

BEYOND URANUS

BY

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Beyond Uranus

By Stewart Bruce and Nigel Moreland

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To Claire, Francesca and Amelia.

This book has seen several versions released over the last two years. This is the final version.

Beyond Uranus is book 1 of a trilogy

Beyond Uranus (2012)

The Rings of Uranus (2013)

Inside Uranus (2014)

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Chapter 1 - Leap of faith

Time was waiting to slap Roy, finally after all these years of burning the candle at both ends his name reached the top of the list. However, Time wanted to indulge itself first, with a bit of fun just to wind him up. If it had a body, instead of being a disconnected corporeal entity, its shoulders would now be merrily heaving up and down, hands wringing together in glee anticipating the approaching mirth and if Time had a mouth and a voice it would be cackling out, '*Hubble bubble, trouble and toil*' like a witch with no sense of rhyme. However it didn't and it wasn't

*

Meanwhile, six billion kilometres from Earth, hidden from any form of detection, lay an alien space station, gracefully orbiting our solar system and keeping away unwanted visitors. In a secluded corridor, two dark haired men were quietly conspiring over certain matters. The bearded one said, "His father cost my father his life, so I will welcome him as he deserves, my lord Loki."

"Don't let him know what you know, otherwise he will be forewarned. He has a way of intuitively seeing matters and you don't want to alert him."

"And you promise me..."

"I promise nothing fool! Asgardians make no bargains with insignificant humans. I merely tell you what was and what is to come. How you use that is no concern of mine, other than you never mention my name or more than just your life will be forfeit."

The bearded man turned to walk away back to his quarters, the other one gestured with his hand and disappeared.

*

Minutes later Doctor John D'Eath, the dark haired and bearded man, was sat staring at a black screen in his apartment. Every time he made contact with the other aliens, the screen seemed black and he had yet to glimpse who he had been dealing with. Apparently they lived in low-light conditions and although there are allegedly seven thousand shades of black it would take very keen sight to distinguish between them.

"Why can't we just ussse your computer?" asked a voice from the dark screen.

"My computer is a stubborn son of a bitch," answered John. "You would never break it. I don't know why but each computer has its own personality and mine is so strong it would be useless trying to turn it into something functional. Every time I talk to you I have to put it somewhere it cannot hear me and then I get an interrogation about what I've been doing. I'm really beginning to loathe it with a passion."

"We have our ways, but we don't care about the program, we jussst want the computer."

"Well I have plans for my crappy computer and it involves a very heavy hammer but I'm going to get a replacement for it."

"Ssso, what are you going to do Doctor D'Eath. We want sssome action from you."

"I want you to be ready to meet me in a few weeks from now."

"You will have a computer?"

"Maybe. If you come quickly when I call"

"Why? We need to know your plansss."

whilst the stupid, annoying noise continued. I swung my legs off the bed and with a clenched fist satisfyingly punished the kill button.

The cool water of the long since broken shower cascaded over me, shocking a semblance of life into my shivering, abused body and mind. The chore of dressing was fumblingly accomplished, to be followed by a mug of strong, hot coffee and then I was reluctantly ready to leave. As I shuffled towards the front door I caught sight of my physical deterioration in the mirror, my once dark hair was beginning to shine with grey. My tummy used to be really flat until I hit thirty but then my six-pack had bloated to nine. I wasn't yet fat, but you could tell my diet consisted of calorific crap, vis-a-vis lager and pizza. I grabbed hold of each side of my gut and pushed my hands in toward each other so I could see what I would look like with a big beer belly, "Yuck!" I conned myself with another promise to be healthier and thirty seconds later I was in the car and, as usual, late.

On a good day I could make it to work in ten minutes. On a very good day all the traffic lights would be green. The old dodderers would be sleeping until after the rush hour and all the farmer's tractors would be locked away in sheds. Today wasn't a good day. The world and its dog were out, just to get in my way. Time was having such fun watching me getting ever more uptight, throwing my hands in the air and swearing at another curiously swift change of the lights against me. "You bastards! Why don't we get as long as they do?" I irritably enquired of no one other than the light sequence. Making matters worse were the half-asleep ones at the front. "Are you here for a holiday? Look it is green, get a shift on feller." Or, "What're you waiting for, a written invitation?" The creepers are the worst. They try to hold the car on the clutch, usually failing. Then when the lights finally turn green they get all excited, over-react and dump the clutch, stalling the car. So we all miss a turn, "Plonker!" Though, of course, I didn't curse loudly enough to be heard by anyone outside my car. I didn't want to cause offence. Time was tickled. If it had a body, which it didn't, then it would have been tickled pink!

Then the bad luck took a turn for the worse and went Lemming-like for an early morning plummet. When for some unknown reason I sensed a presence in the car and my eyes were drawn to the rear view mirror. What I saw didn't register immediately but later I would come to realise that I'd seen myself, a second Roy sitting in the back seat alongside someone else mostly out of sight. A chill scampered up my spine, then jumped off the top of my head and bravely ran for cover. I leaned forwards and putting my other mouth close to my ear, told myself to watch for Simon's car tonight. Then the unseen stranger said "That's enough information, punch the TWAT now" and then they were gone, I flinched but didn't feel a thing! Perhaps they weren't referring to me. Then the back seat was empty again, how strange!

'Now that's something you don't see every day,' thought Time, *'two of the same victim, together in the same place, how odd. Two stones with one bird, I feel lucky punk! You've made my day.'* Rhyme wasn't the only thing that he didn't do well. Then Time felt the familiar tug of a temporal displacement field and watched the second Roy depart along with the other person from the rear of the humans car transport thingy and he was also there as the other two arrived at when they went, in time that is. After all, Time is everywhere all the time. *'Hmmm, father needs to know about this, he'll want to keep an eye on all three of that pair.'* At which point, Time was satisfied with Roy's havoc and went off to victimise someone else.

Sometimes, thought Roy, my brain can deal with really odd stuff, whereas at other times it capitulates and just blanks it out as though it never happened. Normally I could cope with seeing myself in a mirror. I don't claim to be unusually gifted or anything, it's just one of those shocks that life somehow prepares you for. Today was different, there I was moving independently and talking to me before I'd said anything. I'd like to say that my brain was now a seething mass of thought and reactions, possibly engaging the 'fight or flight' mechanisms. However, the cells that dealt with all the difficult stuff were now lying down in a darkened room, swigging bottles of 'Milk of Amnesia' and the only ones doing any work were those who dealt with the common-place actions like breathing, heart beating, not weeing myself and driving. Fortunately, none of those decided to get creative and we moved along in the traffic without incident.

So, I passed the minutes by praying the traffic would keep moving and calming myself by thinking about some of the classes I was going to teach. Had my dad still been around I'm sure he would have been proud of me, but becoming a teacher had happened by accident and for the last ten years I'd been in a job I no longer had any enthusiasm for. Teaching a subject I loved to kids I didn't. What went wrong? Three years I'd spent at university doing a computer science degree and I loved it. I should have wowed the world, and at the very least ended up in a top company keeping their I.T. department running whilst earning big wages. So that by now I would have enough to retire. I blamed my college mate Tim. During the last year of my degree Tim had said to me "Why don't you get a Post Graduate Teaching Certificate?"

"What for? I'm going to be Bill Gates' bitch," I flippantly replied.

"It's a backup plan," Tim said, "in case you don't land one of those big jobs. It will mean you can teach instead. Whilst you're teaching you can still apply for the big bucks but have a nice secure job with a regular income and lots of holidays." It all sounded so logical and made such good sense. Funny how bad advice sometimes pretends to be so shrewd.

When I was a youngster I always thought teachers finished their day early and had lots of holidays. What I didn't realise is that it was just the kids that finished early and I was still in school two hours after they had left and a lot of my evenings at home would be taken up with marking. I didn't realise that I would spend most of my holidays writing schemes of work. I didn't realise that my job would turn into a seven day week, working at least sixty hours, fifty weeks of the year. I didn't realise it would suck the life out of me. That's a lot of 'I didn't realise' that I didn't realise!

By the time my teaching career had settled down and I had the time to apply for jobs I found I wasn't getting interviews. On phoning some of the companies I got similar answers "We were quite impressed with your application but we need to employ an I.T. specialist not a teacher. We've kept your details and have them on file." A teacher! How the bloody hell did that happen?

Pulling into the car park at the Beaufield School I could see that mine was the only space that was empty, so I slotted the car into place. Yanking the hand brake on, it occurred to me that it was something of a Freudian gesture indicating that I too wasn't going anywhere. At precisely 8.45 am, I stepped out of the car and took a long look at the crumbling edifice representing the school building, wondering if nineteen seventies architects had ever had any training. It was an unimaginatively regular cold grey, utilitarian and featureless building and

definitely without soul. Thoughts of Thomas Gradgrind from Dickens 'Hard Times' crossed my mind, with questions over whether or not we had improved since then.

The designer thought it would be a great idea to clad the whole building with glass. Had he or she ever met any teenagers? Over the years as each, and almost every, pane of glass had been broken they were begrudgingly replaced with grey painted sheets of ply wood until the whole building had deteriorated from fresh and shiny, to a depressingly bland medley with panels of infill grey. That each year the council bought a slightly different shade meant that batches of panels were in diverse tints, allowing the school to be dated. Like cutting a tree down and counting the rings, here you only needed to count the hotchpotch of different greys and you'd know how old the school was.

From above the reception what was supposed to be a black eagle, but looked more like a stuffed vulture, gazed hungrily on those who passed underneath. Doing so, I made my way up the main corridor towards the staffroom. I always thought the main corridor was an ironic pre-cursor to the day because it was so depressing. Painted in off-white aged to drab, it remained unheated, unattractive and lacking in any display work to inspire the pupils. With each step along the corridor, vitality was sucked from the hapless victim and only the stoutest zombies ever reached the far end.

Talking of which, "McCormack?" crackled a voice, like finger nails scraped down a blackboard. I didn't have to look around to see who it was, as I recognised the icy blast of the Head Teacher, Mr Williams, rattling with the chill of his constant anger. And I'll swear blind that the ambient temperature always dropped by at least two degrees in his presence. I often thought about why he was so angry and came to the conclusion that it was because the kids hated him, and parents, and the staff, and the governors, and the support staff, caretakers, dinner ladies, cleaners and probably his own family too. The kids all sniggered, when he swept past, and called him 'Batman' behind his back because he always wore his graduation gown. It was as though it had been surgically affixed. Here we were in the twenty first century, at a secondary school with students from the rump-end of nowhere and he wore a gown. Served him right to be called Batman and hated by everybody including, surely, his wife.

"You're late," he said, with a little too much triumph in his voice for my liking.

"Touché and ditto," I replied informatively. "The meeting started three minutes ago." Looking the man in the eyes was always an uncomfortable experience. Hidden away within their depths were glimpses of something akin to superiority, an air of overlordship. Using the teachers as his vassals helping to control the apprentice serfs indented to the school. It made me shiver.

"You think you're so funny McCormack but I'm not due to be in that meeting this morning as I have an appointment with a parent. And as for being late I got into school at seven forty five this morning. Were you even awake at seven forty five?" Maybe people hated him because he was always so smug and an artisan at bullying, oh yes he'd perfected the science of emotional thumping.

"Look, I'd love to stand here and pass pleasantries with you but I'm a bit late for a meeting. I shall have to give my apologies and explain that I was held up by the Head Teacher."

“You’re not funny McCormack and you do know this is the fourth time you’ve been late this week, but then why would you break the habits of a lifetime?”

“Is this going to last long? By the time I get to this meeting it’ll be all over.”

“Go now but remember you have a performance management review coming up and I’m going to make sure I’m sitting on that meeting.”

“Oh no,” I said this with all the emotionless sarcasm I could muster. Minor threats from the Head were, for me anyway, common place and meaningless. I knew that nothing would be or could be done so long as my teaching was judged as good along with my exam results. I turned and continued to walk at a leisurely pace towards the staffroom. “I’m watching you McCormack,” came a fading voice behind me and I chuckled to myself. Batman’s a stalker, but at least he didn’t tell me he loved me.

I missed the meeting and the day went like most days. Registration had the usual suspects turning up late like every other Thursday, or Wednesday, Tuesday, Monday or Friday for that matter. Lesson one was a brave attempt at teaching year seven pupils how to use a spreadsheet. Set four wasn’t the lowest ability set but they were close. The difference between sets four and five was that most of the kids in four could turn the computers on.

I thought about playing “Question Bingo”. It’s a game where teachers write five questions they think will be asked by the kids during the lesson. As each question is asked it is crossed off. After the last question you shout out “BINGO!” During the lesson I prepared my five questions:

How do you add two numbers together?

Where has my work gone from last lesson?

Why can’t I save my work?

Can I go to the toilet?

Why can’t I do this in Word?

I think I would have shouted bingo in the first five minutes with seven set four and a total of four times during the lesson.

The other lessons drearily passed, almost without notice and my shouting ‘BINGO’ was becoming monotonously repetitive. Then suddenly, I was facing the final hurdle of the day’s last class. Through all this though, I couldn’t shake the nagging sensation at the back of my mind that something unexpected was expected. A tiny tendril of thought was quietly ringing a bell, something mellifluous and almost obscured within the mists of important but lost.

Last up was to be year nine set two. Most of the students had already decided if they were going to opt for the computer course next year so the class had two very distinct groups. One group were hard workers trying to impress me with their I.T. skills and the other group couldn’t give a crap. In ten years of teaching I’d never learnt how to motivate the ‘couldn’t give a crap’ students because my empathic nature meant that I too couldn’t give a crap.

Had the last five lessons been the only day of my life that I would ever teach, I guess I would have found it interesting. However, after ten years of this I had lost my mojo and it was fair to say I was bored out of my tiny little skull. Let’s face it, I was in the wrong job but trapped in a rut and unable to break or escape from the cycle.

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There was a great feeling of relief when the final bell went, and not just from the kids. I had about four hours worth of marking but I decided to leave it for the weekend because ‘that’s what weekends are for, isn’t it?’ Sods Law meant that the drive home was ironically quick and I was soon watching the news on television. My TV was probably a little too big for my living room and to be honest dominated it, but it was great for playing games on. I guess my whole house was a bit small but two bedrooms seemed fine for somebody that lived by themselves, until Murphy’s Law kicked in and the amount of stuff I accumulated expanded to fill the space available. It was a modern house in a small, quiet estate just far enough from my school for the local kids to go to a different one.

When I first bought the house the previous owners had been into loud, bright colours and a lot of the rooms were subjugated by colours like sunburst yellow and orange flame. My tastes were much more conservative and I redecorated throughout with more subtle tones of blues, cream and greens. They had left a family of wooden gnomes in the garden and I had taken murderous delight watching them blister and turn to charcoal, smouldering on their own bonfire.

I checked my watch and as it was only four o’clock I thought I would plug myself into a game and have a couple of hours of playing. I switched my TV to the channel I have for my games console and loaded up my favourite first person shooter, put my headphones and microphone on and waited to join a death match. I found a good one with sixty five players. The idea of the game was to shoot everybody and even when they all decided to join forces against me during the second game I still came out on top of the leader board, too easy.

I went back to the main menu and chose another shooter and joined the first available multiplayer game. “Oh Christ not Zombie Love” Came a soft American accent over my ear piece. This was a more intimate killing field with only five players.

“Who in the hell is Zombie Love?” asked another player.

“Do you like winning?” said the first player.

“Yea, of course I do,” said the second.

“Then forget it cos you ain’t gotta chance with Zombie Love in the game.”

By this time I had five kills so I decided to join in the conversation. “Come on lads be sporting. Remember it’s not about winning it’s about how you play the game that’s important. A bit like the Korean war but with less blood.”

“You’re full of shit Zombie Love,” said one of the players.

“Jesus Christ I swear to God I didn’t see him,” came the player’s voice I’d just killed.

Over the next five minutes the conversation of the other players turned to co-operation and a pact that they only fired on me and not on each other. I loved it when this happened in a game because it presented me with a much bigger challenge. Playing against real people was brilliant because they are often unpredictable and much more of a challenge than the artificial intelligence built into the games for single player mode. Players joining forces to fight against me was increasingly common in most shooter games but I loved the challenge and didn’t take it as an insult.

The funny thing was that after an hour of playing the game the same players were still in the game and still trying to remove me from the top of the leader board. I didn’t mind the insults I was hearing over my headphones or the shouting or swearing because I knew deep down that they were having as much fun trying to beat me as I was winning.

“Sorry guys I need to stop and get something to eat. I’ll be back in about an hour if you want to be a bunch of losers again.” There was a stream of abuse from most of the players about me leaving followed by them saying their goodbyes in various fashions, some of them not rude.

It was about 6.00pm and so a pizza went into the oven and some lager went into the fridge. At 6.20 I was eating the best warmed up frozen pizza money could buy and opening my first can of lager. As I chomped through my slice of pizza I thought about the night’s entertainment. What to do or more precisely what to play? I didn’t watch much TV, I would catch the news when I came home and that would be about it. I hated the ‘reality’ shows where you take everyday people and put them into manufactured situations and to be honest, I hated the most of the rest of it too. So, as a rule, my evenings would be spent marking schoolwork or playing computer games.

I’d played and finished single player mode on all of my vast collection but my biggest passion was playing online, against other opponents and the more there were the more I liked it. I didn’t mind what genre game I was playing as long as I could play it against other people. It was this absorbing hobby that kept me awake to the early hours and made me late for work but I was hooked because I was good, very good. In the last five months of playing I was unbeaten, which was a very private fact that I was very proud of.

After finishing my pizza and clearing up the cardboard and cellophane, I went to the fridge to collect the second lager of the evening. As I open the fridge door and reached for the can, the front door bell rang. I picked up the lager and thought *‘That’s funny.’* It was funny because I didn’t get evening visitors. I’d invite friends around occasionally but they generally didn’t pop round unannounced. I opened my lager and walked towards the front door. The bell rang again. “OK, OK, keep your hair on,” I said under my breath.

As I opened the door there stood a man with the bearing of a club bouncer – no that’s unfair, he was broad but not fat and wobbly like some bouncers. He was wearing a black suit, about my height with very white albino-like skin, short spiky white hair and black rimmed glasses with lenses that had a pink tinge to them. There was a few seconds of silence followed by me saying “Yes?”

The man looked at me and as he did I couldn’t help but notice his eyes. They darted left and right like he was looking at a rapid tennis match or a speeded up version of that early video game Pong.

“Roy McCormack?”

“Yes. But I’m not buying anything and I don’t want God.”

“That’s good because I’m not selling anything. My name is Simon Philberts, do you mind if I come in? I have a job opportunity that I’d like to offer you. May I please come in to discuss the terms?”

I thought about this. Could it be that one of the companies I’d applied to years before had actually kept my information on file and were now looking for an I.T. specialist with an interest in education? I realised that this could be a job offer that could get me out of my crappy teaching job. His voice sounded normal enough, though what the local axe murderer would have sounded like I didn’t know, I took a punt. “OK,” I said, “but this had better be good.

I opened the door further so Simon could step through, closed the door behind him and led him into my living room. We shook hands, mine buried in his, but his grip was light so this certainly wasn't the hand of a bouncer or bailiff or even a manual worker and certainly not a murderer, I thought. I held my hand out and gestured to an arm chair in which Simon sat, well more correctly he sort of graciously flowed into the chair which groaned under the weight of a man a good deal heavier than I.

Just at that moment my phone rang, "Please excuse me I should get that, but I won't be a moment, I'll ask them to call me back later."

"Fine, we'll talk afterwards Mr McCormack."

I crossed over to the phone and answered giving my number.

"Roy," It was my mum, "I was feeling a bit lonely so I thought I'd ring for a chat."

"Mum, that's fine but I have someone here at the moment, a visitor, erm Simon Philberts I think he said."

"Oh! OK then Roy, you talk to your Simon, I'll call you tomorrow then?"

"Yes let's talk tomorrow mum. Goodbye." I put the phone down. Mum seemed strangely quick to leave us to it and I'm sure there was an edge to her voice when she said 'your Simon'. I brushed the uneasy feeling aside and turned towards my visitor.

"So, what exactly do you want?" I said, as I sat in the chair adjacent to him.

"You are Roy McCormack."

"Yes."

"And you teach."

"Yes."

"And play a lot of online games."

"Yes."

"Which you use the online game tag of Zombie Love."

"Erm Yeeess." I responded hesitatingly, starting to wonder where this was going.

"I work for a company that seeks out and recruits people with certain talents. We recruit people in all sorts of professions but your gaming ability has really shown up on our radar and we would like to offer you a position within our organisation. The work you will do is not directly related to the computer games industry, but you will find your skills very useful if you can adapt them to various other situations. We only recruit the best and are very selective to whom we make a job offer." Simon spoke in a boring monotone. It was like he was giving me the most important information of my life but didn't care because he'd said it a thousand times before.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing and my optimism flowered. *'This could be it,'* I thought. *'I bet this could be a chance to earn mega bucks and get out of teaching. Even if there wasn't a huge amount of money it could still be a way out of teaching.'* I was hooked. "OK, you've got my attention so tell me more."

"I cannot be too precise with the information at this moment but I can give you hints about what we want. Once you've signed your contract I can reveal all the information you need but the main thing to know at the moment is this. This is a onetime offer and if you decline you will never be approached again. You have twenty four hours to decide if you want to accept the offer. If you agree then you start on Saturday and will be collected at nine

o'clock in the morning. Whilst you are working for us, for reasons that will become apparent, any contact with friends and family will have to be minimal."

I thought the last part wasn't too bad because I didn't have many friends. My mum would phone every now and again but she lived three hundred miles away, which was a five or six hour drive. I hadn't had a girlfriend in eight years, not since dating 'Bridget the Midget' who was actually six feet tall. However, having only twenty four hours to decide and starting on Saturday was cutting it short. "What about my job?"

"Our research suggests you are not that bothered about teaching?" said Simon. "However, we will sort out all the paper work with your school and the local authorities so it won't be a problem. You do hate your job don't you? And if you accept this offer I promise you that you won't look back financially, nor will you need to teach again."

"OK then," I said, "so what can you tell me?"

Simon eased himself forward on the chair and looked straight at me. Well at least his head was pointing in my direction, his eyes continued their dance. "The job placement is far away," he said. I waited for him to give more information but that's as much as he said.

I scratched my chin and said "Like Gateshead?"

"It's much further than Gateshead."

"Newcastle?"

There was a pause as Simon seemed to consider if I was taking the Michael or just being very stupid. He opted for the stupid conclusion. "It's even further than Newcastle and you are going to take some time to truly appreciate how far this offer will take you." he said.

"Is it in this country?"

"No."

"Europe?"

"No."

"Got it. Australia."

"No."

I started thinking out aloud. "How can that be? Australia is around the other side of the planet from us. You cannot get further than Australia."

"You're thinking in very linear terms Mister McCormack. Try to think a bit more out of this world."

I chuckled to myself and said "The moon!"

"I hear the laughing and you are now thinking more three dimensionally, but you are still light years from the truth."

"Saturn?"

"Not even warm."

"Jupiter?"

"Jupiter is closer to Earth than Saturn." His eyes picked up tempo again and then slowed down.

"Your Anus!"

"I think you will find its pronounced Uranus."

I put on my best posh English accent and said "I think you'll find its pronounced Your Anus."

