaps. Perhaps I’m that part of universe you always hoped would respond—to answer your questions, soothe your doubts. Or perhaps I’m just a dream.”

A pulsing sound woke Caesar. He jumped and looked

around the cabin. Was it a virus or glitch in the uploaded data from *Cygnus*? Was it really Alistair's ghost, or something else...?

Caesar and Bethany—about three months pregnant—floated side-by-side in the crew area as the wave-riders plunged through warped space.

Mevi addressed the gathered crew.

“Caesar,” he said, “Son of Alphaeus—the succession. In the absence of *Rama-theos* Paulo, and of my brother Nadnael the *Jocab*, and if it is the will of the Sons of Lightning...?” he turned to Zon and Geem.

“It is,” they intoned together.

“We determine that you are the rightful *Rama-theos*,” said Mevi.

Bethany said, “And it is my sacred honor to anoint you *Icthyis*—Fisher King of the People of the Way—Father of Nations. Do you swear to uphold justice and defend them from all evil?”

“I so swear,” said Caesar.

“Then may you serve your people well,” Bethany dabbed oil on his head, and his feet.

The wave-riders dropped out of warped space.

In the cockpit, Caesar leaned over the instruments. His crew was with him, and the Earth was in the window. They ran the numbers and took a star reading to confirm it, but they didn't need to. Those continents were as familiar to spacegoing terrans as their own reflections. The intelli-pane read: "Achieved Coordinates. Begun Final Approach."

Caesar tapped the comm. button.

"Attention, all ships," he said, "This is Caesar." His voice rang over the convoy's intercom as the wave-riders blasted towards Earth, "We're home."

The ship's compliment joined Caesar in the crew area of the lead wave-rider as he stared at earth out the portal. Bethany, his wife—his priestess according to all the ancient traditions, and carrying his child—floated in her rightful place beside him. She, too, had begun final approach.

"How can we know if they've received our signal?" asked Geem.

"Who knows if they're even listening anymore?" Zon agreed.

They stared out at the big blue world.

“And what will they think of us, after all this time?” asked Lebedeas.

Bethany looked at Caesar, a sidelong question in her eyes.

“How cruel to crawl upon the earth,” she said, “when we’ve been kings of heaven.”

Caesar put his arm around her, and kissed her temple.

“My friends,” he said, “We’ve seen many things, but in all our travels we’ve never found a home. This planet holds the key to our future more than any alien world. How will we live? How will they greet us? I don’t know, but I know one thing: this planet is where we belong. It’s where we all belong.”

More than half the National Space Council's expeditions vanished without a trace. Those who returned brought strange tales of a difficult life among the stars. And the people of Earth are left to wonder: are the rest of their children truly lost, or are they still out there somewhere, forming new homes and cultures that will some day bridge the gap of space and time to rejoin the planet of their birth?

The End