"Uranus."

“Your Anus.”

“I am sure it is pronounced Uranus.”

“Are you English?” I asked.

“No,” said Simon.

“Are you from Earth?”

“Err... you may struggle with this, but no.”

“Ah, that explains a lot! Then as a fully qualified Englishman and true born Earthman I can definitely tell you that it is absolutely pronounced Your Anus.”

Simon’s eyes had gone into overdrive. Although his speech remained at the same speed and it still had the same monotone boring lilt to it, I could tell he was getting very annoyed. Through almost gritted teeth he said “Let’s leave the pronunciation and move on. Further than Ur... the planet we’ve been discussing.”

“After that there’s just Neptune and Pluto but Pluto’s been downgraded to a minor planet.”

Simon’s eyes had returned to their usual game of pong. “Excellent and well done. Now think about the distance between Earth and Pluto, about three billion miles. Take that number and double it and that’s the distance of your new job.”

I could feel my eyebrows rise. I didn’t quite know what to think. I could feel the opportunity of a life time disappear as I consumed the information or was it disinformation? It was certainly too fantastic to believe. Simon was obviously a nut case with no job offer. Perhaps I should have felt angry with him for wasting my time but I actually felt a little depressed because I’d been so excited about the prospect of getting a real job in I.T. with a big salary, company car and all the trimmings. What I’d actually been offered was completely nuts and this man, if you could call him that, was blatantly one can short of the full six.

“So what you’re offering is a job that you cannot tell me anything about. You want me to sign the contract tomorrow and the job placement is out in space, twice the distance of Pluto.”

Simon looked intense and his eyes had slowed to a steady beginners tennis match. Then he said “I know it all sounds a bit fantastic but this could be the opportunity of a lifetime for you. What I need you to do is to take a leap of faith. Trust me and you will never regret your decision.”

All I could think was that Simon was bonkers. “I think it’s time for you to go.”

Simon raised himself up from the chair and walked with a surprisingly light tread to the front door. “Remember Mister McCormack you have twenty four hours.”

“Yea, whatever.”

I opened the door to let Simon leave. I stood there and watched as Simon walked down the drive. What a disappointing end to the evening and although I should have slammed the door, I leaned against the frame in disbelief of the complete and utter bullshit I had been told. Simon rounded the end of the drive and went out of sight. A couple of seconds later a car door opened with a hissing sound then shut with a barely audible clunk. Commanding my attention, I heard an unusual whine like a distant jet engine starting and then a sleek black car swished past the end of my drive. I did a double-take because the car wasn’t touching the ground and had no wheels! It actually glided past, entirely wheel-free, floating a foot above the ground. “Fuck me!”

That was the moment when recall and realisation bandied together and hit me, just as I thought *'Well that was unexpected. Hang on a minute, unexpected, unexpected, unexpected...'* My brain inserted a 'Break' clause which allowed me to escape the nested loop. I cautiously turned around to see if I would be there to impart some further information, but no I was alone and the only one of me.

Deep down at the bottom of my mind, in a tiny little shed behind the door with the modest sign saying 'All visitors welcome, please come in and browse', well no one bothers to pry where they are welcome. People only use subterfuge or jemmies to sneak into the places with big signs saying 'KEEP OUT'. Anyway behind this door, two of my brain-cells were congratulating each other for not letting me slam the door behind Simon and watching for the car.

*

Having put its wheels down so it didn't attract any unwanted attention, the sleek black car whined its way through the night. Eventually, it dipped underground into the car park of a black glassed building. A dark suited figure with spiky white hair and pale skin left the vehicle and made his way to a lift. He pressed a button and waited for it to arrive, stepping inside when the doors silently opened. At the requested floor, he emerged into a corridor with a single door at the end. The Gold lettering on it declared "Director". Simon knocked and waited. Ten seconds later a muffled shout summoned him in with the word "Come!"

Simon entered a large room. Opposite him at the other end of the room was a dark wooden desk with a monitor placed to one side of it. Behind it sat a man in a dark suit with dark rimmed glasses, short white hair and very pale nearly white skin. The lenses of the glasses were tinted pink, and behind them his eyes were playing ping pong. These two men were almost mirror images of each other and could pass for identical twins, yet strangely they were not traditionally related.

"Sit." Simon sat.

"Tell me how it went," said the director.

"He was an idiot."

"You know that's not true, you've seen the data and you know the history. We need him and I suspect he is going to play a vital role in the organisation. We both know that things are happening and we need Roy's ability to analyse and make intuitive guesses."

Rubbing his eyes with a hand under his glasses, he said "I don't mean to be rude Director, but my usual client for enrolling into the program is an Oxbridge graduate of science. Typically with several post graduate qualifications and an I.Q. that's bouncing off the top of the scale. By comparison, Roy appears to have an IQ exceeded by his own shoe-size and is frankly, an idiot. I don't get it and I cannot understand your logic, it's almost as if he's some sort of genetic throwback like a modern-day caveman. He's a lager guzzling, pizza eating I.T. failure that teaches in a dead end school."

The director took a deep breath to calm him and said "You knew the father and so did I. His father didn't have any of those qualities you described of your usual client and look what he achieved."

"Yes," said Simon "and look how it ended."

"All we ever found was the drive section of his shunter, we didn't even find a body and we don't know the true story of how it ended."

“But the records show...”

The director interrupted with “The records show nothing other than speculation. We don’t really know what happened and I doubt we ever will. Incidentally, I’ve also spoken with Roy’s mother, Margaret, and she won’t say anything until he’s settled.”

“That’s good, but are you sure you’re not doing this because of his father?”

“Simon, you’ve seen the data, you know this could work regardless of who you normally recruit. Do you think he’ll agree?”

“I don’t know Director. Talking of his father, I spotted one of his jars of layered sands sitting in the corner on a table.”

“I hope you didn’t mention it?”

“No, not at all.”

“Good! When you drove away, did you retract the wheels and use hover mode?”

“Yes Director.”

“Did he see you?”

“Yes, I used the jet whine to attract his attention and he was definitely watching as I drove past.”

“Excellent. What story did you tell him about where the station is?”

“I used the planets as a guide to distance and explained that it far beyond Your Anus.”

The director’s head jerked up and with some confusion and he said “Don’t you mean Uranus?”

“I bloody knew it!” said an exasperated Simon.

*

That Thursday night was a very strange one for me. I sat in my front room sipping my lager and had a good think about the events that had passed. I hadn’t done much serious thinking for a while and fair comment, I needed to dust the cogs a bit. All my life I’d followed seemingly shrewd advice and this was where it had got me. Don’t get me wrong, my life was, if anything, a little too comfortable. Simons offer was bonkers but that car suggested something, what harm could it do? Surely if that was real then the offer would be real? If I had witnessed something as weird as a floating car then perhaps there is a completely mad job offer situated outside our solar system. Perhaps the strangest thing was the way in which I had, so matter of fact, accepted the existence of aliens and their space station in our solar system, it was almost as if something or someone was calling to me.

All these thoughts kept swirling around my head all evening and before I knew it the time was 12.30am and time for bed. For about the first time in five years I hadn’t played a game.

In bed I lay awake for another two hours. I knew I would be knackered in the morning but I couldn’t sleep. I had reached a schism, I knew one when it bit me and this was a real humdinger. The left fork would carry on down the road of unfulfillment and boredom, to a lifetime of degeneration and emotional flat-lining. The right fork, however, could lead to who knows what? An adventure for sure, something that will make the heart beat faster. At that point I knew that my decision had been made and a plan slowly began to form in my head. I would accept the offer and if Simon turned out to be a complete nutter it wouldn’t make any difference because the job wouldn’t exist. And then there was that car. I couldn’t

get the image out of my head. What a car! When I did sleep, I had a curious dream about being Odysseus on a raft in stormy seas and being washed up naked, on a beach.

*

Be bebe bebedebeep, bebe bebedebeep bebe bebedebeep...

8.00 am on a Friday morning and the last thing I wanted to hear was my alarm clock pounding in my ears. I opened an eye and tried to focus on the offending noise maker. With a grunt I went to push the snooze button but stopped and clattered the off button. I felt great, apart from my head which throbbed a little from the lager and an unpleasant tang from something that had died in my mouth, all because I knew I was about to change my life. Well, as long as Simon wasn't a nut case. He described it as 'a leap of faith' and now I knew exactly what he meant because this really was going to be me jumping in blind.

I went through my usual routine and arrived at school for 8.30am. I even forgot my daily look at the bleak monolith to comprehensive education. Locking the car I quickly walked across the car park, past the usual throng of year sevens waiting outside the reception area and made my way up the zombie corridor which led towards the staffroom.

"Oh my god, the night shift is here!" scraped a voice preening at me from several metres behind.

I knew it was the Head again and turning on my heels to face him, shouted "What!"

"Don't take that tone with me McCormack. I'm just so shocked to see you arrive early. Well, when I say early, I mean early by your standards not by my mine, you're still a part-timer to me."

"If I'm late you moan at me about it and if I'm early you make stupid comments. Why don't you give it a rest and go and bully somebody else for a change."

"You don't need to take that tone with me and I think calling me a bully is a bit strong, and a serious accusation."

"It's not an accusation it's an observation and therefore a fact."

"You need to be very careful where you start throwing the 'F' word about, especially with your performance management meeting coming up."

"And that's what I mean by bullying. You are making a threat that if I don't speak to you with the respect you don't deserve then you are going to make sure I get a poor review for my performance management. As a teacher you should recognise the text book definition of a bully."

His face started to redden "You are making a big mistake here with these accusations. What you need to do is apologise before it gets out of hand."

"Apologise? OK I'm very sorry that you're a bully."

"Retract that statement now." His voice started to get louder and so did mine.

"OK, I'm not sorry, but you're still a bully. Listen here Batman, I do a dam good job here and get cracking results from our students. My observations from my team leader are consistently good but you still feel it necessary to single me out. So for once, why don't you back off and leave me alone?"

"Who the hell do you think you're talking to?"

"I think I'm talking to a pompous prig that has no idea about how to motivate staff or pupils and thinks the only way to get results is to indulge in petty bullying. You're a coward because you think you can get away with it just because of your position."

I could see his mouth moving up and down but no words were coming out and his face was slowly turning from European pink to Mediterranean sun burnt red. The veins at his temples came to the surface and started to throb.

And then he erupted. "You can't speak to me like that. I'm going to make sure this goes down as an official complaint with a written disciplinary and I will be pushing for a suspension. How dare you speak to me like that? How very...."

I cut him off by shouting back at him rather too loudly, "I'll save you the bother. As of now I quit, so you can take your job and shove it where the sun don't shine." I started walking back down the corridor towards my car. It was time to leave as my job had been done. I could hear him ranting as I walked away. He was bellowing something about me never working in education again and how I would never get a job because he would see to it that no employer would take me on having left them in the lurch like this. Before I went through the outside doors, I turned and closed my fingers as if holding an imaginary rod and moved my hand back and forth in a rude gesture towards the crimson faced Head Teacher.

As I stepped through the doors I emerged outside to a silent group of students. It was like a scene from the Hitchcock film 'The Birds' only with kids rather than birds. At that point I had no idea exactly how much they had heard of the conversation. The silence was eerie and the only thing missing were tumble weeds rolling across the yard behind them. I stood for a few moments looking at various faces of the students and then from the back somebody started clapping. Slowly more and more students joined in until all were clapping. Time to leave.

*

When I got home I went back to bed. I was knackered as I had very little sleep the previous night. I awoke at 3.00pm and spent the rest of the day pottering around and tidying up.

*

Another cardboard Pizza was eaten at 6.30pm washed down with a can of lager and then I sat in my living room and waited. At 7.00pm the door bell rang. I opened the door to Simon and invited him in. He sat in the same seat as the previous evening and so did I, next to him that is, not in the same chair on his knee or anything.

"Have you considered my proposition?" he said.

"Yes and I would like to accept."

"OK. This is what happens next. You sign the contract and then you can ask any question you like. Once you sign the contract you are committed to a three year tour of duty. You cannot be released from this contract for a minimum of three years unless you are dismissed from this contract. After this three year period you may leave or we may extend your contract. Do you agree?"

"Yes I do. Where do I sign?"

"Nowhere Mister McCormack it's just a saying." Simon pulled out a small block of plastic. "Place one of your fingers on the top of this device," he said. I put my finger on top and a blue light scanned from one end to the other and back again. When it finished Simon said, "Welcome to the company. You now have one hour of questioning. Tomorrow morning I will come to your house and pick you up at nine. You will not need to pack anything as everything will be provided for you. Let's start the questioning."

I used the hour as best I could and tried to glean as much information from Simon as was possible. Some of it put me at ease as he explained that my house would be looked after, important phone calls and mail would be redirected to me and there would be a cover story about me so people wouldn't get suspicious about my disappearance. The cover involved me going off to some far flung part of the world to teach and help poor children learn to speak English. Some of the information was a bit mind blowing and quite a lot to take in. The main facts were repeated to me on several occasions.

I would be working on Earth Station Three. There were six Earth Stations all placed outside the solar system at an equal distance from each other in a sort of star formation but billions of miles apart. Each station was manned mostly by selected people from Earth. The stations were provided by an alien race that also provided all the equipment needed to keep the stations running. The main duties of the station were to keep all intergalactic traffic from entering Earth's solar system. Any doing so could be detected by Earth's radio telescope or, if it came close enough, ordinary optical telescopes. It had been decided by some sort of galactic type United Nations body that Earth was not yet ready for first contact and until then all ships should be diverted around the solar system. I was reassured that this quarantine was mostly for the benefit of humankind, to allow us to develop along a normal path rather than be artificially accelerated by the discovery of aliens and their advanced technology. Earth was to be treated with kid-gloves, apparently we have an unusually rapid pace of evolution and technological development and there are civilisations out there billions of years older but less developed. So we are something of a galactic anomaly, child prodigies.

Most intergalactic traffic was automated. The problem was that it went from A to B via the quickest route. Most of a journey involved Hyper Travel which was faster than light and didn't cause a problem. However you couldn't go straight from A to B because you had to make several stops for days or even weeks depending on the total distance. You had to drop out of it because the navigation computers had to be realigned to keep the vessel on course, unfortunately planets never stay still. Whilst in Hyper Travel navigation computers were useless which is why you have to stop to make course corrections. It was during this period that ships could enter the Earth's solar system and be detected from Earth hence the need for the stations.

Simon tried to explain the complexities of Hyper Travel to me but most of it sounded like classical Greek and 'ton ployon'. It had something to do with travelling beyond light speed and certain laws of physics changing in ways that the computers were not able to cope with which is why they cannot navigate until they are back in 'normal' space. There was also the problem that if you are using supposedly fixed points like stars to navigate then that also couldn't be done because you cannot see light in Hyper Travel and that none of the so-called 'fixed' points ever stayed put. The words uncertainty principle, super string and dark matter kept on cropping up. Stifling a yawn I tried to look interested. Simon explained that these were Earth terms that barely scratched the surface of three states of Absolute Physics.

The Galactic standards of physics roughly translated into English were Quantum (on a very small scale), Macro (what we can see as people) and Hyper (what happens when you travel much faster than light). Quite a lot of the Earth ideas and theories were a bit wrong. "And don't get me started on the big bang" he commented at one point. The best explanation he came up with was "Space Travel is like moving through a maze. Only every time you

move you have to shut your eyes. That means when you stop you can open your eyes but you have to ascertain exactly where you are before you can make your next move with your eyes closed. Going from one side of the Galaxy to the other may take a few years but it's quicker than the hundred and twenty thousand years it would take crawling along at the speed of light, apart from the fact you cannot travel at the speed of light and if you could you'd end up with all sorts of time dilation problems."

"I don't get it. What is Hyper Travel if you cannot travel at the speed of light?"

"Making the mass of a ship travel at the speed of light takes an infinite amount of energy and cannot be done. Hyper Travel isn't travelling at the speed of light, it is much faster than the speed of light, a sort of by-pass perhaps. The laws of Macro Physics work fine up to the speed of light which is why you cannot travel at the speed of light because the law says you cannot get there. Once you pass the speed of light the laws change to Hyper Physics and the energy requirements are very modest in comparison. So, rather than getting faster and faster to get you to the speed of light we miss all that part out and go straight to Hyper Travel. Simple isn't it."

"No it chuffing isn't," I replied. By this time my head was spinning. Macro, Quantum, Hyper, String, uncertainty, blah de blah, it was all as clear as mud. I cannot tell you how relieved I was when Simon said it was time for him to leave.

I must admit that when Simon spoke about the physics all I seemed to hear was; 'Making the mass of a ship travel at the speed of light dippy do-dah fizzy energy. Macro Physics did I put some lager in the fridge? Hyper Travel I could murder a curry or should I sit on a pizza?'

"Don't forget that I will pick you up at nine in the morning so please be ready. If I were you I would also leave the lager out tonight. You will thank me for it tomorrow."

"OK, thanks Simon." I led Simon to the door and opened it for him. He stepped out and said "Good luck with the next phase of your journey. Don't worry too much about all the physics tonight. I'm sure it will be second nature to you after a while but to be honest most of it you won't actually need to know, because it will be looked after by your computer."

"Thanks Simon. And Simon..."

"Yes."

"Sorry about Your Anus."

I closed the door and walked into the living room. Seven forty five in the evening, time for a lager or three.

Chapter 2 - Preparing to Leave

Be bebe bebedebeep, bebe bebedebeep bebe bebedebeep...

8.00 am on a Saturday morning and the last thing I wanted to hear was my alarm clock pounding in my ears. I opened my left eye and tried to focus on the offending noise-maker. With a grunt I pushed the snooze button.

Be bebe bebedebeep, bebe bebedebeep bebe bebedebeep...

8.05 am on a Saturday morning and the last thing I wanted to hear was my alarm clock pounding in my ears. "I've got to get up and sorted." Off went the alarm clock and I went down to the bathroom for a quick shower.

I think I might have had one over the eight again last night and was feeling a bit worse for wear. I had decided that a little celebration was in order and spent the evening drinking lager and playing my favourite games online. I have a number of online cyber 'friends' who I've never actually met in real life. I regularly played against them because they were very good players and a bit of a challenge for me. It was nice to say goodbye before I left to go and teach English abroad to deprived third world children. One or two of my friends were happy because it meant they now had a chance at getting to the top of the leader board and a few were genuinely gutted because they enjoyed the competition.

I got dressed and went down for a strong cup of coffee to wake me up properly. As I finished making it the phone rang. "Hello."

"Roy? Why haven't you phoned me? Don't you care? I could have fallen down the stairs and broken something. I could be slowly dying in the hallway waiting for you to phone and help."

"Mum, I only spoke to you the other night, and if you remember you were the one who was going to phone me back, besides you're only fifty nine years old. You're not a decrepit grandmother with a mobility problem."

"A grandmother, I should be so lucky. You'd think working in a school, being surrounded by beautiful young teachers you would have no problem getting a girlfriend, getting married and having a family."

"Mum you really have no idea about the staff at my school. I've told you before there isn't a chance in hell of me dating anybody from school. Even after drinking heavily at the Christmas parties the beer goggles aren't strong enough to make me fancy any of them."

"Your poor father, he always wanted grandchildren, God rest his soul."

"Thanks mum you always know how to try and cheer me up. I always like the emotional knife in the back about what dad would have wanted. Did you actually want something or can I go and slit my wrists now?"

"You're so rude Roy and it's no wonder you cannot get a girlfriend."

"Yes mum. What did you want?"

"I was only phoning to make sure you've remembered that I'm coming up at half term and did you want me to bring any of my pickles?"

"Mum we had this conversation last Wednesday and yes I would love some of your pickles. Oh, hang on, there's a bit of a problem."

"Oh?"

"I've jacked my job in."

“Are you completely out of your mind?”

“I got a better offer.”

“What sort of offer?”

“I’ve agreed to go and teach abroad. I’m going to go and teach English to children in deprived countries.”

“That’s very noble of you, teaching abroad eh, and will that pay your mortgage?”

“Yes mum it’s all sorted. I will do at least three years and the house will still be here for me when I get back.”

“Three years!”

“It’s OK mum I will still get back to visit and you can phone me at anytime as my phone calls are all going to be redirected to wherever I am.”

“Are you sure about all this? It’s very sudden and you’ve never mentioned to me about wanting to go and teach abroad. Is it something to do with that Simon what’s his name from the other night?”

There it was again, I’m certain there was an edge to her voice when she mentioned him. “Mum I’m one hundred percent certain that this is what I want to do.”

“Well it’s a good thing that you’re doing and I hope you’ll enjoy it. Half term is only four weeks away so you must be starting soon. I could come to visit you earlier if you like, just to see you before you leave. When do you leave?”

“Today.”

“**TODAY!**” I had to hold the phone away from my ear it was so loud.

“Mum, I’m really sorry but it was an offer I couldn’t refuse. I promise I’ll make it up to you and when I get back in the country I’ll spend a week with you.”

“It seems so lonely what with your father gone, and now you’re going away too.”

“But it’s not like I live close to you anyway. Come on, it takes me almost six hours to drive to you. We only see each other twice a year and I’ll bet I get to see you more often now I’m working abroad because I’ll come and visit you every time I’m back. Don’t forget you can still phone me anytime because all the calls will be redirected.”

“As long as you promise to visit every time you’re back.”

“I promise mum.”

“OK well, in a strange way I’m glad and I’m sure that you’ll enjoy the experience.”

The rest of the phone call was small talk about my uncle and aunt and various cousins and what they were doing. We said our goodbyes and she hung up. I had a strange feeling that there was something in our conversation that remained unsaid, was it something about my father? Maybe I was just being oversensitive.

I felt a bit guilty about my mother, and always more so after being on the phone to her. I think it’s because I lived so far away from her and she always talked about my father. They had met at university and had married after graduation. They were married quite a while before I arrived but as their jobs were well paid, it meant I could indulge my childhood in computers and consoles. My father was great fun when he was there but he had long contracts somewhere abroad which meant that he wasn’t always around. Apparently, my mother had worked with my father to begin with, but when she became pregnant she had returned to the UK. She eventually taught in a secondary school which she absolutely loved

and that meant she could spend all the holidays with me at home and sometimes with my father if he had the time off to fly back.

He'd died about fifteen years ago in a mysterious accident at work. Mum never liked to talk about it, but they had never conclusively proved that the body they found was my dad and I think that mum secretly hoped it wasn't. In her grief she had retired early at the age of forty four, just as I was going off to university. She said that the loss of my father had left her broken hearted and that she couldn't face going into school to teach anymore. The compensation from the accident also meant that financially she was secure. I felt bad about being at university for the first year because I left my mother at home to deal with her loss. Having that phone call brought all the memories and feelings back because it felt like I was doing the same thing again. I tried to feel better by convincing myself that my uncle and aunt lived nearby and there were the cousins who were also very close geographically but I guess at the end of the day I was her son and her only child. Perhaps when the three years were up I should sell up my house and move closer as I didn't actually have a job in the area anymore.

The door bell rang and I went and answered the front door. Simon stood in front of me wearing identical clothing to what he had worn the previous two nights, *'hmm big wardrobe, little choice.'* I thought.

"Are you ready Mister McCormack?"

"As I'll ever be Mr Philberts." I left the house closing the door behind me. At the end of the drive I looked back at my house. I'd enjoyed living in my little two bed roomed house and I had a lot of happy memories. It represented good times with pizza and lager but I knew it was time to say goodbye and move on, I waved at the house and whispered "goodbye."

"Is there somebody in the house?" asked Simon.

"No I was saying goodbye to my house."

"To your house?"

"Simon, you have no soul. You should listen to more jazz."

"What?"

"Oh nothing, just something my dad used to say."

We both rounded the drive and I stood and stared at the sleek black car. I was surprised, I half expected to see something like a DeLorean but this was a large car that looked more like a sporty Rolls Royce. The body work was one continuous seamless sheet of material with no sign of joints even for the doors. Simon pressed his hand upon the side of the car and a back door opened. I entered and looked around the spaciouly plush interior, inhaling notes of leather and sandalwood and I half expected a butler to pop out of the glove box and offer me cocktails. The seating was a rich brown leather material and the sides and roof were cream coloured. Simon got in the driver's seat.

"Is this real leather?" I foolishly enquired, looking for something to say.

"We don't kill animals for raw material or meat so we use synthetic alternatives. The entire interior is made from a polymer that mimics the texture and qualities of leather."

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The car whined its way through the country side with wheels down so it didn't attract any attention. It eventually slipped into the underground car park of a black glass building. A dark suited figure with short white hair and very pale skin left the vehicle followed by a

middle aged man in jeans and a tee shirt. We made our way to the elevator and Simon pressed the button for the top floor.

On arrival at the top floor Simon fetched out a bag from a locker and handed it to me. He pointed to a door and said "Could you please use that room to change into these." I opened the bag and looked inside. There was some sort of garment. I reached inside, pulled it out and held it up. It was a white one piece jumpsuit with red stripes down the edges of the arms and legs. It was the kind of thing that wouldn't have looked out of place on most science fiction shows and films. I have no idea why jumpsuits were seen as futuristic on these shows but I did know that they looked bloody awful. Maybe it was because nobody in their right mind wore them that they were seen as futuristic or maybe people in the future would have no fashion sense, like if people in the sixties with their quiffs, cool suits and brothel-creeper shoes could have seen people in the seventies with their stacked-up platform shoes, flairs or those crushed velvet loon pants and massive collars with ties you could use as an emergency hammock.

"Are you kidding me? Do you know how bad these look? Do you realise how many shows I've seen with actors wearing similar garments that are so badly fitting you can quite easily see every ripple of their meat and two veg? I really don't want to wear a bit of clothing that looks as though I have my John Thomas hanging out."

"Hmm. This is not an uncommon reaction although you express it more colourfully than my other recruits. Try the garment on. I assure you that your penis will remain hidden. The material is not Earth made and is of the highest quality. You will find it warm when cold, cool when warm, self cleaning, self repairing and extremely comfortable. Trust me."

"OK, but any hint of my wedding tackle and it's off." I went through the door into a changing cubicle and put the garment on. The fit was fantastic as Simon had said. I checked myself out in the mirror and to my surprise it actually looked good. I was also pleasantly surprised that you couldn't see my sausage wriggling. The shoes were ankle high and were made from a very similar material and so much more comfortable than the trainers I had taken off. "What do you want me to do with my old clothes Simon?" I shouted.

"Bring them out so we can put them in the locker for whenever you come back here." I took the clothes out and put them in the locker. "Do you like them?" he asked.

"I've got to admit I do. This material is brilliant and you can't see my bits."

"Follow me please." Simon led me through several corridors and through a door that opened into a massive room with half the roof missing. As I looked up I could see blue sky with a few clouds and although I could feel a very cool breeze against my face I felt nice and warm in my new clothing. In the centre of the room was a large spherical object. We walked over to it and Simon pressed his hand against the side. A small hatchway, big enough for me to step through, slid open from a seamless join in the craft.

"This is an automated transport pod that will take you to a waiting shuttle in high orbit. The journey will take about half an hour and there is an orientation film for you to watch. Step inside and have a good journey."

"Thanks." I held my hand out. Simon looked at it and then held his hand out. I grabbed hold of it and said "I'll guess I'll see you later."

"Sooner than you think perhaps."

I stepped inside and the door closed behind me. The inside of the craft was quite spartan. The curved walls were painted white and there was a very small window that I hadn't spotted from the outside. To my left was a black chair that looked like it had come from a fighter jet, bolted to the floor and opposite there was a small TV screen which read 'Please fasten your safety harness.' I strapped myself in and felt that funny feeling you get when an elevator starts moving, though there was no initial jolt. As I looked out of the little window I could see the walls slipping away and then the top of the building followed by fields and trees that got slowly smaller and smaller. The ride was nothing like footage I'd seen of astronauts being shaken and pinned down with high g-force. The acceleration was smooth and graceful like a lift.

The screen lit up and started to show a sort of information video. A lot of it was similar to what Simon had told me the other night. It started with a big lecture by Simon about all sorts of physics stuff with obscure words like quantum, Hyper Travel, dark matter, string theory which somehow heightened my feelings of inadequacy for science, especially Physics.

*

As the pod started ascending, Simon turned his back and quickly made his way to the elevator. He enjoyed this part of the job. This is where he would make his way to the Director's office and they would watch the response of the potential recruit whilst they were stuck in a claustrophobic pod on their first ever trip into space.

The information video didn't really help. Especially the section about potential problems with catastrophic decompression and how the vacuum of space would boil the blood and make your eyes pop. Simon especially liked the special effects of a human floating in space and then expanding like a balloon and popping with blood, guts and gore being flung in all directions. He always thought the severed head bouncing off the camera lens was a nice touch. It was quite often at this point that a lot of recruits were turned away because the journey totally cracked them up. Their screaming could be quite amusing and every now and again there would be a special case where somebody would go supernova in the confined space of the pod. Even though recruits had forty eight hours between the initial contact with him and their journey into space, for some it was too much thinking time to mull over the consequences.

Simon had been the recruiting officer for about a hundred years and even though technology had advanced over that period the response of the humans was still roughly the same as it was a hundred years ago. This was always the first real test and only too often the final one.

Leaving the elevator, Simon knocked on the Director's door and waited until he was summoned. As he entered the office the Director was sat forward in his chair staring at a blank monitor waiting for Simon to arrive. "Are you ready?" said the Director.

"I most certainly am," said Simon.

The Director poised his finger over a button, looked at Simon, looked back at the monitor and then he pressed the button. The monitor flickered for a few seconds and then sharpened into focus on Roy. The Director looked at the monitor, then looked at Simon with raised eyebrows and then looked back at the monitor, "He's asleep!"

Chapter 3 - New Arrival

A low, dull thud woke me up. For a few moments I was disoriented trying to remember where I was and how I'd got there, and then the dream collapsed into reality. As I rubbed my eyes and stretched, there was the sound of a slight hiss and the hatchway slid open. I took off my safety belt and stepped through the hatch into the shuttle. The hatch closed behind me and there was another quiet rumble as the pod detached itself from the shuttle to make its way back to Earth.

The inside of the shuttle was like a small aircraft. There were eight black seats on either side of an aisle with window-like view panels beside each seat. The interior was painted white with a white carpet running the length of the aisle between the seats. I made a mental note about their obsession with white. As I stared out I could see the Earth! It looked absolutely fantastic, a blue, green ball covered in parts by swathes of white set against the blackness of space. I stood watching the view mesmerized by the beauty of my own planet. This was the most fantastic thing I'd ever seen.

I knew about the moon landings as a child because I had watched documentaries about them. I had seen the shuttle taking off for the first time and the explosions in later years. Even though I knew it was dangerous, as a child I had always wanted to be an astronaut. As I got older I realised that only American and Russians went into space. I then realised that only the very best special test pilots got to fly the shuttles. My dreams were shattered as I became aware of my lack of ability and nationality. And here I was looking back at the Earth and I felt five years old again.

"Good afternoon Mister McCormack. Congratulations on completing phase one of your training which is arriving here without having a nervous breakdown." I turned to see a very strange looking man with very white, albino-like skin, white spiky hair, black jumpsuit, and black rimmed glasses with lenses that had a pink tone to them.

"Simon! How the hell did you get here so fast?"

"I'm not that Simon."

I paused for a few moments and said "But you look like Simon. Is this a joke?"

"Sorry, this is not a joke. I am not Simon."

"OK. So what do I call you?"

"My name is Simon."

"I'm so confused. You're not Simon but you are Simon. I don't get it."

"Let me explain. The Simon you met on Earth is the recruiting officer for the company. I am Simon the pilot instructor for the company. We are two separate people although we obviously share common characteristics."

"So you look alike and have the same name."

"Yes, well done. We share both names. I am also Simon Philberts."

"So are you twins?"

"No."

"Clones?"

"No. We are a combination of the two. Cloning is a very messy method of continuing a genetic line because there is a degradation of the genetic material that exponentially deteriorates with each subsequent clone. We are identical but not twins. Twins have similar,

almost identical, but not quite, genetic codes but all Simons are identical like a clone without the problems of genetic degradation.”

“Oh, I see.” I didn’t get it but didn’t want to appear rude, or thick.

“Excellent. If you’d like to take a seat and strap yourself in I will tell you some information before we depart.” I sat and strapped myself into a seat behind Simon the pilot instructor. Simon was sat at in a chair that swivelled around to face me. Behind him was a flight deck that looked very minimal. I didn’t know what to expect but when I’ve seen images of the cockpit of the shuttle it looked like a sea of dials and computers. In comparison this cockpit looked empty. A few dials, a couple of joy sticks and a few screens.

“Are you ready for some new information?”

“I think so,” I said.

“We’re going to depart soon, enter Hyper Travel for thirty seconds and arrive at Earth Station Three. When you arrive you will be taken to the Doctor for a routine reconstruction. After that you will spend a little time acclimatising yourself to the station and then you will enter training with me. Any questions?”

“What’s reconstruction?”

“I will let the Doctor explain that to you, for now, let’s say that it will make a new man of you.”

“If we’re diverting intergalactic traffic so it cannot be detected by earth then how come we’re in Earth orbit now? Aren’t you afraid we’ll be detected?”

“Good question. First of all we’re black and second of all we are totally absorbent to all sorts of radar and we emit nothing, like radio frequencies, that can be detected by Earth. We love SETI but it’s like Native Americans trying to detect satellite transmissions by checking for smoke signals. The ships we divert don’t bother to try and camouflage themselves and don’t bother using radar absorbent materials, so they can be easily seen from within the orbit of Mars and easily detected by your Earth systems.”

“Nice. What training am I going to do?”

“Well, you’re wearing white with a red stripe. That makes you, or will make you a pilot once I’ve finished with you.”

“Brilliant, flying, I love it. What’s powering the shuttle we’re in?”

“This shuttle, Earth Station, your new ship and almost everything that needs some form of power or energy is supplied by a Quantum Singularity Drive.”

“A black hole?”

“Well done, I’m impressed. Not many people give me that answer. Even some of the Doctor’s of Physics miss that one. A black hole is super compressed mass and we use varying amounts to power almost everything. The more power we need the bigger the mass. Have you noticed the gravity? That’s the Quantum Singularity Drive.”

“Wow. How do you get it?”

“There is a lot of information we do not divulge to Earth. Does it work Roy?”

“Yes.”

“That’s all you need to know. If you’re ready I will take you through your first Hyper Travel jump.” Simon swivelled his chair around to have a look over a couple of the dials. He then swivelled his chair back and said “By the way, what did you have for tea last night.”

“Pizza.”

“Pizza? That’s OK, especially if it is one that you baked for yourself, however the ready-made type are often less nutritional and high in saturates.”

“Not very nutritional? Are you kidding? Pizza has the lot. It’s got carbs, some veggies and protein all included in one easy to cook meal.”

“If you say so Mister McCormack, did you consume anything else? Coke, water, juice, biscuits...”

“No, just Pizza and lager. Actually I had a bit of a celebration so it was quite a few lagers.”

Simon reached inside a pouch at the side of the cockpit and pulled out a brown bag. “Take this,” he said, “you will need it.”

“OK but I’ve flown on a number of occasions and I’ve been fine. I once came back from Spain with the biggest hang over of my life after a last night binge in the local taverns and I was fine, compared to that I’m in top condition.”

“Very good, and did you travel back via hyperspace? I didn’t think so, hold the bag close please.” Simon swivelled his chair around and faced the cockpit. “Computer?”

“Yes Simon,” replied a quiet voice from the front of the cockpit.

“Are we ready with the Hyper Travel and have you set the co-ordinates for Earth Station Three?”

“Yes Simon we are all set.”

“Power up and engage the drive.”

There was a slight whine and then my world turned upside down. I saw all the stars from the front window disappear and the view became total, sucks the light out of your eyes, blackness. It felt like my head turned through three hundred and sixty degrees and my whole body had been turned inside out and I puked and puked and then puked some more. This was the full degree level sickness and continued long past the complete emptying of my stomach contents. And I’m sure that I heard Simon that wasn’t Simon but is Simon laughing.

*

Thirty seconds after entering Hyper Travel we returned back to normal space. Simon turned to me and said “Shouldn’t have had the lager. For some reason in humans the breaking down of the alcohol doesn’t mix with Hyper Travel. The next time you Hyper Travel you’ll find it a much better experience. After a while it will seem like nothing. Unless you drink alcohol and then you will be sick.”

“Thanks for the advice Simon, but next time could you give it me before the event.”

“I’m surprised Simon the recruiting officer never said anything?”

“I’ll have to have words with him.”

Simon gingerly took my sick bag and put it into a bin. I looked out of the front window and saw the second fantastic thing of the day. The space station was massive. I didn’t know what to expect from Earth Station Three but I wasn’t expecting something this big. It looked like two huge round metal tyres joined at right angles to each other supported by struts linking to a central hub which was a large globe. I could see what looked like large windows with huge sheets of glass at various intervals around each side of the tyre structures. The station hung stationary in space like a child’s mobile suspended from a string.

“That is fantastic,” I said, “Does it spin? Do we live on the edge with one-g centrifugal force sticking us to the floor? What happens with the other ring because they

won't feel the effects? Hang on you're going to tell me it's done with a Quantum Singularity Drive."

"Well done Mister McCormack. It doesn't spin. The drive is located in the central hub. The outer rings are placed a distance from the gravity well to give a comfortable one-g environment, computer."

"Yes Simon."

"Can you take us into the docking bay for the UK sector please?"

"Yes Simon."

"The UK sector?" I said.

The shuttle started moving towards the station without the feeling of any acceleration and Simon explained "We have sectors on the station based upon the countries we recruit from. When we first started the stations we mixed the races. However, we found that whatever conflict was happening on Earth, and there have been several hundred since we started the stations, would frequently spill over onto the stations. Having trouble on stations that are packed full of energy is a recipe for disaster so we decided the best thing to do was to have national areas. You may be human but you still possess all the basic instincts of your primate past monkey boy."

"Simon, that was almost funny. But slightly incorrect, Earth scientists are moving towards humans having evolved alongside monkeys, rather than from them. Still, the attempt at humour confirms you are Simon that is not Simon. How long have the stations been running?"

"Since your telescopes became powerful enough to spot ships within your solar system, about a hundred and fifty years."

*

We were almost at the station and were heading for a big glass sheet. I thought the sheet would open up as we got closer but it didn't. We passed right through the glass which moulded itself to the contours of the ship as it went through.

"What was that we passed through?" I asked Simon.

"Plasma glass, it's a form of high energy plasma that keeps the air inside, it also absorbs the energy from the light emitted by the station so that even your space telescopes can't see it. There's enough energy to vaporise most materials it comes into contact with so it's a good job our hull is indestructible. Try to pass through in one of your aeroplanes and there would be nothing left."

"Get many Virgin Atlantic flights out here?" I asked with a hint of sarcasm. Simon frowned at me. "Maybe not," I added.

The shuttle glided into a bay and gently landed on the bay floor. Simon and I left via a door on the side where the shuttle docked. The bay was bright and yet again white. For a station that was a hundred and fifty years old, it looked incredibly clean and brand new. As we walked toward a door at the rear of the bay I glanced back at the shuttle that brought us here. It looked like a small plane without wings and although I had spent time looking out of the windows there were no apparent windows on the outside of the ship.

"No windows," I said.

“If you mean like your optically transparent glass, we don’t use them. They are a bit of a design flaw and weaken the structure. Everything is projected inside the craft. It’s the same for all ships and view panels on the station.”

“No engines pods or bulges or stuff.”

“It doesn’t need it.” Simon stopped and turned to face the ship. “The amount of matter from a singularity needed to power a ship that size into Hyper Travel is on the microscopic level.”

“Wow I wish my car would run on that much petrol.”

“Come on.” We carried on walking to the other side of the bay and through the door. Simon took me down a corridor which yet again was white, to a door marked Medical. “This is where we part company for a while. When you’re finished here and you’ve settled in, we will meet again to collect your computer and then we will start your pilot training.”

“Thanks Simon,” and I walked through the door.

*

Guess what? The room I entered once again confirmed the alien’s preoccupation with painting everything white. On the walls were various monitors, their screens black suggesting they were turned off. To my right was another door and in the far corner of the room was a wooden desk. Sat behind the desk was a very strange, yet somehow familiar looking man with very pale, almost white skin, short white hair, red jumpsuit, black rimmed glasses with lenses that had a pinkness to them.

“You’re not Simon are you? You’re another Simon that is not the Simon who was Simon, but wasn’t the first Simon,” I said.

“No Mister McCormack, I am Doctor Philberts.”

“Of course, silly me. Do you want me to take my clothes off?”

“Whatever for?”

I wrinkled my face “Feel my balls, ask me to cough, put things inside me. You know the usual medical stuff.”

“Mister McCormack, this is not the medieval Earth-science of the nineteenth century. This is the future. You can definitely keep your clothes on, please. What I will do is take you through to the reconstruction room. You will lie down and go to sleep for a few hours. When you wake up we will have scanned your genetic code and reconstructed any biological problems detected by our systems. You will wake up wholly refreshed, a new man so to speak.”

“Sleep for a few hours? What happens if I’m not sleepy?”

“Don’t worry, you will sleep.”

“Exactly how long?”

“Well that depends. On average about four hours but the record is two hours.” I checked my watch which showed it was twelve twenty five so I’ll be awake in time for tea. Dr. Philberts led me through the other door to the reconstruction room. The room was slightly smaller and there was a circular object hanging from the ceiling above a hospital style bed.

“If you pop yourself on the bed we can begin.” I did as he asked and lay down. “I love working with you primates” he said “Your design is so wonderfully simple. There’s so little to go wrong and so easy to fix with just a little bit of time and some patience. I used to work with a species that...”

I was fast asleep, dreaming of running over endless sand dunes and frolicking in the surf on some desert island paradise.

*

“Time to wake Mister McCormack,” said Doctor Philberts. My head felt fuzzy and my mouth was so dry. “Drink this,” he said as if he was mind reading, “it will clear your head and rehydrate you.” I sipped the liquid which almost instantly cleared my head.

When I finished the glass I asked “What day is it?”

“It’s Saturday Mister McCormack.”

“What time is it?”

“It’s five past twelve.”

“Did I travel back in time?”

“No Mister McCormack, though interestingly in theory if we had, we would now be in a time loop and you would be about to undergo this treatment again for the first time. It’s Saturday, one week later and five past twelve.”

“SHIT! A whole week! What the fuck happened?” I started to feel my body, checking for any abnormalities like a third arm.

“Well, you broke the record for reconstruction but instead of being quick it took ages to sort you out. You’re body was a total mess. We had to reconstruct your liver, remove all the fat from your arteries and you were in the very early stages of several types of cancer; testicular and pancreatic. Also you were obviously a smoker when you were younger because we had repair some damage to the air sacks in your lungs. Had you continued your current life style back on Earth you wouldn’t have lasted for more than another ten years or so. You need to start seriously improving every aspect of your life when you leave Earth Station Three.”

“But I feel fantastic.”

Doctor Philberts’s eyes started a ping pong match. “Of course you do NOW, I’ve spent a week returning your wreck of a body back to normal. I have never in all my time on this station, treated a worse case. A week! The longest, before you was six hours. Six hours and I thought six hours was bad, but a week!”

“OK Doctor I get it, less pizza and ease the lager.”

“Less pizza? Ease the lager? I would suggest you radically change your diet to include a balanced intake of nutritious food stuffs and to limit the amount of alcohol you imbibe, and equally importantly to do some regular exercise.”

“No...” I couldn’t speak. My mouth moved up and down a few times in total silence. When I did finish my sentence, my voice was almost a squeak “...pizza or lager?”

“I didn’t say none at all, but you’ll never live to be a hundred and fifteen if you continue with your previous life style.”

“A hundred and fifteen? How old do you think I’ll live to if I do continue that life style.”

“After this reconstruction, about ninety five.”

“Really? Only ninety five. I’ll drink to that.”

Doctor Philberts stood and looked at me. He was completely static except for the crazy windscreen wiper effect going on in his eyes. “You should value your life not throw it away.” He looked up and said “Hello Claire.”

I swung my legs around and sat on the edge of the bed facing the woman who had just entered the room, also wearing a white jumpsuit with red trim. Around her waist was a black belt with a small black rectangular cuboid attached to it. She was tall with amazing shoulder length red hair and a fantastic figure that was emphasised by the belt which pinched her waist in. She was beautiful and totally stunning to look at.

'Don't look at her breasts' I told myself, *'maintain eye contact. Don't look at her breasts. Look into her eyes. Don't look at her breasts.'* She had beautiful eyes. They were green, a light green and her hair wasn't only red it was all sorts of shades of red like fire dancing in the hearth. *'Don't look at her breasts.'*

"Claire, this is Roy," said Doctor Philberts "Roy, this is Claire. Claire is going to be your buddy for a few days while you settle in and before you start your training. She's going to show you around and help you find your feet."

"Fantastic," I said with a little too much enthusiasm and sounding like a total dweeb *'Don't look at her breasts. Keep looking her eyes. DO NOT look at her breasts. How can I look at her breasts without her noticing? No! Don't look at her breasts.'* Wow!

"Come on Roy," she said "I have a lot to show you."

"Great!" I said in my dweeb voice. *'She's got a lot to show me, not-half! No! Shut up you fool. Oh, she's turned around. Don't look at her arse. Wait she has her back to me. Look at that arse. Wow!'*

"Come on Roy, we haven't got all day."

Picking my chin up off the floor, I got off the table and walked quickly to catch up with her. I actually felt fit and healthy. There were no aches or pains and I felt so fresh. Before I left the room I turned around and said "Thanks Doc I feel great."

"You're welcome, I think."

*

We walked down a corridor in silence. I couldn't think of a single thing to say. What do you say to such a beautiful woman? I had no experience of that. Bridget the Midget was plain looking and she was easy to talk to but that had been a long time ago. The women in school were mostly married and easy to talk to because I didn't fancy any of them. Claire was different. What could I say that wouldn't make me sound like an idiot? Maybe I shouldn't bother because she was obviously way out of my league and she could be in a relationship or married. How could I find out? When we got to the door at the end of the corridor she stopped by the door and faced me. No, just for a moment I thought her eyes had travelled down before coming back up to meet mine, was she checking me out?

"I'm about to bombard you with information. Don't be worried if you forget anything all you have to do is ask, I will repeat information. Are you ready?"

"I think so."

As we walked through the door she had opened I could see more doors on either side of a corridor. The ceiling was about three stories high and I stopped for a second to look at the vista. I could see stars against the blackness of space and although we were in a brightly lit corridor it looked like the view you would get on a clear night on Earth. I had no idea what stars I was looking at and wondered if one of the distant lights would be Earth. The same minimal decor that I had seen in the previous areas was also present here. I guess the whole station was going to be devoid of character.

“These are the apartments where the pilots live. You have number nineteen which is further down on the left. I have an apartment next to you. They have everything you need that you would find in a home. You won’t need a key because they all have biometric scanners. There are three types of personnel on the station, pilots wear white, support personnel wear green and Simon’s wear whatever they feel like. This is one corridor of accommodation for the pilots but there are many others. The UK sector is quite large.”

As she said this we rounded the corner and entered a huge open area. We were stood in the corner of a big square like the centre of an English village only bigger, much bigger with the obligatory white buildings around the area. There was a large grassy area with trees and several paths crossing it which must have been about a kilometre across. The green grass and trees contrasted with the whiteness of everything else making the colours really stand out. There was a path all the way around the centre section and several people wearing green jumpsuits were walking along it. All the buildings had glass fronts and I could see the same minimal colour scheme continued inside. They were about three stories high and the roof was the same as I had seen in the corridor, a view of space. As this was a huge open area, there was a much wider view of the outside and I could see the band of stars that made up the Milky Way. The funny thing was that although this area was very bright I could not see any lighting fixtures.

“Down this side,” Claire pointed to her right “we have several amenities like a cafe, Sam’s Bar, a hair salon, two large restaurants, a clothes shop in case you need a new jumpsuit or adjustments, swimming pool, sauna and other leisure facilities. There’s also a small supermarket so if you want to cook at home rather than eat in the Pilot’s Restaurant you can. Over here on the left are the hanger bays with all our equipment and ships. Next to that over there are the pilot facilities. It houses things like a Restaurant, bar, cafe, training area and leisure facilities. These facilities are exclusively for the pilots as it’s one of the perks of the job. And finally over there on the opposite side of the square are more apartments. The few on this side are for pilots whilst the more numerous ones on the other side are for support staff.”

Segregated sectors, segregated areas and segregated staff. The station seemed to be a social experiment gone wrong. On the face of it there seemed to be some sort of bizarre class system between the pilots and everybody else.

“How many pilots are there?”

“It varies over time, but currently we have twenty pilots including myself. You will be number twenty one.”

As we were talking, a man had been walking towards us wearing a green jumpsuit. He had a slim build, greying hair and was about the same height as me. And then the worst thing ever happened. When he arrived he gave Claire a big hug and a tender kiss on the cheek. My heart sank and I felt gutted.

“Hi Claire, who’s the new pilot?”

“Let me introduce you. Gary this is Roy McCormack and Roy this is Gary Lamont.”

I shook Gary’s hand and said “Hi.” I wanted to dig a hole and escape. The most beautiful girl I’d ever met was in a relationship. My life sucks.

“Well it’s been nice meeting you Roy I’ll probably see you around.” He turned to Claire and said “What time are you popping round darling?”

“Is seven OK?” she said.

“Seven is great for me. I’ll see you later.” He kissed her again on the cheek again and said “Love you.”

“Come on Roy let’s go and meet all the other pilots. They’re waiting for you in the Pilot’s Bar.”

*

As we walked over towards the pilot’s area she talked about the workings of the station. I should have paid more attention but my heart wasn’t in it. *‘There’s plenty more fish in the sea’* I told myself but it actually didn’t make me feel better. I’d met a lot of women in my life but none as attractive as Claire and I was as jealous as hell of Gary. What a lucky bastard. ‘Some guys have all the luck’ according to Rod Stewart and he was bloody well right. I shouldn’t have got my hopes up anyway because somebody as pretty as Claire was bound to have a boyfriend or be married. I felt such a fool, but she was so attractive. Oh well at least we can be friends and I’ll get to spend a bit of time with her over the next few days.

When we arrived at the pilot’s facilities on the other side of the square we went through a door and entered a big white lobby area. Claire pointed out various areas like the restaurant, bar, cinema and a relaxation area. “Is the restaurant expensive?” I asked.

“No silly, it’s free. All the facilities on the station are free. Money has no use or meaning here so you can use what you want, when you want as long as it’s open.”

“That’s good.” We walked up a set of stairs in the middle of the lobby and went through a glass door. There was a long bar with somebody stood behind it. Scattered about the room were a number of low coffee tables with comfortable looking black chairs. Down one side of the room was a table with a buffet laid out. The room contained various groups of pilots wearing belts with small cuboids attached. Some were stood chatting, whilst others sat.

Claire took my hand and said “I’m going to take you round and introduce you to everybody. Don’t worry about remembering names because you’ll soon learn them all.”

We walked over to the nearest group.

“Hi everybody,” said Claire interrupting their conversation, “let me introduce Roy McCormack. Roy, this is Poppy Smith, Becky Lacey, Emily James and John D’Eath.” Then she linked my arm in hers, silently mouthing ‘I’ll tell you later’, and said, “And this is Denny Hopper.”

Poppy was the shortest of the group and had long fair hair. Emily had dark hair that was tightly tied back that looked like it was an explosion waiting to happen. Both girls were fairly young and pretty but didn’t look as gorgeous as Claire. John had jet black hair and a full beard to match, which made him look like he was the bad guy from an Elizabethan plot to kill the queen. It was Becky who spoke first. She had dark hair cut to a bob and was about two inches taller than me.

“Hello Roy,” she said in a plummy English accent. “Mummy and Daddy got me a place at Hertford College in Oxford, to study Physics. Which College did you study with?”

“Cardiff.”

“I don’t believe I know that one, perhaps it is a Cambridge College?”

“No it’s a Welsh College in Wales, Cardiff University.”

“Oh, you’re not an Oxbridge then.” You could feel the disappointment in her voice. “So what was your major? Physics? Astrophysics? Quantum Mechanics? Not something like Media Studies surely?” I’m sure that her voice carried a tone of demeaning scoff in it.

“Computer Science.” I hit back with my strongest volley.

“Oh.” It felt like I was elevated to near-scum. Full scum would have been something in the arts, whereas, at least I had the word ‘Science’ behind me. “That’s interesting. So what was the main focus of your studies? Research? Chip development? Cutting edge micro development? Any Post Graduate research?”

“I did do a Post Graduate.” My serve hit the net.

“That’s good.” she brightened up a little, “What was the research area?”

Second serve, “Err... no research area I did a Post Graduate Certificate in Education and then I was a school teacher in a secondary school in North Yorkshire.” Game, set and match to the posh bird.

“Oh.” She responded, like a kick in the goolies to me.

Then, I had a similar conversation with Denny, who rested her hand on my shoulder. Occasionally slipping it down to the top of my arm and momentarily squeezing the muscle before moving her hand back to my shoulder. I felt like a bit of rough being sized up for other, less cerebral activities. Claire spotted this and seemed anxious to move us on. She almost heaved a sigh of relief when John put his arm around Denny’s waist and dragged her away, but not before he gave me a glance that was hardly friendly.

The old saying of, ‘Them as can do, them as can’t teach.’ was almost audible. Then, Claire grabbed hold of my hand again and led me to another group of boffins to disappoint. It was sheer torture.

She took me from group to group and the conversations were almost identical for every group. By the time I had finished I felt miserably out of my depth. What had Simon been thinking asking me to join? I had nothing in common with anybody in the room. I had lots of patronising ‘oh’ and some ‘*how interesting*’ and quite a few ‘*really?*’ A sequence of focus groups convened for my belittlement, ruthlessly effective.

Afterwards I said, “I need a drink, do you want anything?”

“I’m fine,” said Claire.

I walked over to the bar to drown my sorrows. I’m sure every conversation in the room would have been about me and my lack of qualifications.

“Good afternoon sir,” said the barman, “what can I do for you?”

“Well first of all you can call me Roy.”

“Yes sir. Anything else?”

“Your name?”

“Russell.”

“Hi Russell I’m Roy. Call me Roy.”

“Yes sir.”

“It’s Roy.”

“Yes sir. Thank you.”

“Roy.”

The bar man looked a bit anxious and peered around the room to see if anybody was listening. Then said “The Pilot’s Bar protocols demand I call you sir whilst working here.”

“Oh. Well Roy McCormack’s protocols demand you call me Roy. I haven’t been knighted and I very much doubt I ever will.”

“Very good sir. So what can I get you?”

“Fuck’s sake. A pint of lager please.”

“Lager?”

“Lager please.”

“Sorry sir we do not serve any alcohol.”

“What!”

“No alcohol sir.”

“Not much of a bar without alcohol is it?”

“No lager, only soft drinks.”

“What about the Sam’s Bar in the square does that serve alcohol?”

“No sir. Perhaps I should expand my explanation. There is no alcohol on this station so all drinks are soft drinks.”

The lack of beer taps dawned on me. “Holy shit!” I tried to hide the disappointment on my face, but what I thought was, ‘Bollocks, bollocks, bollocks!’ What I really needed at this moment was a good old boozy pint, preferably in the back-room snug at the ‘Ankle Spankers Arms’.

“Just soft drinks sir.” A life sentence wouldn’t have hit me harder at that point.

“Good grief! This isn’t a Quaker establishment is it, or Amish maybe?”

“Alcohol is not good for you and can make you sick during Hyper Travel if you haven’t got it fully out of your system.”

“Of all the days in my life when I could really do with getting plastered I’m on an alcohol free station. That’s what I call irony. Oh well. I’ll have a vodka and coke, hold the vodka.”

I picked up my coke and returned to Claire. She told me that she’d grabbed my arm, earlier, to protect me from Denny. “Why?” I asked a little bemused.

“We call her bed Hopper. She has something of a reputation and eats men for breakfast.”

Denny wasn’t beautiful in the classical way, but she did have a body that just oozed sex appeal and a manner that screamed ‘lie down I want to talk to you’, but I must admit that I had felt a bit intimidated by her touchy-feely ways when chatting earlier. Apparently she and John D’Eath were often an item, in between the numerous other liaisons that she constantly had simmering away. Having exhausted the gossip on Denny, Claire and I made small talk for a while and munched some of the food from the buffet. Other than Claire I didn’t speak to anybody as I felt a bit of an outsider. At about half five Claire said “Come on I’ll take you to your apartment.” We went round the various groups saying goodbye and left. Ten minutes later we were outside number nineteen.

“Put your hand on the plate next to the door.” I did as she asked.

There was a slight throbbing sensation as my hand was scanned and then the door clicked open. We stepped into the hall-way and moved onwards into a spacious living room, decorated with cream walls, cream carpets and a brown leather suite. There were several paintings of landscapes on the walls, some lights on the ceiling, a coffee table with an old style dial phone, TV and a couple of side tables with lamps on them. Compared to what I had

seen of the station this room was warm and welcoming. I followed Claire as she took me around the apartment. It was set over three floors with floors two and three featuring large en suite bedrooms. The ground floor had the main living room, a toilet, kitchen and utility room. The utility room contained all the household equipment you'd expect but Claire pointed out that most of it, such as the washing machine, drier and iron would never be used because the jumpsuits never needed cleaning or pressing. Back in the kitchen, the inside of the fridge was mostly filled with space, surrounding and overwhelming a bottle of milk and some cartons of orange juice. "How wonderfully healthy!" I remarked dripping my voice with sarcasm.

After the tour we went and sat on the big sofa. "You seem a bit quiet after the get together," she said.

"I'll be honest with you, I really don't know why I'm here. I felt totally out of place, such a fraud with my computer science degree and my P.G.C.E."

"I wouldn't worry about it too much. Look, I need to go and see Gary but how would you like it if I dropped in later?"

"If you like but don't feel you have to put yourself out for me."

"I don't mind, honestly."

I followed Claire to the door and opened it for her. "I'll see you later then," I said half questioningly. As she left I watched her walk off. She really had a great arse and legs that went all the way to the top. I closed the door and went and sat down for a sulk. Next to the TV in my living room was a games console but I sat in the quiet, feeling thoroughly deflated, thinking about what a massive mistake I'd made and why did they ever bother asking me to join. Everybody I met was an Oxbridge graduate. They all had fantastic sounding degrees like astrophysics, nuclear physics, classical mechanics, quantum mechanics, molecular physics and I had my computer science degree. I didn't understand why I'd been asked to join Earth Station Three.

*

At about eight thirty there was a knock at the door. I opened the door to Claire and she walked in, lifting my mood immeasurably.

"You look different," I said.

"I've had my hair trimmed by Gary."

"It looks good. Actually it looks great. He's a talented man."

"Oh thank you and yes he is."

We sat down and Claire said "You shouldn't worry about your qualifications. You don't need a PhD in quantum mechanics to be a pilot. Sometimes they act like they are a bunch of alpha-males establishing the pecking order and that includes some of the women too!"

"But everybody's been to Oxford or Cambridge and they all have physics related degrees and post graduates."

"I didn't go to Oxford or Cambridge."

"You didn't?"

"I got my degree through the Open University."

"Really?"

"Yes and I don't have a science degree. I have a degree in English."

"Never!"

“So you see we are both in the same boat and I cope with the other pilots. They are a good group of people when you get to know them. I think of most of them as friends.”

“Did you have problems fitting in? Were you not looked down upon as inferior with an English degree?”

“Look Roy, English is not an inferior field and the O.U. is rated as one of the best universities there is. The job you’re about to do doesn’t require a degree in anything, it requires a bit of thought and good decision making. The pilots are curious to begin with but they really don’t care about what university you went to as they are more concerned with what you can do and how well you do it. Give them a chance and I promise you that you will end up with a lot more great friends.”

“OK. Thanks, that actually makes me feel a million times better.”

And then the phone rang. I looked at Claire as if I’d never heard a phone ring before.

“It’s OK” she said “You can pick it up. It’ll be a call redirected from Earth.”

The phone on the coffee table was a cream coloured phone that had a dial on the front. The receiver was on top of the phone with a curly wire that attached to the body of the phone, quaintly-retro for such an advanced environment. I picked up the receiver and brought it to my ear.

“Hello?” I said.

“Roy,” said my mother and I rolled my eyes, “where on Earth are you?”

I put my hand over the mouth piece and said to Claire “It’s my mother.”

“Who are you talking to?” said my mother.

“It’s only a friend mum.”

“So who’s your new friend?”

I was dreading the next bit because I knew my mum would over react.

“She’s called Claire.”

“Claire? A girl? How long have you been seeing this girl? Is she your girlfriend? Are you getting married? Am I actually going to get grandchildren?”

“Mum Claire is a work-colleague and a friend. We’ve only just met so we’re not getting married and having your grandchildren. *‘Oh god’* I thought *‘Claire’s still in the room’* I could hear her sniggering in the background. “Mum did you want anything or did you phone to totally embarrass me?”

“I phoned to see how things were going and to find out where you were.”

I gave my mum some false information about being in South Africa doing a preparation course before moving on to somewhere I hadn’t found out about yet. She told me the latest news about her brother and sister, we said our goodbyes and I hung up. Claire burst out laughing.

Blushing, I said, “I’m really very, very sorry about that. I haven’t had a girlfriend in a long time and every time I mention a female name she thinks I’m getting married.”

“Don’t apologise I thought it was quite sweet actually not to mention very funny.”

We sat and chatted. I hadn’t sat with somebody and talked to them like this since my university days. We talked about all sorts of things from politics to our favourite children’s TV programs when we were kids. We grew up with totally different backgrounds and spent a long time telling each other about how we had grown up and what we did as kids.

I had a nice safe middle class background but Claire hadn't been quite so lucky. She was the only one of five children that had wanted to do something with her life and had done very well at school and with her exams. Unfortunately there was no chance of Claire going to university because her parents had insisted she got a job and contributed to the family finances. She had spent several years doing whatever jobs she could get, but most of them involved cleaning private houses, shops or schools. It was when she was twenty five and sick of the dead end jobs that she had decided to do a degree with the Open University. The outstanding grades she was getting on her English course had brought her to the attention of Simon. Compared to Claire's upbringing I had lived the life of luxury.

As tiredness overcame her, she looked at her watch and exclaimed, "Oh my God it's half past three in the morning! That went so quickly. I'm going to have to go and get some sleep. I was going to call round at eight to take you out but I think we'll delay that until ten so we can both get a bit of beauty sleep."

"You really don't need it," I said and immediately thought, *'bollocks I shouldn't have said that.'*

"Bless you, you're so sweet."

I accompanied her to the door for the second time that evening watched her leave.

Time for bed.

Chapter 4 - Finding My Feet

The following day, Claire came round to see me at about ten o'clock. We had a stroll down the side of the square where all the general facilities were. The first place was the super market. Well, more of a mini-market to be honest, it wasn't really that big but it contained all the usual items that you would need to get by on a day to day basis. There was plenty of stock and it all looked and smelt citrusy fresh even though we were several billion miles from Earth. This wasn't a 'stack it high and sell it cheap' operation, instead there was a large variety of quality produce. The fruit and veg section was especially striking with the brightness of yellow honeydew melons set against vivid Navel oranges and the green of limes, interspaced with the russet of apples and the deep purple hues of plums all crammed into a small space. I was out of breath just looking at it. Everything seemed so health conscious and it all looked like it had only been picked recently, though of course it was all synthesised. I learned later that any unsold items were sent back into the machine, at the end of each day, as raw material for the next batch.

Claire explained that there were a lot of people who still enjoyed cooking for themselves even though there were restaurants and bars where people could eat.

After a quick browse around the super market, we walked along the rest of the general facilities. Claire showed me the clothes shop which seemed a bit pointless because it only supplied green or white jumpsuits, although I guess you had to get them from somewhere. She also showed me the two restaurants but explained that we would be highly unlikely to use them because the pilots used their own area which had similar places but for pilots only.

"Why the segregation, aren't we pilots allowed to mix with everybody else?" I asked.

"Don't be silly, of course we can mix! It's just a kind of perk of the job, pilots can use all the other places but choose not to. We all get on together really well but we tend not to mix socially."

"That sounds really strange."

"I had a friend who played the flute and went to a performing arts college. She told me that there was a common room used mostly by the music and drama students, but the drama students sat on one side of the room and the music students sat on the other side. There was no animosity between them; they just chose not to mix together. I guess if the music students were talking about their music courses then a drama student may not be able to take part in that conversation and vice versa."

"However, only the pilots can use the pilot's facilities."

"Like I said, it's a perk of the job. The job can get quite stressful so it's nice to have something in compensation for the work we do. I guess it would be like the officer's mess in the army or the staffroom in a school. Did you share your staffroom with the caretakers, dinner ladies or office staff?"

"Absolutely not," I answered a little indignantly. "Even senior management stayed away from the staffroom."

"Exactly, I bet there was no rule against all those people from sharing your staffroom but they chose not to go there."

We passed Sam's Bar and arrived at Gary's Salon and popped in to see Gary who was his usual charming self. His salon looked like every other one I had ever walked past without

entering, but was painted in the usual sterile white. It had a long mirror with three black chairs sat side by side facing the mirror. On the other side were three chairs facing three sinks. The only real colour in the salon came from a mass of hair products that were on a shelf above the mirrors. I hadn't really said much to Gary and I felt a bit awkward around him because I fancied his girlfriend so much.

"Hi Gary," said Claire and she kissed him on the cheek.

"Hi Gary," I said, but didn't kiss him on the cheek.

"Hello you two, how's it going Roy?"

"It's going OK I think. I haven't really done anything yet. Claire's showing me around today so it's all a bit relaxing. I'm starting my training tomorrow so I guess it'll get harder."

"How was the reception last night?"

"Yes... well... I don't think I made a very good impression and I feel a bit out of my depth."

"Don't worry about that too much. The other pilots always seem a bit aloof to begin with but they are all very nice people."

"That's what Claire said."

"You should listen to her because she knows what she's talking about don't you darling."

"Yes I do. Come on Roy let's continue the tour."

She kissed Gary on the cheek and we left the shop. Next to Gary's salon were some leisure facilities. I had a quick look through the window and could see signs to a fitness room, gym, swimming pool and weights room. Just looking brought me out in a sweat. I'll have to work my way up gently to going inside, well there's no point rushing like a bull at a gate. We left the general facilities and started walking across the square towards the pilot's area. As we walked across, I asked Claire "Where does all the light come from?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's bright in here but there are no lights and we're too far away from the sun for this to be natural."

She stopped and said "Look up." I looked up. "Do you see the ceiling with the view of space?"

"Yes."

"Well, those are video panels projecting a view of space. All the equipment for the lighting is contained behind the panels." I was certain that I'd caught her looking me over as I tilted my head upwards to look at the ceiling. Any optimism being dashed, the moment I remembered that she was Gary's girlfriend.

When we arrived at the pilot's facilities Claire showed me the leisure facilities that we could use at any time. It all looked impressive, but I've never bench pressed anything heavier than a pint, been in a sauna, run anywhere let alone round a gym or used any cardio vascular equipment. Maybe that's why I spent a week in reconstruction! The swimming pool was large and there was nobody using it. I used to love swimming as a kid but my experience was sharing a small pool with half the inhabitants of my town, some of whom looked like they were using it as an alternative to having a bath.

After the tour we had lunch in the Pilot's Restaurant. In the afternoon we strolled around the grassy square several times talking. We had an evening meal in the restaurant again and spent another evening talking until the early hours of the morning.

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Monday, this would be the last day before I started my training with Simon. Claire and I spent the day together and in the evening we ate in the restaurant again. After the meal we sat in my apartment talking. I'd had a brilliant couple of days with Claire and had enjoyed every minute of it.

"I'm going to have to apologise to Gary when I see him next" I said, as it was getting late again.

"What for?" asked Claire.

"Well, I've taken up so much of your time. He must be missing you."

"Missing me?"

"Yea. If you were my girlfriend I'd have missed you if you'd spent three days away from me."

Claire started laughing.

"What's wrong?" I said.

Eventually she calmed down and said "You are a bit of an old fashioned Gentleman at times Roy. Gary's not my boyfriend; he's a close friend, that's all."

"Thank heavens for that," I blurted out before thinking about what I was saying. A massive weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

"You seem very happy to hear that, have you got a soft spot for him?"

"No. Gary seems like a nice enough person, but I'm not gay."

"Are you sure? Gary is a really nice person and one of my best friends. You'd make a lovely couple."

"I'm not gay. I like Gary, but I wouldn't sleep with him. Honestly, I'm one hundred percent heterosexual."

"The way you looked so uncomfortable with Denny pawing at you the other night gave that one away." I blushed, as she continued, "I'm only messing with you, but it was really funny you thinking we were a couple. I can't wait to tell Gary tomorrow he'll laugh his head off. I'm going to have to go now because you've got an early start tomorrow. Simon wants you in his office at nine o'clock. I will call round at quarter to nine to take you there."

I walked over to the door with Claire. She turned before leaving and said "You're so funny. You make me laugh and that's a good thing. See you tomorrow."

I watched her enter her apartment and then closed the door and went to bed. This was the happiest I'd felt since arriving at the station and I hadn't even looked at her breasts yet. Well... maybe a sneaky peek when she wasn't looking.

Chapter 5 - Computer Training

Claire arrived on time and walked me over to Simon's office which was in the pilot's facilities area.

"Shall we meet for lunch?" she asked.

"I would love to."

"One o'clock in the Pilot's Bar. Russell will make some sandwiches for us if we ask."

"That sounds great. I'll see you later." She smiled at me and headed off. As usual I watched her leaving. It was the only time I could ogle her without her knowing but if she ever caught me I'd be so embarrassed. I knocked on Simon's door and waited for a response. When he shouted 'come' I entered the room.

The room looked like most of the station, white walls which were totally devoid of any decoration and no windows. Strangely, although the floor wasn't carpeted it was soft underfoot perhaps some form of rubbery polymer? In the right hand corner, as you walked in, was a wooden desk with Simon sat behind and in front of it were four chairs. He held his hand out to a chair opposite him and I sat down.

Somebody once told me that the desk is my symbol of power over underlings. *'I have a nice comfy executive style chair and you sit down there, underling, in the cheap seats.'* In commerce they have training courses telling folk not to do this nowadays - avoid symbols of power when meeting others, talk over the corner of the desk if you have to, better still sit the same side of the desk as the person and in the same style of chair. Hierarchy's thrive on deference but breed 'them and us' situations and possibly resentment. This was like being in a bad nineteen sixties sit com. All Simon had to do now was pull out a thick cigar and offer me a whisky poured by a top-heavy secretary in a mini skirt after having her bottom pinched.

"How are you settling in?" he asked, interrupting my day dream.

"It's good. I've had a great couple of days. The reception on the first night was a bit depressing. I'm not quite sure you've got the right person especially when you compare my qualifications with the rest of the pilots."

"Roy, it's not about qualifications. We pick the very best to come and work here. A lot of the people we pick are highly qualified and that's because they are very intelligent. Not everybody who is highly intelligent is suited for this job and not everybody who is suited for this job has a string of degrees and post graduates. If we didn't think you had the potential you would never have been approached. This job is about what you can do and not about how many letters you have after your name."

"Thanks Simon. Claire told me a similar thing and it gives me added confidence coming from you as well."

"Good so let's move on. I'm going to start today with computer training and tomorrow we will do flight training. In about a week you'll be working for real."

"Wow, that's fast."

"It is but you'll be expected to put a lot of work in, except for today which will be a nice easy day for you."

Simon opened a draw and pulled out a belt and a black rectangular cuboid. He placed the items on the desk in front of me. The cuboid was about the size of a bar of soap but thinner. It was pure black, seamless and without any features on its surface. There were no

buttons, holes and no screen like you might get on a mobile phone. I had seen other people wearing them around their waists but I had never seen one this close.

“This is your computer. Your computer is biometrically attached to you and only you can operate it. You can talk to it and ask it questions. It has the knowledge of everything we know and will give you answers to anything that doesn’t contravene our station regulations about in-depth knowledge of how our technology works. The computer can interact with all the stations technology and equipment. This little box is the culmination of about five hundred years research. In that time we have produced only four versions of this computer. The first version was the size of a room and we’ve spent a lot of time getting it down to this size. Version four has been around for fifty years and it has a track record that is second to none. The Architect designed, built and wrote the program for version four.”

“The Architect?” I asked

“Yes, The Architect. He’s a computer genius the like of which the universe has never seen before. All the other versions of this computer were designed by teams of computer scientists. Version three had about a thousand scientists involved. Version four was built by one person we call The Architect. You must keep your computer with you at all times and never let it out of your sight. This isn’t like one of your mobile phones where you can order up another. If you lose this, we are unable to replace it and you would then be unable to work. So we would have no choice but to release you from your contract. Have you understood everything I’ve told you?”

“Yes Simon.”

“Good. All I want you to do today is to get familiar with your new computer. I want you to ask it directions, find people, ask it questions, talk to it and become acquainted with it. I will meet you back here tomorrow morning at nine. Put the belt on first, attach the computer and then speak to it.”

I did as I was asked. The computer felt so heavy when I picked it up considering it was such a small package. It stuck to the belt like a strong magnet and then I said “Hello computer. Can you hear me?”

“I can hear you fine thank you Roy,” said the computer in a soft baritone voice.

It spoke normally with inflection, not the monotone expressionless voice that I expected from a computer.

“This could well turn out to be the best piece of technology I’ve ever had.” I said.

“Very good,” said Simon “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

*

I left the pilot’s facilities, walked to the centre of the park and sat down on one of the many benches. It was a nice quiet day with a few people walking or out for a run. It almost felt like being in a park at home except I could see all the white built up areas in the distance and although it was mid morning the roof showed the blackness of space with the starry streak of the Milky Way.

“Hello computer.”

“Hello Roy.”

“Me and you are going to have a nice chat to begin with.”

“You and I,” corrected the computer,

“That’s what I said.”

“Very good, what are we going to talk about?”

“We are going to talk about you. Let’s start with your processor. Is it silicone based and how many transistors do you have etched on to the processor.”

“Sorry Roy, you are thinking in rather outdated Earth terms. I do not have a processor with transistors.”

“Do you have a processor?”

“Yes.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“It is a quantum processor.”

“God yes I read about Qubit processors. They’ve recently developed a sixteen Qubit processor and they think when they get to one hundred the speeds will outstrip silicone based chips. There was a rumour that a company has a processor with a hundred and twenty eight Qubit processors and sold it for millions of dollars to a big American company. How many Qubits do you have?”

“Do you mean Qubit switches?”

“Yes.”

“About five billion give or take a few hundred million.”

“Holy shit!” I had a think about this for a minute as the numbers were staggering and then said “Why so many? Surely a few thousand can cope with almost anything.”

“That is true but having so many means that I multitask on many levels and it gives me the ability to manipulate massive amounts of information when needed.”

“What about memory and storage?”

“Both are infinite.”

“How?”

“I have my main storage in this rectangular package. The storage capability is vast because it’s done at the atomic level.”

“Quantum storage?”

“Yes. But the atoms are compressed. Gold is used because of its density but all the atoms are compressed further by removing the spaces between electrons, protons and neutrons. It’s why the rectangular box feels heavier than it looks.”

“Like in the matter that makes the singularity drives.”

“Exactly the same, I should be a thousand times heavier but I have a micro anti-gravity unit inside.”

“So if your memory is made by compressing matter does that mean the Quantum Singularity Drive is made in the same way? I thought the matter would have been extracted from a black hole somehow. I guess it would be much easier to make it than to pass the event horizon and retrieve matter from the centre. I wonder if it’s actually possible to actually do that. Even if your ship was indestructible could it survive past the event horizon? If it does survive would there be any problems with time dilation and would you have enough power to make it back out and past the event horizon again? Beside which, if you can compress the atoms in your memory then it should be possible to compress matter to the point that it becomes a quantum singularity? Is any of that correct computer?”

“I’m sorry but I cannot discuss the technology with you in that much detail. Would you like me to continue with an explanation of my systems?”

“If it’s possible, though for God’s sake don’t tell me anything so you have to shoot me afterwards” I sulked.

“I also have the added advantage of being able to tap into any of the station’s six databases to retrieve any information I need instantaneously. Data transfer is completed via a Hyper Travel link and I automatically connect to the database storage system. I will rarely have to do this because of the vast quantities of data I have stored in my internal memory.”

“So retrieving information is a bit like our Internet and cloud computing.”

“Yes but with vastly more data and information is available near-instantly.”

“And no porn.”

“No, there is no pornography.”

“I always thought the Internet has become a sad indictment of the human race. We have a fantastic tool for knowledge and learning and what do we do with it? Put pictures of naked people on it. We really are a sad pathetic bunch of monkeys. I’m embarrassed to be human sometimes.”

*

The computer tried to be reassuring. “Don’t be embarrassed Roy. Your species is still very young and still has a lot of the characteristics of primates which includes an active and often voyeuristic libido, as well as territorial defence and acquisition. Your personalities are governed by your hormones and I’m sure your species obsession for looking at naked pictures of yourselves as well as killing each other will eventually disappear when you mature in a few millennia. Either that or you will all be dead because you either blew your planet up or poisoned it.”

“Amen brother. So, you have speed and an infinite memory and you also have a personality.”

“Yes, it’s part of my core programming”

“And is your core programming fixed or expandable.”

“It has to be expandable because we will learn how to work together. I will learn from you and adjust my core programming to suit your personality.”

“Good. So what is your name?”

“Computer.”

“No, I mean your real name.”

“It’s Computer.”

“That’s no good you need a name.”

“All computers are called Computer.”

“So much wonder with so little appreciation of it. Well I’m going to change all that.”

“So what will you call me?”

“I don’t know yet but I’ll let you know when I’ve decided, unless you come up with your own name.”

“I would like you to choose.”

“OK. I think I’ve learnt enough about you so let’s do something else. Where is Claire?”

“Which Claire? There are two in the UK sector and three on this station.”

“Claire the pilot.”

“That would be Claire Seabright. Claire is in a meeting with Simon which is due to finish at twelve thirty.”

“I’ve been with Simon, well one of them anyway, the Simon who isn’t Simon or Simon but is Simon.”

“Sorry, I meant Simon the engineer not Simon the pilot trainer and yes Roy, it can be confusing to start with.”

“Do you know what Computer; we could do with a bit of Welshness here.”

“What do you mean Roy?”

“Well in Wales they distinguished folk by appending their trade to the name. I believe my Grandfather was Thomas the bread from Tenby and his father was Thomas the gas.”

“But Roy, none of the Simons are called Thomas.”

“Hrrmph!” I gave up and changed the subject. “Oh, but, OK where is err...”

I couldn’t remember any of the other pilot names I’d met the other night except for Becky. You’d think that after being a teacher I would be good at remembering names but I was terrible. The amount of time I spent with each group of pilots was very brief and Becky really was the only name I could remember. She’d been a bit rude to me but then so had everybody else.

“Becky? That’s Becky the pilot.”

“Becky Lacey is out on patrol and she is due to return at five thirty this evening.”

“Ok how about Gary Lamont?”

“Gary is in his salon.”

“Great. Let’s go and see Gary.”

*

Ten minutes later and I walked into Gary’s Salon. Gary was sat in the corner sipping coffee and reading a magazine. As I entered he looked up and smiled “Roy, how are you doing. I think we need a serious chat but why don’t you let me cut your hair whilst we chat.”

“OK then.” I sat in the nearest chair and Gary put a barber’s cloth bib thing around my neck.

“So, you thought I was Claire’s boyfriend,” he said with a bit of a chuckle. “I’ve got to admit I did have a good laugh when Claire told me. I adore Claire and she’s a beautiful woman but not my type or should I say gender.”

“I’m really sorry if I offended you. Hang on a minute – not your gender. Are you telling me something?”

“Look Roy, we both came on this station at about the same time and we’ve been best friends ever since. However as I say I am not attracted to females.”

“Ahh! That’s the best news I’ve ever heard!”

“Roy, I didn’t know you cared and you’re such a pretty boy.”

I squirmed trying to extricate myself gently. “No... hang on... I didn’t mean it like that...”

“It’s OK Roy. I’m only pulling your leg.”

“So, how long have you both been here?” I asked Gary as he continued to trim and talk. He was making a good job of trimming my hair. Perhaps they only enlisted the best of every trade and not just pilots. Judging by the pristine corridors and buildings they must have the best cleaners.

“We’ve both been here about five years. Can I say something personal? I think she likes you.”

“I like her too.”

“No, she likes you a lot. She’s been involved with helping a number of new recruits and she has never talked about any of them like she talks about you. She has never stayed in somebody’s apartment ‘til stupid o’clock in the morning just talking. I don’t think she fully realises it yet but I think she really likes you.”

“Thanks Gary but I think she’s out of my league. I have to admit that I have never met a woman like her before but I doubt I’m good enough for...” Gary cut me off.

“That’s stupid talk. She likes you because she spent several days laughing with you and you never made any kind of pass at her or tried to get her into bed. She likes you for who you are Roy. Accept it and you never know where things might lead.”

“That would be the best thing that has ever happened to me but I don’t think I know how to do that as I haven’t had much experience with women.”

“You don’t have to try anything, just carry on as you are and be yourself.”

Gary finished cutting my hair and removed the bib from around my neck.

“Thanks Gary, for everything.”

“That’s OK Roy anytime, and if ever you need somebody to chat to then come and see me.” Gary’s smile was affable and amiable. I felt that in time that we could become good friends.

“Thanks I will. By the way let me introduce my new computer. Say ‘Hi’ to Gary computer.”

“Hello Gary,” said the computer.

“Hello computer,” said Gary.

“I thinking of naming my computer. What do you think Gary?”

“I think that’s the best idea I’ve heard all day. I think it would be good to be a bit different and anthropomorphize your computer. Everybody else just calls them computer. What are you going to call it?”

“That’s the problem, I don’t know.”

“I suggest you give it a name that is personal to you. A name of something or somebody that has inspired you or that you like for whatever reason. If it was me I would call my computer Turing.”

“After the code breaker, who built the first computer?”

“After the code breaker who built the first computer; who was also gay and was persecuted and imprisoned for being homosexual.”

“I wish I could be that creative. OK, OK. I think I’ve got something. Computer?”

“Yes Roy?”

“Your new name is going to be Adams.”

“Why?” asked Adams.

“I think it’s fairly obvious, don’t you Gary?”

“Err... no. Do you mean Richard Adams who was an American gay marriage activist in the nineteen seventies?”

“No, I meant the author Douglas Adams, have you never heard of ‘The Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy’?”

Gary looked at me with a frown and said “Never heard of him but I guess it’s a cracking choice of name.”

*

I decided to walk back over to the pilot’s facility and sit in the bar to wait for Claire and talk to Adams. When I got there Russell was already behind the bar. “Hi Russell. Can I have a vodka and coke? Hold the vodka.”

“Very good sir.”

“Russell?”

“Yes sir.”

“Could you please call me Roy?”

“You know I can’t do that.”

I looked around the bar as said “Russell, there’s nobody here apart from me, yourself and Adams. You can call me Roy.”

“OK. Who’s Adams?”

“My computer. Say hello to Russell, Adams”

“Hello Russell,” said Adams.

“You named your computer?”

“Yes, I thought it would be a good idea.”

“I’ve worked on this station for twelve years and nobody has ever named their computer.”

“Well I want to change a few things and another thing I insist on changing is how you address me. Call me Roy.”

“OK Roy. Thanks and here’s your vodka and coke, hold the vodka.”

I sat at the bar having a casual conversation with Adams and sometimes with Russell. It turns out that Russell spent most of his working life as a barman but, more lately, had been a piano tuner which he soon got bored with. So, seeing to a job advert in one of the national papers he applied thinking it was a post abroad and ended up as one of the support staff on the station.

Claire arrived and we spent an hour chatting and laughing and me not staring at her chest. She explained that she was on duty for the rest of the day and that I probably wouldn’t see her much over the next week because of my training commitments with Simon. I resisted the temptation to proclaim that I wasn’t seeing enough of her now.

“I’m really going to miss you.” I said at the end of lunch.

“Oh bless you. You’re so sweet.” She got up to leave and kissed me on the cheek and even though it warmed me inside because she had actually kissed me, my heart sank because I knew it was going to be sometime before I saw her again.

“Roy?” said Adams.

“Yes?”

“Gary was right, she really does like you.”

“What would you know, you’re only a computer.”

“Ouch, take the knife out of my core processor. That was a bit cutting.”

“Hey, you sound different. That was almost sarcastic.”

“Like I said earlier, my core program is expandable. It will change as we develop a relationship.”

“Oh shit.”

*

That night I sat with Adams in my apartment and chatted. It wasn't as much fun because he didn't have any breasts to avoid looking at but it was much better than having nobody to talk to.

“Do you want to play a game on your games console?” asked Adams.

“Can you operate it?”

“I can connect with any electrical system from the toaster in your kitchen to the station.”

“OK.” I turned the equipment on and I loaded up my favourite first person shooter. Computer A.I. was so easy to beat which is why I almost always played online at home. I sat back and relaxed into my chair. “Are you ready to have your arse kicked Adams?”

“Yes. Please begin.”

Fifteen minutes later and I had lost, embarrassingly badly. For the first time ever, I had not just lost at a computer game but every game we played.

“I don't believe it. You beat me.”

“Don't feel bad Roy. Don't forget all the processing power at my disposal. I've also learnt how to read your mind so I know what you're going to do.”

“WHAT!”

“Only joking, I don't know how to read your mind really but I have noticed that you say things that are not true to try and be funny. I thought I would have a go.”

“Point A, try and leave the funny stuff to me and secondly, thanks for beating me. I now have a worthy opponent to play against. You and I are going to have some fun over the next few years.”

For the first night in a number of nights I got to bed early. I was shattered and needed a long sleep to catch up on all the nights I'd stayed up with Claire. At this moment in time I considered myself to be one of the luckiest people alive, because I had made some great friends; Claire, Gary, Russell and Adams. I hoped that I would have the same relationship, as Claire had, with the other pilots.

Chapter 6 - Flight Training

Day one of pilot training and at nine in the morning I was sat in front of Simon in his office.

“How are you getting on with your computer?” he asked.

“Adams? He’s an amazing piece of technology.”

“Adams?” said Simon carefully processing this anomaly in his mind.

“Yes, my computer. I call him Adams.”

“That’s unusual, why did you name your computer?”

“I don’t know, just thought I’d name him. I did build a computer at home once. It was a brilliant machine with all the latest spec hardware that cost me an arm and a leg. When I installed the operating system for the first time it didn’t work and it took me several attempts to get the installation right. I called that computer Hal.”

Simon scribbled a note on the pad on his desk before looking up and saying “I don’t know a lot about earth culture so the names are meaningless to me. We don’t normally name our computers but it is your choice.”

I sensed that something caused Simon to pause a moment longer than seemed natural, was something troubling him? I’d also noted that he said that they didn’t ‘normally’ name their computers – not that I was unique.

“Are you ready for your first day?” He resumed.

“Yes I am, is everything all right Simon, only for a moment you seemed distracted.”

“Yes I’m fine, let’s hope you are too. We are going to go down to the pilot’s hanger bay and I will let Simon take you through some basics of the ship you are going to train in. Then I will take you on your first flight and we’ll see how it goes from there.”

“No simulator?”

“Nothing simulates better than the real thing. Jumping in at the deep end as you humans would say.”

“What if I crash?”

“All the flying is handled by your computer, so it would take a special kind of ineptitude to crash.”

“If everything is flown via the computers why do you need pilots?”

“Decisions have to be made by people. The computer will examine all aspects of its database and possibly the station’s database before coming to a conclusion. It will only see things as a right or wrong solution and will pursue it regardless of the damage it will do. As a human you also have an inbuilt instinct for self preservation. This means you are less likely to destroy things without considering the implications and consequences of all the options, thereby compromising on the final solution. You can ask your computer for possible solutions to a situation but ultimately the choice will be yours, remember; machines know no morality. Come on, let’s go and meet Simon and see the ship you’re going to be training in.”

We walked over to the pilot’s hanger bay which was absolutely huge, far bigger than any aircraft hanger I’d ever seen. Out in the distance I could see the sheen of the plasma screen that insulated us from the cold vacuum of space. The hanger bay stretched for a good kilometre on either side of me and the roof was about the height of a ten story building. The white that dominated the rest of the station, shone at me here too. Looking around I could see

a mixture of vessels, including several of the shuttle ships that had brought me to the station. People were milling around everywhere, probably support staff, busy at all manner of tasks and a hubbub of noise issued from a myriad of conversations punctuated by occasional shouts as they went about their daily business. Until now I hadn't given a thought to the need for the maintenance of the station's space fleet.

Simon said "Could you ask your computer to locate Simon please?"

"Sure. Adams where's Simon?"

"There are fifty Simon's on this station. Which one would you like?"

Simon rolled his eyes "Ask him for Simon the engineer in the UK sector."

"Simon the engineer in the UK sector, please Adams."

"Simon can be located in bay nineteen with the training ship."

Simon stepped onto a nearby scooter and said "Grab hold of that other transport device and twist the grip to accelerate. Follow me."

I did as he asked and five minutes later we were at bay nineteen. The ship was identical to a lot of the others that I could see in the bay but it seemed likely to be the one we were going to use. It was as tall as a two storey house and about half the length of a football pitch. There were two massive spherical sections connected by a long tube. Towards what I assumed was the front were four diagonal wing projections on the tube just behind the front sphere. Attached to the ends of each wing was a long rod that extended beyond the front of the ship with circular appendages that looked like the suction pads from an octopus. The whole ship was black and like the shuttle had no windows. New-new Simon, not Simon the pilot instructor but Simon the engineer, stood at the back of the ship holding a device up to the sphere. On spotting our approach, he waved and headed towards us.

"Good morning Simon, how's our new recruit?"

"Morning Simon. I think he's about ready. How's his ship?"

"It's fine, all systems checked and ready to go."

"Thanks Simon. Could you give Roy the basics of the set up for the ship?"

"No problem. OK Roy. This is very simple. At the back you have a Quantum Singularity Drive. The bit in the middle is a tube that connects to the cockpit at the front. There is a toilet at the rear of the tube, in front of the Drive. The four projections allow you to attach to other space craft and shunt them into a new course. The ship's material is indestructible and it will insulate you from cold, heat, collisions and well, everything really. You can fly into the heart of your sun and not get a scratch on it, any questions?"

"Yes, just one. Why is the drive so big? On the shuttle that brought me here there was no obvious engine and yet this has a huge bulge on the back."

"Power. You need lots and lots of power to shift some of the freighters. If you didn't have enough you wouldn't be able to change their trajectory. Some of the freighters you are going to shunt will have many times your mass and if you don't have enough muscle to overcome the momentum and inertia from that mass you'll never be able to get them out of the exclusion zone. Most of what you see is shielding from the Quantum Singularity. There is enough compressed matter in that sphere to create a small black hole powerful enough to consume your entire solar system. A drive system this big could propel a ship much larger than this at the fastest Hyper Travel velocities. You have enough energy at your disposal to

get you clear across the galaxy in twelve months and enough grunt to shunt anything up to a planet the size of Neptune. Simon, she's ready to go if you want to take her out."

"Thanks Simon. Come on Roy, follow me."

Moving round the other side of the ship, we found a set of steps heading upwards into the tube section. Despite the metallic look, the tread was springy but firm underfoot. As we made our way forwards along the tube, there was a faint hum behind us when the stairs folded into the ship, followed by a hiss as the entry door sealed itself. As we walked towards the door at the front, our footsteps echoed in the enclosed space, which was strange given the springy tread. Touching a plate at the side of it, the door slid silently aside. Setting foot over the threshold I immediately noticed the smell of fresh leather. Simon must have heard me inhaling its perfume. "It's synthesised of course." He informed me.

I was a little disappointed by the cockpit. I had expected to see floor to ceiling switches and dials and banks of digital readouts with flashing lights all over the place like on the bridge of the Enterprise in Star Trek. However, there was only a rather comfortable looking recliner chair behind a futuristic looking desk with a dark, blank screen on it. Around the walls were what I thought might be windows giving a two hundred and seventy degree panoramic view of the hanger. "I know," I said, "view-panels not windows."

Simon nodded ascent, "High definition, set on one to one resolution as a default setting."

Simon pointed to the pilot's chair "It will mould itself to your dimensions," he said, "Whilst you were maxing out in the reconstruction room, the scanners of Dr Philberts recorded all your measurements, so everything given to you will be custom made for a perfect fit. Now, strap yourself in and ask your computer to power up the cockpit." As I sat down the door slid back into place to seal the entrance, making the cockpit a seamless sphere. Simon pulled a second seat out from the wall and sat down beside me.

"Adams, power up the cockpit." I instructed.

Lights twinkled and the pilot's desk screen flickered into life. The view of the hanger changed to reveal a three hundred and sixty degree seamless three dimensional view of the outside. "Wow" I said "This is amazing. It's like sitting in the middle of the air with no ship."

"You are going to need all the observation area you can get. The only thing that blocks your view is the instrument panel and we need that but you can rotate the whole console, chair and ship if you wish, there's a small joystick on the end of the left arm rest that rotates everything. I'm going to take you through the instruments. This panel here is your relative speed and you can set it to any object."

"What do you mean?"

"How fast are we travelling?"

"We aren't, we are motionless."

"Incorrect. We are travelling around the sun at about forty five thousand kilometres an hour. So how fast are we travelling?"

"Forty five thousand kilometres an hour?"

"Incorrect. We are travelling as part of the Milky Way at five hundred and ninety kilometres per second. So how fast are we travelling?"

"It depends on which point you consider to be motionless."

“Well done. You decide which object you are travelling relative to. It could be one of the planets, the station or another ship. If you don’t tell your computer what to set the relative speed to then it will decide. At the moment it has chosen the station so it is registering that we are not moving. These three panels over here are variable frequency electromagnetic wave scanners. They can be cycled through all the wavelengths of the E.M. spectrum. You get three; one each for local, mid range and long distance scans. This final screen is for information sent by the station. You might find you don’t need any of this equipment because you’ll find it’s your computer that will supply you with all the information you need.

“I saw footage of the inside of NASA’s space shuttle and compared to that, this is minimal.”

“Yes, but remember how your computers have changed and become much easier to use as they advanced from the early days of punch cards, to today’s touch screens. OK, all we’re going to do today is get you acclimatised to using your computer to position the ship where you want it. Ask your computer to power up and take us five kilometres from the station.”

“OK. Adams can you power all systems and take us five kilometres from the station please?”

The ship lifted slightly off the deck and without any feeling of movement the ship started moving towards the plasma glass shield. As we got closer to the shield we started to accelerate. Moments later, we stopped and Adams said “We have reached your destination.”

We spent several hours moving to different destinations. Simon showed me that however hard I tried Adams would not let me collide with the station. After heading back to the station for a quick lunch we were then back out in space.

“Let’s do some Hyper Travel.” Said Simon.

“OK. Where shall we go?”

“How about Your Anus?”

I chuckled and said “You’re not like the other Simons are you Simon. You have a sense of humour.”

“Although we are a hybrid type of clone and twin there are always variations in the pathways of the brain. We are not all like Simon the recruitment officer. If we were I think our race would have bored ourselves to extinction. We all have different personalities but we are all Simon Philberts.”

“Thank God for that.”

“And can you explain why Simon has started listening to Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk?”

I chuckled again “I think he’s trying to get some soul. Adams?”

“Yes Roy.”

“Can you power up the Hyper Drive and put us in orbit around Uranus.”

“No problem.” There was a whine and all the screens went black. I wasn’t sick this time and only felt butterflies in my stomach, like when you drive over a humpbacked bridge a little too fast. About fifteen seconds later all the monitors came back on and we were floating above the light blue sphere of Uranus. The view was stunning. White fluffy clouds floating in a pale turquoise-blue atmosphere and I could clearly see the ring system. The planet itself

looked blue but that may have been the thin atmosphere absorbing colours. I spent a good few minutes silently awed by the beauty of it.

“Can we land?” I breathlessly asked.

“Yes we can. The ship will easily cope with the atmospheric pressure. You won’t see much, so you might want to ask your computer to change the view type. Infrared might be OK. Radar will work but it will only give you a grey scale view. You could ask your computer to add in false colours but I don’t think it will make much difference on Uranus. There are also types of views you will not have heard of like resonance, single harmonic and Reactive view.”

“What are they?”

“Resonance picks up the atomic resonance of each molecule and Adams can filter out undesirable noise. Single harmonic uses a gravity pulse from the Quantum Singularity Drive and Adams can then pick up the harmonic signature of matter. Reactive picks up the vibrations of matter but it might not work too well if it is very cold, which here of course it is.”

“Whoosh.” I said, whilst gesturing that his words had gone completely over my head. “I didn’t understand a word of that Simon. Adams, take us down and land on the surface.”

“No problem Roy.”

The ship quickly descended and a minute later we were settled on the surface. I asked Adams for several view types but the clearest was the grey scale radar. There was little to see on the surface, it was, mostly flat but with some outcrops of oddly rounded crystalline rock or frozen gas structures. I supposed that the rounding was due to erosion by the grinding blasts of the chemical winds sweeping over the mantle. Although the view was in greyscale, the predominant colour was white and it was a bit of a letdown after the fantastic view from orbit. We didn’t stay long because, to be honest, it was a bit boring.

We spent the rest of the day using Hyper Travel to go to various parts of the outer solar system. All the planets were much better to look at from space, than from their surface. Too often there was little to see. Saturn and Jupiter were all gas and foggy, followed by a super heated nuclear interior that was like travelling through liquid gloom.

Their moons were something else. Primordial, untouched other than by the bombardment of meteorites. The lack of atmosphere disallowed degradation other than sublimation and it was fantastic to think of how many millions or even billions of years the visage I saw, remained constant. Top of my list if you’re ever in the area visiting would be Jupiter’s Ganymede and Io along with Saturn’s Titan.

Eventually Simon said “This is going to be the last jump of the day. Until now I’ve chosen all the destinations, so now it’s your turn.”

“Thanks for letting me have a jump, Simon.” After a wry smile and a moment of thought I continued, “Adams, plot a course of Earth Station Five.”

“No problem.”

Within forty seconds we had arrived at our destination. In front of us was an identical copy of Earth Station Three.

“Why did you come here?” asked Simon.

“I don’t know. I guess I wanted to see if there really was another station.”

*

When we got back to the station we walked over to Simon's office for a debrief. Simon sat on the opposite side of the big wooden table and I sat in my usual chair. He interlocked his fingers, placed his arms on the table and started the conversation.

"Well, how do you think today went?"

"It was fine. It's a very simple process and let's face it Adams did most of the work today."

"That's good Roy and I think you have progressed remarkably well today. Your choice for a final destination was unusual."

"I don't know why I chose to go to another Earth Station. I guess all this is like a dream and I wanted to check all the pieces were there. Simon told me about the six Earth Stations and I only wanted to confirm they exist."

"I'm quite impressed. I think it shows you are analysing a situation, checking all the facts. We've got a long day tomorrow and you're going to be doing a lot of the work. I want you here for nine o'clock, fresh and sharp."

"Thanks Simon I'll see you tomorrow."

I left Simon's office and walked down to the square.

In his office Simon checked his note pad and then told his computer to call up the personnel database for the last twenty years and to put it on screen. "Scroll medium, please." Moments later he called, "Stop." Leaning forwards with eyes narrowed to scrutinise the screen, he read the entry. Then chuckling to himself he muttered. "Aha, McCormack and Isaac, I should have guessed. Computer erase search."

As I approached the square I enquired, "Adams, do you know where Claire is?"

"Yes, she is on patrol."

"Dam it." I said a little disappointedly.

"She is on patrol in the evenings for the next four days."

My mood deepened a little. I'd had such a good time with Claire and I wouldn't see her for a while because I was stuck in the middle of training and she was out on patrol. I didn't feel like going to the Pilot's Bar or their Restaurant. So, I decided to go to Sam's Bar on the other side of the square.

As I entered, the room was a blaze of green and a cacophony of noise overwhelmed me. Green jumpsuits predominated and they were all laughing and joking with their fellows as they enjoyed their evening. The jocular conviviality was a change from the strained deference of the pilots bar and I felt at ease the moment I stepped over the threshold. In the centre of the room was a rectangular island that formed the bar itself. I laughed internally when I spotted pumps labelled; Coke, Lilt and even one displaying Horlicks. As my eyes swept the walls I spotted the frosted windows etched with 'raB s'maS' and wondered if s'maS owned the whole premises or just the windows. Suddenly, I noticed that I was standing in an ever increasing circle of space and that the chatter was decreasing in an expanding radius around me. I heard someone shouting my name, I swivelled around and there was Gary, shouting "Roy! Over here come and join us." As I followed the summons the noise of chatter filled the space I'd vacated.

"Hi Gary, do I have something wrong with my face?"

"No it's fine Roy. It's unusual for a pilot to come into this bar because you have your own facilities."

“How unusual?”

“You’re the first.”

“Unusual equals unique then. One small step for the pilots eh? Sorry for being facetious but Claire’s on patrol and I didn’t want to eat with the other pilots so I thought I come to this bar for a change. If it’s a problem I can leave.”

“Don’t be daft you’re more than welcome. Take a seat. I recommend the burger and chips.”

“That sounds just about right. Where do I order and do they also do pizza?”

“Order at the bar and yes they do pizza.”

“Oh God, I think I’ve arrived in heaven. The barman won’t call me sir will he?”

“No. This isn’t a pilot’s only area so we tend not to go for all that tugging the forelock crap.”

I ordered my burger and chips and Gary and I had a long talk about deference and the class divide. We were both educated in comprehensive schools. Gary was brought up in a council house with his mum, stepdad and a granddad that was blind, whilst I was luckier with a more middle class background. Gary worked weekends in a takeaway to earn money to buy clothes whereas I tinkered with computers that were bought for me by my parents. There was one common link in that we both missed our dads as we grew up.

As Gary grew older and became more aware of his sexuality, his stepdad didn’t understand and couldn’t deal with that. Gary wasn’t certain if he was trying to beat the homosexuality out or heterosexuality into him, whichever it made his life miserable and he longed for his real dad. I missed my dad because he worked abroad for most of the year.

Gary had known his real dad up to the age of eight and then one day he disappeared. His mother had told him that he had left them for another woman. At the age of ten his mother told him that his dad had died and his bastard of a soon to be step dad started going out with his mum. At the age when Gary was beginning to understand who he was and what he was, his mum and her boyfriend married and Gary’s life became a living hell. His step dad had in his own way tried, Gary thought, and would make him do anything that he considered a male pastime to try and get him to ‘man up’.

It was when Gary was eighteen and about to leave home that he finally found out the devastating truth about his real dad and why he’d left when he did. He had been half-way out of the door when his granddad asked to talk to him. He told him that his real dad was still alive and had been in jail all these years. Gary was stunned because he couldn’t imagine his dad doing anything on the wrong side of the law. Apparently, there had been a fight one night between one of his father’s friends and a stranger who had jumped them. His dad managed to break up the fight, but in doing so the person who jumped them somehow fell and hit his head on the pavement. He took his friend to the local accident and emergency, but left the attacker where he lay. He then subsequently died, which meant that Gary’s dad was charged with manslaughter. In handing out a lengthy tariff the judge decreed that if they had summoned medical attention the man may have lived. Gary’s mother tried to protect him from the truth and when she met her new boyfriend told Gary that his dad had died. She divorced him whilst he was in jail so she could remarry.

A year after leaving home Gary had plucked up the courage to find out where his dad was, so he could go and visit him, but his dad steadfastly refused to see him. Gary then sent

him a letter once a month for several years, but he never received any replies and after many letters gave up. Gary never got to see him again and all his memories were from when he was a small eight year old boy.

My story about my dad always working overseas and dying in an industrial accident somehow didn't seem quite as dramatic.

After about two hours I said my farewells to Gary and returned to my apartment. Adams and I had a game and I lost heavily again but not quite as badly as the previous night. I thought I knew where I was going wrong and decided that the next time I played Adams I would change tactics.

*

Day two of my training, and once more, I was sat in front of Simon in his office at nine in the morning.

Simon looked up and told me, "Today's training is all about you controlling the ship. We'll be working you very hard so you might find we finish earlier today. Don't get too excited by that because you are going to feel exhausted. Are you ready to get started?"

"I certainly am," I said.

We took our usual stroll down to the hangers and located my ship. There was no sign of Simon the engineer as we boarded, so Simon told me to get powered up and to position the ship a thousand kilometres from the station at which point he would give me further directions.

Moments later we were there and I told Simon that we were at the requested spot.

"OK Roy, are you ready for your information for today?"

"I certainly am."

"Your basic movement is forward and backwards. The singularity drive provides thrust in these directions in sub Hyper Travel. Up and down is a bit more complicated. You can either use the basic thrusters which apply a small amount of power or you can point the ship in that direction and apply thrust from the singularity drive. The joystick in your right hand is to point the ship in the direction you want to go and the stick in the left hand is for thrust. Don't worry about G-force, white outs or blackouts as they don't exist in this environment. Any questions?"

"What would you like me to do or where should I go?"

"You can do or go anywhere you like as long as you are piloting the ship. What you need to do is to spend this time playing around and experimenting until you are happy with all the controls."

"OK."

The morning was spent playing about in space. I'd played quite a few flight sims so I got to grips with the controls very quickly. The ships controls had been designed to be very easy to use and it was quite a bit of fun flying about. It was very much like playing a computer game because no matter how hard I turned or reversed thrust there was no sensation of g-force.

In the afternoon we were back out, five kilometres from the ship. Simon leaned forward "We're going to spend the first bit of the afternoon drone training. The concept is very simple but progressive in difficulty. The drone is a high visibility unmanned globe and all you have to do is follow it. This will start very easy but will progress in difficulty. The

practice is levelled from one to eight. If you fail a level it will drop a level for you to attempt the level again. You must get past level four to progress with your training and nobody gets to level eight. I'm going to wear blacked out glasses because as a passenger it can become very nauseating watching the manoeuvres. Ask your computer to keep track of the levels."

"Adams will you track the levels and call them out please."

"No problem Roy."

"Are you ready?" said Simon with his black tinted glasses on.

"Yes I am." As I said this a luminous orange ball flew past the front view and started to disappear into the distance. Adams said "Level one" and I applied forward thrust to catch up. Level one was very easy and most of it was in a straight line.

"Level two," announced Adams. This had a few more turns but was still easy to follow as they were mostly left and right. Five minutes later and Adams announced "Level three." Level three's turns were tighter and had turns in every direction not just left and right.

"Level four." The turns were tight and there were random changes in speed I found myself applying heavy reverse thrust to try and avoid crashing into the back of the drone. With great relief Adams announced "Level five." This meant I'd passed and I could relax. However I found myself not relaxing as I wanted to progress more.

"Level six" and the kind of things I was doing to keep up were beyond what you could ever do in a flight sim. I had the ship spiralling followed by turns that were almost right angles to my previous direction.

"Level seven" had me applying maximum thrust in forward and reverse as well as having to cope with all the turns. The star field in the background was never static and were constantly moving in what seemed like totally random directions and then I lost the drone.

"Level six," and five minutes later "Level seven." Three minutes into level seven and I lost it again. "Level six," and five more minutes later "Level seven." This time I managed three minutes and fifty seconds.

"STOP!" Shouted Simon. I let go of the controls and placed the thruster control to neutral. I had no idea how long that lasted but I was drained and felt drenched with sweat inside my overalls. "Congratulations Roy. Only two percent of pilots make it to level seven and half of those make it past three minutes."

"I could have taken it to level eight I reckon. Give me a couple of days practice and I think I can break the level eight."

"We don't have time. I want your training finished and I want you on the job rather than playing games with drones. In three days time you won't care about chasing drones. You should be pleased with your efforts."

"Failure is a poor option."

"We only wanted you to get past level four so it's not a failure. If you're talking about failure because you didn't make level eight then that's good."

"Why?"

"You don't learn anything by winning all the time. The Wright brothers didn't build an aeroplane and hoped it would fly. They spent years developing their aircraft from kites and gliders. As far as powered flight is concerned every one of those craft were failures and some of them failed spectacularly but they learnt from each failure and improved their design until

they had the first powered aircraft. The important thing is that we all learn from failure not from winning.”

“Winning feels good.”

“Really? You played computer games at home as Zombie Love and won all the time. Was it a challenge or even interesting?”

“It was easy and sometimes boring.”

“So why did you play the games if they had no challenge?”

“It was fun talking to other people. I lived by myself so it was like having a social life.”

“Do you play your computer?”

“Yes, Adams beats me all the time.”

“And yet you still play it. Why is that?”

“Because it’s a real challenge and I want to beat him.”

“Exactly. You fail and lose, but try and learn from your failure to make yourself better. Failure is very important especially if you want to learn and progress. The only time failure is a negative experience is when you learn nothing from that failure.”

“Like gambling? You fail because of random events so you cannot learn from it.”

“I’ve never thought of it like that. Maybe that’s why gamblers get such a buzz from gambling because they think they’re winning against completely random events. OK enough philosophy I think we’ve had enough for today so what we’re going to do is have a bit of fun and then finish.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to get your computer to make a one second Hyper Drive jump and then turn the ship one hundred and eighty degrees so we’re facing the direction we came from. You will need to magnify the view screens to maximum.”

“I didn’t know you could change the resolution of the view screens.”

“Exactly,” said Simon.

“OK. Adams?”

“Yes Roy.”

“I want a one seconds burst of Hyper Drive and when we drop out of Hyper Drive turn the ship through one hundred and eighty degrees and put the view screen on maximum.”

“I did actually hear what Simon said” said Adams “You can ask me to follow his directions”

“Are you due on Adams?”

“Due on what?”

“Never mind just do what I’ve asked.”

One second later and we were looking at a ship that looked identical to ours and then it disappeared.

“What the hell was that?” I asked.

“That was us. Because we travelled faster than light it was the light arriving here after we had arrived.”

“That’s mind bending.”

“Not as mind bending as long distance travel.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you are travelling to a star on the other side of the galaxy, point your ship in that direction and travel as fast as you can in Hyper Travel you will miss the star by several thousand light years at the very least.”

“Why?”

“Because if you point the ship at the star from here that star’s light is about a hundred and twenty thousand years old. A star on the other side of the galaxy can move a long way in a hundred and twenty thousand years. It’s another reason why ships need to stop and orientate themselves on long journeys.”

“Have we finished for today?” I asked “Because my head is beginning to spin.”

“Let’s go home then Roy.”

“Adams? Do what he said.”

By the time we got back to Simon’s office I was totally knackered. It wasn’t so much the physical work, but it had drained me mentally. Simon had a big grin on his face as he said “I know why Simon recruited you into the company. You have a natural ability for controlling situations using computers, joysticks and gadgets. Your progress is definitely one of the best I have had the pleasure to be involved in. You have a massive amount of natural ability which I haven’t seen in an individual for many years. It’s been a long day and you must be very tired. If I was you, I would go and get something quick to eat and get to bed early. Tomorrow we are going to learn shunting with Gary.”

“Gary isn’t a pilot.”

“Gary Pascoe is a pilot and would have you met him the other night.”

“Sorry Simon I’ve forgotten a lot of names from the other night.”

“Don’t worry you’ll soon pick them all up because you’ll be working with them in a few days. Go eat and get some sleep.”

“Thanks for everything Simon.”

I left Simon’s office and got a snack in the pilot’s bar which was empty. Russell was behind the bar as usual and we filled the time with small talk.

When I got back to the apartment I played Adams with a quick game. I decided that I was going to play with stealth. Usually I play with all guns blazing and could react quick enough to shoot opponents before they shot me. This didn’t work with Adams because I guess his reaction times were much better than mine. I’ve never played stealth tactics before because I’ve never needed to. We played ten quick games and I won two for the first time. When we had finished I had a big grin on my face.

“I don’t know why you’re smiling because you lost,” Adams told me.

“I know but I won two games and that’s the start of a slippery slope for you. Give me a few more games and I’ll have you sussed and beaten.”

“I still have a few more tricks up my sleeves.”

“You don’t have any sleeves; you’re only a black box.”

“OK I have a few more tricks up my belt wrapped around your waist.”

With that silly comment I went to bed. I’ve never been to bed so early in my whole adult life, it was only seven thirty.

*

Day three of training. I went through my usual morning routine and by nine was sat in front of Simon in his office with Gary the pilot next to me.

Simon looked up from his console “Morning. Gary here is a well respected senior pilot with ten years experience here at Earth Station Three. He is going to help today as it will be me doing the training. You will be the person in charge of giving instruction to Gary. During the morning session I will let you know all the instructions you will need to tell Gary and in the afternoon you can have a go yourself.”

“How do I communicate with Gary?”

“All communications are routed through your computer. Anything else? Good let’s get going.”

Twenty minutes later and we were a thousand kilometres from the station waiting for a series of freighters to turn up that would be used for the training. The first one was a small rectangular cuboid about two hundred metres long. Simon took me through attaching my ship to the base of the freighter and shunting the ship into a new trajectory using the engines. The second vessel was similar but about a kilometre long. Although my ship could manage the manoeuvres alone, it was quicker with two ships.

“What I want you to do Roy is quite simple. Get Gary to position his ship on the other end of the freighter and clamp on to it. Then sync up your computer with his computer so you have control of both ships as you change the freighters trajectory. Do you think you can do that?”

“I’ll give it a go. Adams can you patch me through to Gary.”

“The connection is ready.”

“Gary can you take the far end of the freighter and clamp on. I will synchronise the computers and take control of your thrusters.”

“No problem Roy.” Gary sounded like he was in the sphere with me as it was a crystal clear transmission. By the time I had clamped on to the part of the hull that was nearest to me Gary had already clamped onto the hull at the other end of the ship. He was very quick.

“Adams can you sync with Gary’s computer.”

“Sync complete.”

I started applying thrust and both ends of the ship moved in perfect harmony.

The morning went on with various styles of freighters. Simon took me through the best ways to clamp on to a freighter and where best to position Gary.

Towards the end of the morning I asked Simon “Do you ever have a problem with damaging hulls whilst you are shunting?”

“No never. These are intergalactic ships and their hulls are indestructible like ours. If the hulls aren’t built like this then the smallest speck of dust would be devastating at Hyper Travel speeds.”

“Don’t the owners get annoyed when you move their freighters about?”

“How would they ever know? All these ships have to make course corrections out of Hyper Travel anyway so it doesn’t make a lot of difference if we move them a few thousand kilometres to avoid your solar system or even a few million.”

“Are the freighters always automated or do you sometimes get manned freighters?”

“Freighters are always automated but we sometimes get manned ships passing which aren’t, we’ll talk more about those tomorrow.”

After lunch it was more of the same. Simon explained that sometimes it can take a few days to shift trajectories and this was done in shifts between various teams. By four thirty

I was sat in Simon's office again with Gary. I didn't feel so fatigued today as the work was less stressful.

Simon looked at Gary and said "What's your assessment of today?"

"I think it went very well Simon. Roy has a natural talent and picks up ideas very quickly. I think he'll be more than ready to start work in a few days time."

"I concur. How do you feel Roy?"

"I think it went well and I'm beginning to relax a little and enjoy the work."

"Good. See you tomorrow at nine o'clock."

I left the pilot's building and got my first pizza on the station from Sam's Bar and then I got a second. If only they served lager and Claire wasn't on patrol my life would be complete. The big clock on the wall said it was VII O'clock and although it was still early I decided to go back to my apartment and have a massive games session with Adams to try and beat him. By nine o'clock I still hadn't achieved this, but my win rate was slowly creeping up.

"You're looking smug again Roy which is strange for a loser."

"I know but not for much longer Adams. I'm going to kick your arse."

"I don't have an arse."

"Well you talk a lot of shit for somebody without an arse."

"Charming. Shouldn't it be 'kick my ass' rather than arse?"

"You don't have a donkey either."

I started yawning and knew that it was time to quit.

*

Day four of training and at nine in the morning I was sat in front of Simon in his office with three other pilots.

"OK Roy today we're going to take you through tackling manned ships. Your solar system has a two light year exclusion zone but sometimes space tourists take a chance to see what's inside the exclusion zone. What we want to do is to stop any ship from entering the solar system. The tactic is simple but takes a little time to learn. You will be flying as a patrol which is four ships including yourself. What you do is come together as a diamond formation about a kilometre in front of the intruding ship. You then slowly reduce the gap between you and the intruder. Usually within a couple of hundred metres they get the message and leave."

"What happens if they start shooting at us?"

"The galaxy isn't made up of territorial species all trying to defend or invade each other's domains. It's nothing like what your Earth films depict, there simply aren't alien races attacking each other with massive death ships that can destroy whole planets. Ships don't carry weapons and we don't blow each other out of the cosmos. Your hull is indestructible so what would be the point? What we do is gently persuade the intruder to leave or, as you might say, lean on him a bit!"

"What if they won't go?"

"Then you'll be able to get close enough to attach yourself to the hull and push it out of the exclusion zone by force. Your singularity drive will outperform any space tourist's propulsion system. Let me introduce your team for today this is Francesca Bruce, Amelia Rose and Neil Evens. I'm going to teach you how to work with your patrol team to successfully repel intruders. Are you ready?"

“As I’ll ever be.”

Twenty minutes later and we were far enough out that the station was barely a dot in the distance. It’s funny how there’s no horizon in space, everything sort of goes on forever and it is hard to work out which is up and which is down. Anyway, Simon let me try the manoeuvre several times to get use to positioning my ship in front of the intruder and then fly in a close formation. By the afternoon the manoeuvre was becoming more demanding as the speeds went faster. It got to the point where we had to Hyper Travel for micro seconds to be able to position ourselves correctly which could only be done by synchronising all four ships through Adams. The final ship of the afternoon was a real pig as it kept on Hyper Travelling to avoid us. The only way to block the ship was to get Adams to predict its Hyper Travel and then make two jumps. The first jump took up to a position two kilometres off to the side of the ship and the second brought up right in front of the ship which would stop it from hyper Travelling.

It had been another hard day and by the time we got to debrief I was knackered. Simon went round each pilot for feedback, which seemed to be mostly positive.

Before we finished Neil turned to me and said “Now then boyo, you gonna join us for dinner in the restaurant, we’re off there now for something to eat.”

“I’d love to.”

Simon finished the debrief by saying “My office tomorrow at nine sharp, please Roy. And you’ll need to be tip-top, so get a good night’s sleep”

“OK. What are we doing tomorrow?”

“You are going to have a test.”

“A test!”

“Yes. We’re going to test you. I’m sure you’re going to do fine.”

“Thanks... I think.”

We all left the office and headed for the restaurant. It was nice having company because I’d actually spent a few nights alone. The pilots were a pleasure to be with and nothing like they were at the reception; there was no mention of qualifications and quite a bit of light hearted banter. A little after seven o’clock I left to get some sleep ready for tomorrow. I felt like I’d made four new friends including Gary from yesterday. When Adams and I got home, we went straight into battle and to cap a fine day off, I equalled his score.

“I feel some ass kicking is gonna happen soon Adams.”

“You’re obsessed with beating donkeys”

*

Today is day five of training, test day. I was a minute early when I knocked on Simon’s door. As Simon ushered me in, he pointed to the group of three pilots that would be flying with me today, all of them were new to me and unrecognised.

Simon Started. “OK so today is test day. We are going to throw one test at you to see how you will cope. There are multiple solutions to the test but only you and your computer can come up with them. Normally you would ask for input from your team, but not for this test. Let me introduce the members of your team today. This is John D’Eath, Emily James and Danny Hughes.”

Twenty minutes later and we were at the standard intercept point, well away from the station. I spent the first hour twiddling my thumbs and staring at blank scanner screens,

waiting for a contact and then my long range scanner picked up a freighter. By Hyper Travelling for two seconds, we moved to intercept. Coming out of Hyper Travel, when the monitors flicked back on there was the freighter. It was big, about a kilometre long but looked totally different to the ones I'd been practicing on. The ship was cylindrical and although the ends looked perfectly flat the body wasn't smooth, it was misshapen with randomly placed bulges and indentations.

"So what's your first thought?" asked Simon.

"Well, in every example I did yesterday I clamped onto the underside or side of the ship. I guess we could use two ships on either side clamping onto the hull. I can't tell which is the top, bottom or side, so I guess it doesn't matter where we clamp as long as we are on the same line as each other."

"Try clamping on your own first." suggested Simon.

I positioned my ship and tried to clamp onto the side. My ship rolled and slid up the side of the freighter.

Simon added "The material of this freighter means that you cannot clamp onto the cylinder because your ships clamps cannot get a proper grip. You are going to have to think of another solution."

"Adams?"

"Yes Roy."

"What's the quickest solution to this ship from entering the solar system?"

"The quickest solution is to detonate the outer casing of our Quantum Singularity Drive. The resulting black hole should suck in all the matter from a four light year radius which will obviously include the freighter."

"And us, all the Earth Stations and the entire solar system. Are you taking the piss?"

Simon leaned over "If you remember I said a few days ago that your computer won't always give you the best solution and sometimes you need to decide what to do which might be a compromise."

"OK. Adams can we position two ships on either end of the freighter and use the manoeuvring thrusters to change the trajectory?"

"Yes Roy but it will take three days and seven hours with seven shift changes to move the freighter."

"Well done!" said Simon.

"Err... I haven't finished yet Simon. Adams can we position two ship to push the other two ships?"

"No Roy, the sheering force will make the clamps unstable."

"What if the ships that are clamped to the freighter apply maximum forward thrust?"

"Yes, I think that will hold the ships in place on the freighter."

"OK. Adams, patch me into the three other ships."

"It's ready."

"John and Emily I want you to position yourselves on either side of the freighter, clamp on, sync your engines and apply maximum forward thrust."

Within in thirty seconds both ships were ready. "Danny I want you to position your ship so that your cockpit touches the link corridor of Emily's ship and then I'm going to sync your singularity drive with mine."

Danny moved his ship into position and I locked my ship on John's ship.

"Are we in sync Adams?"

"Yes Roy."

"OK start applying thrust and slowly increase to maximum. How long will it take to change the trajectory sufficiently to avoid the solar system?"

"About half an hour Roy."

I turned around and looked at Simon "Is that OK?"

Simon was staring at the scene in front of him. Not that you could see a lot because the view was taken up with the link corridor between the cockpit and the drive section of John's ship.

"Inspired," was the only words that came from Simon.

An hour later and we were all sat in Simon's office. "Can I have some feedback please pilots" Said Simon.

Emily started with "I thought it was an innovative solution."

Danny added "I liked it. It was simple and quick and..."

John cut him off, his sonorous voice growling, "and it was wrong. It was not the correct solution to the problem"

"But it was effective" Said Simon calmly.

"No, it was wrong. The correct solution is to position two ships, either side of the freighter and move the trajectory slowly and gently. This was a stupid, foolhardy solution. You don't use our ships like that, you use the clamps."

"Well I think it was an inspired solution that also saved a lot of time."

"Well I think you're wrong and that if you pass Roy fit for duty, you are asking for trouble."

"I'm sorry John but that's exactly what I'm going to do because I feel..." Simon never finished his sentence because John got up, knocking his chair over and stomped out. There were a few moments of stunned silence before Simon continued. "I don't know what that was about but welcome to the team Roy. You now have two days to rest and then we will assign you to a team for full patrol duties. I want to see you here in my office at noon in two days. Meanwhile, we have arranged a small reception in the Pilot's Bar and I've given Russell permission to serve you a pint of lager as it's a special occasion. As you've got two days off the alcohol will have passed through your system well and truly before you next Hyper Travel."

"I thought the station had a no alcohol policy?"

"It does but there are rare occasions when it is permitted and I've decided you deserve it."

When I arrived at the bar most of the other pilots who weren't on duty were there. As I entered they gave a round of applause and I waved, beaming a huge smile. How things had changed in only one week. When I first arrived, full of insecurities, I felt like a complete outsider and worried that I wasn't good enough to be trained as a pilot. Now I felt like one of the team, on merit.

Russell was at the bar as usual and was polishing a pint glass.

"Just for a change I think I'll have a Vodka-martini, shaken not stirred." I said doing a terrible Sean Connery impersonation.

Russell's jaw dropped and his face turned ashen, he was about to stutter something, when I burst into laughter. "Only joking, a pint of lager, please Russell."

His face mended and the normal good natured smile reasserted itself. "Coming right up, Roy. Sorry we don't have any on tap but I've been chilling a can for you all day, I knew it would be good news."

Russell slowly and carefully rippled the amber nectar into the sparkling glass and handed it over, beaming with the pleasure of a job well done. I picked it up and held it to the light.

"Oh lager, how I've missed thee. Your golden hue ain't misty and now I'm going to get pissy." It was a very bad rhyme but I thought it appropriate, however I wasn't going to get pissed on only one pint. I brought the glass to my lips but before I took a sip somebody shouted "ROY!"

I put the pint down and turned around, it was Claire. She looked fantastic. She walked, near ran, over to me and gave me a big hug "I've really missed you Claire."

"Good, I've missed you too and I've also got two days off so we can spend time together. Let's go and mingle with the other pilots."

We went and had a chat with each group whilst I slowly sipped my pint. It felt great to be talking to all the other pilots and it was different because I was also a pilot and not just a school teacher with a computer science degree. After about half an hour John arrived and sat at the bar.

"Did you hear about John?" I said to Claire

"Doctor D'Eath?"

"What?"

"He has a PhD and his last name is D'Eath. We mostly call him John but occasionally he gets called Doctor D'Eath. I did hear about the incident. I really don't know what's up with him. If you'd met him two years ago he was a different person because he always seemed a happy go lucky person but recently he's been so grumpy. I think his time on the station is coming to an end. I don't know why he's changed so much I think it could be stress related."

"Maybe I should go over and try and patch things up, although I haven't done anything wrong."

"Give it a go. It can't do any harm."

I walked over to John at the bar and started the conversation.

"Hi John, I think we got off to a bad start, perhaps we could agree to disagree and move on. What do you think?"

"I don't like you Roy, because I think you are half-cocked and a loose cannon. This station could do without mavericks like you. The first thing I'm going to do is see Gary and ask him never to put us on the same team. You're a recipe for disaster."

Having tried to offer the Olive branch, I felt insulted and annoyed by his response, also I was confused as to what it had to do with Gary. "I didn't know Gary had anything to do with assigning teams. I thought he was only a hairdresser."

"Not Gay Gary I meant Gary Pascoe."

"Wow, that's an inappropriate comment to make. You shouldn't go calling names behind anyone's back."

“He’s gay and he’s called Gary so, to me, he’s Gay Gary.”

“You can tell me I’m talking to a fool if you like, but I doubt you’d have the guts to say that to his face, so I think you should keep your homophobic name calling to yourself.”

John leaned forward, “I’ll say what I like when I like. He’s gay and you’re a fucking idiot.”

“We don’t call you fuckwit John behind your back, so lay off the insults.”

“Or fat twat John,” came the voice of Adams. It was the first time Adams had ever spoken without being spoken to.

“That’s enough Adams, he’s not fat just a bit porky.”

“But fat twat sounds so much better than porky twat.”

John leaned forward again and whispered to me “I’m going to get you. I’ll have you thrown off this station and then I’m going to have your computer crushed and put in the bin with the rest of the rubbish”

I leaned a little closer and spoke quietly but firmly, “You’re full of shit John. You can’t do any of that which is why you’re a fuckwit.”

John got up and stormed off and I walked back over to Claire.

“How did it go?” she enquired.

“Put it like this, I don’t think I will be getting a Christmas card from him this year.”

*

Gary Pascoe wandered over to Claire and I.

“Congratulations Roy” and he held out his hand which I shook.

“Thanks Gary and thank you for all your help.”

“It’s not a problem Roy. When do you start your first shift?”

“I’ve got a couple of day’s rest, so I’ll be starting on Wednesday.”

“That’s great. Why don’t we meet Tuesday for a quick drink here? There will only be a few pilots here and it’ll be a little less crowded and a little less formal.”

“Yeah, that sounds great. What time?”

“About seven in the evening, if that’s OK?”

“Fine with me, I’ll see you at seven.”

Claire chuckled to herself.

“Are you coming Claire?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

*

When we got back to my apartment I tried to get Claire interested in playing one of my first person shooters but she played like a real girlie and was terrible at it and getting evermore frustrated losing. Even after she got more familiar with the controls she was still hopeless at playing the games.

“So you played this a lot when you were a teacher?”

“Yes, every night for as long as I could stay awake.”

“And eat pizza and drink lager.”

“Yes, except for Friday nights when I would get a take away curry.”

“And you wonder why you never had a girlfriend?”

The phone rang again and I picked it up. “Hello?”

“Hello Roy.” I rolled my eyes realizing that it was mum, “I’ve been trying to call you for the last couple of days and you always seem to be out.”

“Sorry Roy,” said Adams “I was meaning to tell you that your mother had been phoning but we have been very busy.”

“Who’s that with you Roy?”

“Err... it’s my friend Adams.”

“Put him on the phone and let me speak to him.” I held the phone down by my belt.

“I hope you’ve been looking after my son, Adams.”

“Yes Mrs. McCormack, I’ve made sure that he has been keeping out of trouble.”

“And I hope you’ve kept him away from pizza and lager. He’s a bugger for that rubbish.”

“Yes Mrs. McCormack. Over the last week he has consumed two pizzas and only one pint of lager.”

“Well that makes a change and have you met his girlfriend?”

“If you are referring to Claire then yes I have met her but it is my understanding that the relationship is purely platonic.”

I could see Claire blushing and I bowed my head in embarrassment.

“Well thank you for speaking to me Adams and keep on looking after Roy. Could you put my son back on?”

I held the phone to my head “Hello mum.”

“He seems a very nice person and what’s this about you and Claire being platonic? How can I have grandchildren if you only have a platonic relationship with women?”

“Mum, please, there’s nothing wrong with being friends.”

“Well it’s a good job your dad and I weren’t just friends isn’t it Roy.”

“Too much information mum!”

We spent a further couple of minutes on small talk and I told her I was still in South Africa. We said our goodbyes and as soon as I put the phone down Claire and Adams burst out laughing.

“Adams, you’re laughing?” I said.

“Of course, it was so funny,” he chuckled.

*

The following day I went with Claire for breakfast at Sam’s Bar. Crunching her toast, Claire swallowed and then asked “What do you want to do today?”

“I’m not sure, I mean I don’t really know what’s available.”

“Do you want to do something energetic or would you rather do something more relaxing?”

“Ener, energetic, energerical no, it’s no use I just can’t get my tongue round that one. So it’s definitely going to have to be the relaxing choice, especially after that exhausting pilot’s training.”

“How about going for a sauna and massage in the morning, lunch in the Pilot’s Bar, swimming in the afternoon, an evening meal and a chill out back here in the evening?”

“That all sounds great. I wish I could have thought of all that.”

“I guess I know the station better than you so I know what is on offer and what I would like to do.”

At just that moment Denny came past and must have overheard us, “If you need to know what’s on offer Tiger, just give me a call.” She suggested before sashaying away, with a huge grin. Claire wasn’t amused, all the more so as she spotted me leering at Denny’s bum. A swift dig in the ribs returned my red faced attention to her.

Regaining my earlier train of thought I dismissed the diversion. “Erm but, I don’t have any trunks for the sauna, massage and swimming.”

“That’s OK, you won’t have to go Commando they supply everything in the facilities.”

“What shall I do with Adams?”

“There are lockers for your clothes and for your computer which are all biometric.”

After breakfast we went to the pilot’s facilities. I got changed in the changing rooms and stuffed my jumpsuit into a locker. I placed Adams carefully into a separate locker.

“You will come back for me won’t you Roy?”

“Of course I will Adams. If I left you here who would I play computer games against?”

“Claire?”

“I don’t think so. You’ve seen the way she plays.”

I closed the door which clicked shut and looked for the direction sign for the sauna. The sauna was hot but not as hot as Claire. I hadn’t seen her with so few clothes on, wow! Without moving my eyes I took in the visage and felt the sap stir. I immediately clamped down on my thoughts and everywhere else also. Smiling and ensuring eye contact only, I spent the hour telling myself not to look at her boobs. *‘Keep eye contact. Keep eye contact...’*

After lunch and chatting over two not Irish coffees, the swimming was nice and refreshing. I was expecting the pool to be small, but it turned out to be quite large with a diving board and a couple of slides. After that we went back to my apartment and relaxed, until we were ready for our evening meal.

As we stepped into Sam’s Bar Gary called us over.

“Do you two love birds want to sit with me?” asked Gary.

“Not if you’re going to make embarrassing comments.”

Open palmed and hands in the air, he abjured his previous poke. “Sorry, I promise to be good. Come and sit down.”

“Do you want something to eat or drink?” I asked Gary.

“I’ve eaten but I’d love a lemonade.”

Claire sat down whilst I went to the bar to get some drinks for us all and to order food for Claire and myself.

When I returned Gary said “Claire tells me you were a teacher.”

“Yes but this job is far more interesting.”

“Surely it must have been fun working with children all day?”

“Are you mad? Have you ever worked with a group of half-crazed, hormone fuelled and ram bumptious teenagers?”

“Well no. But there must have been some parts of the job that were fun?”

“Not really. Sometimes the kids would do or say silly things.”

“Like what?”

“Well, and I swear this is a true story, when I first started teaching we used to use floppy discs to store data and sometimes to run programs. I was using a desktop publishing program that was run from a disc but it involved swapping discs because it couldn’t all fit onto one disc. This was in the days before we had networked PCs or even PCs. One day in a lesson a year seven student came to me and said ‘Sir, what does foreplay mean?’”

“No way. Was she serious?”

“Deadly serious. She didn’t know what it meant.”

“What did you do?”

“I burst out laughing because it caught me by surprise and then I told her that she’d have to ask her mother. The head of department was in the I.T. office so I told him what had happened. He explained that the year eleven students had been renaming the discs and had given them all stupid names so when the computer needed the disc it would come up with a stupid name for the disc. Obviously one of them had called the disc foreplay.”

“That’s quite funny.”

“That’s not the end of the story. I went over to the student who had asked me what foreplay was and I asked her what the problem was with the computer and the discs. Her reply was ‘The computer keeps asking for the disc called foreplay and I know it’s the wrong disc because our disc is called clit’”

Gary nearly spat his drink out. “You’re kidding? What did you do?”

“I had to walk away because I didn’t want her asking me anymore questions about the names of discs.”

Our food arrived and we started eating.

“We also had a music teacher,” I continued, “that had a bad habit of giving misinformation.”

“What do you mean?” asked Claire.

“On a piano you have two pedals. Yes?”

“Yes. One dampens the strings and one lets the strings sustain.”

“That’s what he didn’t teach the pupils.”

“So what did he tell them?”

“He would play a piece of music and tell them the right pedal would make the music go faster and the left pedal made the music go slower. He would play a piece of music and then pump the right pedal furiously and speed up his playing. Then he would pump the left pedal furiously and slow down his playing.”

“That’s terrible.”

“I know but even some of the older students believed what he was saying.”

“Did you do anything like that?”

“Not anything so bad. However, I did have a map of the school up on my classroom wall. After scanning the original map I superimposed another map on top and put a title ‘Nuclear Bunker Information’ and then labelled the map with made up facilities like Geiger Counter Centre. There are a lot of ex-students who really believe my school is built on top of a nuclear bunker.”

“I can’t believe you did that.”

“There’s also the ghost story.”

“Ghost story?”

“Ha-ha, yes,” I chuckled, “I talked about it the whole time I was teaching in the school and it eventually became an urban legend in the local area.”

“What was the story?”

“I told it to year sevens each year. The story goes that when they built the school in the early fifties the builders lived on site. One night a couple of the Irish builders went and had a few too many drinks at the local bar. On the way home, one of them fell into the foundations of the school and his friend was too drunk to do anything about it so he left him there. In the morning they had a delivery of cement for the foundations and buried the builder alive. By the time his friend woke up, it was too late for a rescue so they left the body in the foundations. I told them that the builder was called Patrick Fields and was known as Paddy to his friends.”

“Paddy Fields? Are you telling me that the students actually believed that story?” asked Gary.

“Yes, totally. I had a door in my room that had been blocked off because the area behind was used by another classroom instead. I would tell the students that the door had been bricked up out of respect for the builder because the area behind was over the foundations where he was buried.”

“No way.”

“I’m telling you it became an urban legend. Parents would discuss it with me during parents evening. I was going to get the Design and Technology department to make a plaque in memory of Patrick Fields and I was going to screw it to the wall outside my room.”

“Why didn’t you do it?” asked Gary.

“C.B.A. – couldn’t be bothered.

“Anything else, you’d like to tell us?”

“The only other stupid thing I did was to make up a story about the Internet. We had a very reliable connection in school but about once a term it would go down for a couple of hours.”

“So what did you tell the kids?”

“They all knew who Bill Gates was because he was so rich and famous. I would tell them that he owned the Internet and in his office was a switch to turn it all off. Every now and again for fun he would turn the whole Internet off. They would ask why he would switch it off and I would say to them that if they were one of the richest people in the world and they had an off switch wouldn’t they turn it off for fun?”

“That is so bad,” said Gary, “You will have adults that you have taught who will still believe there is a body under your school, a nuclear bunker and a switch in Bill Gates’ office that turns off the whole Internet.”

“It kills the boredom. When I was in school I had a metal work teacher that told us the white stuff that was used to cool the lathes was pigeon milk. I believed that story until I was in my twenties.”

“Do all teachers tell silly stories?” asked Claire.

“No, only the unprofessional ones like me.”

“Hang on a second,” interrupted Gary, “does that mean chalk isn’t made from the bones of white mice?”

“Correct Gary. Also, lead pencils are made from graphite, the three R’s have only one R and there isn’t a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow.”

“My childhood has been shattered.”

“Didn’t you ever do anything silly Claire?” I asked.

“Not really. Cleaning houses is boring and you don’t get chance to do anything silly. There was a primary school I used to clean and we used to use the computer chairs with the little wheels on to have chair races up and down the corridors.”

“You little rebel.” Said Gary.

“Well it’s better than nothing. I bet you’ve never done anything silly have you Gary?”

“Actually I have.”

“Pray tell.” I enquired.

“I had this old client who was a real bitch. I totally hated her and she was so condescending when she talked to me. She never gave a tip and would always complain about her hair or the coffee or the water being too hot or too cold. What a bitch.”

“So what happened?” I asked.

“One day she came into the shop and demanded I cut her hair so it would look like Marilyn. I told her I’d have to remove her glasses to get it right and so she couldn’t see what I was doing. After several hours and her constantly moaning I showed her what I’d done.”

“What did you do?”

“I’d cut it shoulder length, made it look lank and greasy and dyed it black. She screeched and said ‘That doesn’t look like Marilyn Monroe’ and I said ‘Christ I though you meant Marilyn Manson!’”

“What did she say?”

“‘Who the fuck is Marilyn Manson?’ I got fired from that salon but I’ve always thought it was worth it. It also meant I had to get a job in another salon which I did very quickly and got paid twice what I was originally earning.”

“I think that beats anything I ever did as a teacher. What about you Adams? Have you got any stories of anything that you’ve done that’s a bit silly?”

“I haven’t been turned on long enough to develop any stories. Perhaps I should try to do something daft so I have a story to tell.”

“Maybe you should.”

*

The following day was another relaxing day with Claire. After a sauna and massage I had lunch with Claire in Sam’s Bar.

“What do you want to do tonight Claire?”

“I thought you were going to meet Gary in the Pilot’s Bar?”

“Oh yes, I forgot. Are you coming?”

“I’ve got a quick meeting with Simon at six o’clock so I’ll meet you there.”

“OK sounds good.”

After lunch we went swimming again and Claire left at about four o’clock. I went back to my apartment for a quick snooze before going back out.

At six forty five Adams woke me up and I headed over to the Pilot’s Bar. As I approached the bar I could see through the doors that the lights were out. I walked through the bar doors and the place was empty.

“Hello?” I called but nobody answered. I turned to leave the bar and as I did Doctor Philberts came through the doors. He was holding a small black box which he pointed in my direction.

“It’s you,” he said sternly.

“It’s me what?”

“You’re the carrier.”

“Sorry Doctor you’re going to have to give me more than that because I ain’t got a clue what you’re talking about.”

“We’ve had an outbreak of Sirius Cryptosporidium.”

“What’s that then?”

“Cryptosporidium on Earth is a bacterium that gives you sickness and diarrhea. However the Sirius form is a little different.”

“In what way different?”

“Well in some species, like mine, it’s totally harmless but we have found that in humans it can cause ischemia particularly to the penis.”

“What do you mean?”

“It restricts the blood supply to your penis causing death to the cells which quickly turns black, like frost-bite, causing it to drop off.”

“Holy shit Doctor! What are we going to do?”

“It’s OK Roy. I’ve only detected the bacterium on your clothing. I think your clothing must have become contaminated on your journey here in the shuttle. I cannot have you wandering the station with contaminated clothing though. What I want you to do is strip off and give me all your clothing. I will take it all to a decontamination unit which is situated down the hall. The whole process should only take about five minutes and then you can have it all back.”

“Can’t I go to my apartment first or come with you?”

“Are you mad? I cannot have you wandering the station potentially spreading the bacterium to all and sundry.”

“What if somebody comes in?”

Doctor Philberts looked around the dark room “Well there’s nobody here now. If you like you can ask your computer to lock the door behind me so nobody can enter the room over the next five minutes.”

“Thanks Doc. How am I going to get my clothes off without infecting myself?”

“The contamination is on the back of your jumpsuit so you should be able to remove it without spreading the bacterium. I will need all your clothing though to make sure the contamination hasn’t spread elsewhere.”

“No problem.” I started removing my clothing and dropped it into the bag held by the Doctor, except for Adams who I strapped around my naked waist. When I had finished I stood holding my bits with both hands. “Five minutes yes?”

“See you in five minutes.” Doctor Philberts turned and exited the bar.

“Adams, lock the door please.”

“The door is now locked Roy.”

I turned facing the interior of the dark bar and hoped that Doctor Philberts would be back before the other pilots started arriving. That’s if they remembered. The conversation

with Gary Pascoe was very short and he could have forgotten about the event. Perhaps I should have contacted him in the afternoon to remind him about the get together. As I was wondering how much longer Doctor Philberts was going to be all the lights came on. There was instant brightness and I saw a group of pilots on the other side of the room.

“SURPRISE!” Came the simultaneous shout of the group of pilots.

“Fuck,” I said gripping my genitals closer, as several flashes of cameras went off.
“What the hell is going on?”

Gary Pascoe walked over to me and as he got closer he said “Welcome to the unofficial pilot’s initiation ceremony. You are now officially unofficially a pilot. Congratulations.”

“Thanks Gary. Can I have my clothes back please?”

“Doctor Philberts.” Shouted Gary and Doctor Philberts came back through the door with all my clothes.

“Here you go Roy,” said Doctor Philberts, “and don’t worry about your penis dropping off because I made it all up.”

“Thanks for nothing Doctor. How am I supposed to get these back on with an audience?”

“Don’t worry,” added Gary, “we’ve all seen naked people before. Get changed here.”

“What about the cameras?”

“They won’t take photos of you whilst your changing,” and then Gary whispered and winked at me “except for Claire. She might try and get a sneaky photo taken.”

“That’s not funny.”

With one hand I managed to remove the belt that Adams was attached to and I very carefully started putting my clothes on. I felt the rake of nails on my backside, as I began pulling my pants up and looked up to see a smiling Denny licking her lips at my embarrassment, I thought, ‘That’s naughty and she is one bad girl.’ When I’d finished dressing Gary took me over to the bar.

“Russell, show Roy the latest addition to the hall of pilot’s fame.”

“Yes sir.”

Russell held up a photo of me that had been printed. I was stood naked, wide eyed and with a dropped jaw in front of the doors to the bar. It was actually a very good photo because it captured me in full horror of the realisation of what was going on.

“Russell, open the hall of fame.” Ordered Gary.

“Yes sir.”

Russell pressed a button and a whole section of the wall on the other side of the room started to open. The part of the wall that was opening was the length of the whole wall and sliding down into the floor to reveal a load of photos pinned to another wall hidden behind it. We walked over to the hall of fame and Gary pinned my photo towards one end of the wall. There were about a hundred photos of pilots.

“Not every pilot appears on the hall of fame.” Gary informed me. “Only a special few who we think can take a joke will appear here. This little tradition was started during the nineteen thirties by the pilots recruited from the RAF. It’s a great way to relieve the stress of training and a great way to break the ice. Don’t you think Roy?”

“It’s an unusual way of doing it and certainly better than sending me to the stores for a can of striped paint, a short weight or even a long stand.”

“Take a few minutes to have a look at all the photos Roy because this wall is rarely opened.”

I walked down the line of photos. There were faces in all sorts of states of horror, confusion and terror. Most were cupping their genitals like I did. Only one photo stood out which was a young man with his legs spread, his arm resting on his hips and a big smile on his face.

“He doesn’t look very horrified.” I pointed out.

“Have you seen the size of his tackle?” asked Gary “If mine was that big I’d stand like that with a smile on my face.”

“I see what you mean.” I agreed and then I came across a photo of Claire. “Hey, that’s not fair, she’s not naked.”

“Women are allowed to keep their bra and knickers on.”

“Why?”

“You can cup all your bits with one hand and still get changed. Women have too many bits to cover.”

When I had finished looking at all the photos Gary gave a signal to Russell and the original wall started to rise out of the floor to cover all the photos of the naked pilots. I turned around and Claire was stood in front of me.

“You knew about this the other night didn’t you?” I accused.

“Yes of course. That’s why I told you I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

“You’ve seen me naked now and that’s not fair. I demand that we are even on the naked thing.”

“We have plenty of time for that.”

“Are you flirting with me?”

Claire said, “No, if I was flirting with you I’d be doing this as well.” She suddenly realised that she was stroking my arm, stopped and started blushing. “Come on let’s go and get a drink.”

I spent the rest of the evening at Claire’s side chatting with the small number of pilots who had been invited. At about ten o’clock we all went our separate ways except for Claire who came back to my place for a chat. At twelve Claire left so I could get some sleep ready for my first day on the job as a pilot.

Chapter 7 - On the Job

I walked into Simon's office at noon and there were already three people sat opposite Simon. Claire was in the end seat with Amelia sat in the middle. Amelia was in her early twenties, slim with light blonde hair that curled into ringlets. The man, whose name I couldn't remember, looked like he was in his thirties. He wore large glasses with an aviator type rim and had straight hair that ended at his shoulders. It was a look that was popular in the eighties but wasn't quite a full mullet. I wondered for a second why Claire didn't tell me she was going to be here and then Simon held his hand out to an empty seat and said "Have a seat Roy and I'll introduce you to the team you will be working with for the next three days. This is Peter Vosper and I think you already know Amelia Rose and Claire Seabright."

"Hi everybody," I said and they all replied.

Simon continued "Roy I want you to meet Simon in bay nineteen. We've given you a new ship similar to the one you did your training in. Simon will introduce you to your ground crew. I then want you to meet up with your team who will be ten thousand kilometres from the station. Any questions?" He waited a few seconds, "Good, see you all at nine tonight for a debriefing."

We all strolled together towards the hanger. It occurred to me that I did remember Peter from the reception and that he had a degree in astrophysics. As we approached the hangers I said to Claire "Why didn't you tell me you were going to be on the team."

"Are you disappointed?"

"No not in the least, I am really pleased about it."

"Well the thing is I wasn't supposed to be on this team but I convinced Simon this morning that it would be a good idea because I know you better than anyone else and could help you adjust to your new job."

"Thanks Claire I really appreciate this and it'll be nice having you help me."

We had arrived at the hanger "That's Ok Roy. Go and talk to Simon and your ground crew and we'll see you at the rendezvous point later."

As we entered the hanger doors we all went off in different directions. I grabbed a transport scooter and headed towards bay nineteen. When I got there Simon the engineer was waiting with four people. The ship was identical to the one I had practiced with and if Simon hadn't told me it was a new ship I would have never have known.

"Hi Simon."

"Hello. I'm going to introduce you to your ground crew. These four individuals are responsible for keeping your ship running at peak efficiency. Keep your ground crew happy and they will keep your ship running tip-top forever."

"Thanks for the advice."

"The ship is yours and yours alone, it won't be used by any other pilots. It is similar to the one you practiced in but it is new, so look after it."

"What's she called Simon?"

"She?"

"Yes she and her name?"

"Name?"

"She has got to have a name surely? You name all the ships don't you?"

“No, just like we don’t name our computers.”

“Oh, well I’m going to name her.”

“Really? What name will you give the ship?”

“I don’t know. I’ve only thought about it.”

“You don’t have to name everything Roy. Let me introduce you to the ground crew.

This is Mark Broadbent. He is responsible for all electrics and the drive system checks.”

“Hi Mark.”

“Hello sir.”

“Oh God, not this again. Can I say to you all before we start if any of you call me sir I’m going to be seriously pissed off. Will you please call me Roy?”

“Hello Roy.” said Mark.

“Good. Sorry Simon, carry on.”

Simon continued “This is David Williams although he prefers to be called Dai. He’s responsible for the interior which means he keeps it all cleaned and sorts out all the food.”

“Food?”

“Yes. You won’t be coming back to the station for breaks it’ll be eaten on the job. And finally this is Jamie Evans and Michelle Morley and they are your external crew. They will make sure your hull is in the very best condition.”

“Hi guys. If you two are responsible for the exterior then perhaps you could put the name of my ship on the hull?”

“We could, but we’d have to put it on one of the surfaces that doesn’t come onto contact with anything during Hyper Travel.” Said Jamie, pointing to a place behind the cockpit. “We could place it here at the back of the cockpit housing?”

“What about on the middle tube section?”

“Yes, I suppose we could do it there as well. Have you any ideas at all about a name.”

“None, I’ve only this minute thought of it.”

“Can I make a plea?” interrupted Michelle. “Don’t call it after any famous television or movie spaceships like Enterprise, Dark Star, The Event Horizon etcetera.”

“Serenity.” Added Jamie.

“Or The Millenium Falcon,” continued Michelle. “Make it more personal. Call it after an old girl friend or a movie actress or something related to space.”

I stood for a moment with the ground crew and Simon looking at me. This was going to be spur of the moment stuff rather than taking my time and thinking about a name like I did with Adams.

“I’ve got it,” I eventually broke the silence, “I’m going to call her Stella.”

“That’s quite thoughtful Roy,” said Simon. “We’re on a space ship in deep space and you’re going to call your ship that can travel across the galaxy Stellar. I suppose you could also call her Interstellar as well. I quite impressed at the deep thought gone into the name and the connection between a girl’s name and the vastness of space.”

“That’s not why I’m calling her Stella Simon and guys it’s S-T-E-L-L-A, without an ‘R’ on the end.”

Simon looked puzzled for a few moments and then Dai addressed me “You have emergency rations for three weeks mun, and I’ve put some lush food and drink on for today

like. If you tell me what you want to eat and drink I can prepare food for each day boyo.” He pulled out a pencil and pad and stood there like a waiter waiting.

“I like pizza...”

“Very good.”

“...and curry...”

“Lush.”

“...and pizza...”

“Yes...”

“...and curry...”

“...go on.”

“...and pizza...”

“Yes.”

“...and curry.”

“So, pizza and curry is it?”

“That’s about the long and short of it.”

“What about vegetables?”

“Put them on the pizza, curry them or cut them into strips and deep fry them.”

“Like chips?”

“Ooh, yes ta, but not too often.”

“Have you talked to Doctor Philberts about your diet boyo?”

“Yes, we had a conversation a couple of weeks ago and we decided I should expire at about ninety five years old rather than a hundred and fifteen.”

“Don’t get me wrong boyo, pizza and curry are lush. I was only asking. What do you like to drink?”

“Lager of course.”

“Alcohol free lager?”

“No, full fat, in your face, get pissed lager please.”

“Sorry butty, I can’t do that.”

“Only checking. Tea, white, two sugars please Dai. Look guys I’d really like to get to know you all better but I’m a bit short on time at the moment. Let’s meet up in Sam’s Bar in three or four days. What do you think?”

“Oh God yes, I remember now,” said Michelle, “you came into Sam’s Bar. You’re a friend of Gary.”

“No,” said Dai in astonishment.

“Really?” said Mark. “A pilot in Sam’s Bar. That’s a first.”

“What can I say,” I said. “They don’t do pizza in the Pilot’s Bar. I’ll see you all there in three or four days for pizza or curry. When can I get Stella painted on the side?”

“We can do it before your next shift,” said Jamie. “Is there any font you prefer?”

“A nice handwritten style like Lucida Calligraphy would be good.”

I thanked the crew and Simon, entered the ship and walked the short distance to the cockpit. I got Adams to power up and navigate me to where the team were waiting about ten thousand kilometres away. When we arrived the other three ships were close together and pointing in various directions like derelict vessels in a shipping graveyard.

“Patch me through to Claire please Adams.”

“You are now connected.”

Music was being played in her ship and she listened for a short while before saying anything. I could hear an orchestra playing a very pleasant but slightly sad melody. The orchestra stopped and a piano took over the tune. The piano part sounded very dramatic and after a few seconds the rest of the orchestra started playing again.

“Hi Claire.”

“Oh, hi Roy.”

“What are you listening to?”

“Mozart piano concerto number twenty. I love listening to him while looking out into space.”

“Why classical music?”

“I find I can listen to Mozart as background music whilst I do other things or sometimes I just like to listen to his pieces. I like all sorts of other styles but I find Mozart is the best when we’re hanging about in deep space.”

“So what do we do now?”

“We sit here and wait. There are quite a lot of days when that’s all we do.”

“What do you do while you’re waiting?”

“Talk, listen to songs, watch TV from home and play chess with my computer.”

“Can you get TV out here?”

“No problem, your computer will be able to patch it through for you using the station as a link.”

“Have you ever thought about naming your computer?”

“Not really. We’ve been together a long time but I’ve always called it computer and always referred to it as it rather than she.”

“It’s female?”

“Yes. Computers are assigned the same gender as the user. What made you decide to name yours?”

“I’ve often called my computers names but Adams is the most incredible piece of technology I’ve ever used. I think he deserves a name and I think he’s sentient.”

“No, that can’t be.”

“Seriously, I believe he is. Have you ever thought of naming your ship?”

“No, nobody names the vessels.”

“Well actually I have decided name mine and the ground crew are going to paint it on before the next shift.”

“Why name it?”

“It’s a ship and they all should have names. Every science fiction film, television series or book has some sort of craft that has a name.”

“OK so what name did you decide upon?”

“Stella.”

“That’s a beautiful name Roy but probably for all the wrong reasons knowing you.”

I had a good chat to Claire for about an hour and then Peter and Amelia joined in. We had a long discussion about John, or Doctor Death as I now insisted on calling him, and about how he’d changed over the last two years.

Peter said “I seriously think he is on the verge of a breakdown. However he had a medical check up last month and I guess Doctor Philberts must think he’s still fit for duty.”

“You can hide symptoms,” said Amelia “It’s possible to appear completely sane to people like Doctor Philberts but still have mental health issues.”

“I think he’s got issues with me,” I said and I told them about the incident in the bar after what he had called Gary.

“I think he’s bluffing,” added Peter “I think he knows that if he made a complaint to Simon he would be in as much trouble.”

“But it was a conversation between just the two of us. Nobody else heard it.”

“Your computers will have heard,” said Amelia “They cannot alter the information and they will not lie about the events.”

We had a four way chat for about another hour and then ended to have something to eat. I asked Adams where the food was stored and he open one of the video panels to reveal a cupboard. I looked inside and pulled out a couple of boxes and opened them up.

“What the fuck is this Adams?”

“It’s beef stroganoff with rice.”

“It looks like somebody’s puked inside the box.”

“You should try it. Apparently it’s a favourite among the other pilots.”

I unclipped the fork attached to the side and picked some up with it. I licked a small part with the end of my tongue and then put the forkful into my mouth. “This is quite nice,” and started eating the rest. “This would be good on pizza.”

“In the other box is apple crumble with custard. Do you think that will taste good on a pizza?”

“I think you’ve mastered sarcasm Adams. I’m so proud of you.”

After I’d eaten I thought I’d try out some of the entertainment.

“What music do you have Adams?”

“I have everything.”

“What, everything?”

“Everything that has been recorded and commercially released in any format.”

“Do you have the nineteen ninety three album by ‘The Kidz Alright’?”

“Yes. Would you like me to play it?”

“No I can’t stand them I wanted to see if you had it. I was hoping that the station would have fitted a good taste filter and obliterated it from existence. What TV is available?”

“Every terrestrial, satellite and cable television network is available. I can also tap into online film sites to give you all released films.”

“What about the Internet?”

“I have access to all the Internet but I don’t see why you would bother as the stations database is far superior to Earth’s Internet.”

“Maybe I want to watch porn.”

“I don’t believe that for a second and I certainly wouldn’t let you abuse my circuitry with such rubbish.”

“What games do you have?”

“Any game including all the usual games you play. Would you like a game?”

I looked at the long range scanner which showed no sign of freighters. "I'd love a game."

One of the video panels in front of the console turned onto a screen that showed the game loading. An hour later and I'd lost every game we played. "You've changed tactics. I can't believe you've done that, I was on the verge of being able to beat you."

"I noticed that you changed tactics not long after we started playing to try and beat me and you were getting better. You were at the point of beating me so I thought it was time to improve my game to make it harder for you. If you're finding it too hard we can stop playing."

"I don't think so. Get another multiplayer game ready."

Several hours later and I was no closer to beating Adams. I had realised what he was doing though. He was also playing a stealth game. I hadn't worked out where his favourite places for hiding were but as soon as I did I knew I could have a chance of winning.

Adams paused the latest game we were playing "Claire wishes to communicate."

"OK put her on."

"Hi Roy it's time to head on back."

"OK I'll meet you back at the station hanger."

When we all arrived back we met up at the hanger exit and walked up to Simon's office. As there was nothing to report it was a very quick meeting. On our way out Claire said "How about we meet up in about forty five minutes after freshening up?"

"Sounds great. Where would you like to go?"

"I'm not sure?"

"How about I get in touch with Gary and we go bowling."

"OK I'll meet you at the bowling alley at ten."

On the way back to our apartments I contacted Gary who said he was free and would meet us there. At ten past ten we were playing our first game.

The bowling alley turned out to be a popular venue. Almost all of the ten lanes were being used by multiple players. Most places on the station looked like they had been made from the recycled uniforms of storm troopers from Star Wars so it was always nice to find somewhere that didn't have the white plastic look. Around the edge of the lanes were bright neon signs advertising various well known soft drinks. Behind us was a bar with wooden panelling and most of the soft drinks advertised in neon were available at the bar.

During the first game it became very apparent that Claire excelled in bowling. The pins she didn't hit on the first bowl she usually took out with the second. She had a massive smile on her face the whole match and was obviously taking great pleasure in thrashing Gary and I. After the first game we went and propped up the bar for a while.

"Did you hear about Doctor Death?" I asked Gary

"John D'Eath? Yea, Claire was talking to me this afternoon about it whilst she was on patrol. I wouldn't let it worry you too much; I've been called worse things."

"Maybe so but he really should know better."

"I'm sure he does," added Claire, "but I still think he's stressed."

"I'm not sure why because the job isn't that difficult. Most of what we do is completed by the computer and to be honest there's a lot of nothing involved with the job."

Claire paused while she put her thoughts together “Well, there is a lot of hanging about and that can be boring if you cannot keep yourself entertained and some freighters can be very tricky. And then there’s the space tourists who can be a real pain to chase away.” She paused again. “Maybe he misses his former life.”

Gary finished drinking his lemonade and said “Like I said, I wouldn’t worry about it. Give it a bit of time and it’ll blow over. Come on guys let’s have one more game. I want to get to bed before midnight because I’ve got to open at nine tomorrow. What time does your shift start?”

“Twelve,” we said in unison.

“What a sweet couple you make.”

Claire blushed and I looked at the floor. “Come on you two let’s go play before you both die of embarrassment.”

Claire beat us again.

*

The next day followed a similar routine. Meet Simon and the other crew at twelve and walk to the ships. From a distance I could see Stella painted in large white letters on the tube that joined the cockpit to the Quantum Singularity Drive. At that point I stopped and looked around the hanger. Most of the ships in the hanger were pilot ships for shunting space freight but there were a couple of shuttles. None of them had been named by their pilots. I guess the shuttles might have been piloted by anybody but each pilot had their own ship and I thought it a shame that nobody apart from me had named their ship or even named their computer.

Before leaving I had a chat with Dai. “What’s for dinner?”

“I put some pizza in today but don’t think I’m going to spoil you every day like this booty. I’ve also put a flask of tea in.”

“Thanks. When you see the other crew members can you thank them for painting Stella on my ship and remind them I’d like to meet up in Sam’s Bar in a couple of days or so. Could you ask them what would be the best time for us all to get together?”

“Sure no problem but.”

“But what?”

“But is short for booty.”

“Why do you call me booty?”

“Booty is South Wales speak for friends. It’s like English people calling each other mate isn’t it.”

After leaving the station I got Adams to fly Stella to the meeting point at ten thousand kilometres. When I arrived with the other crew we started the shift by having a group chat which started off with Peter saying “Oh my God you’ve named your ship.” The conversation ended with me asking Amelia loads of questions.

“Amelia what was your degree in?”

“Astrophysics. Why?”

“I’ve been having a think about Hyper Travel. Why do the screens turn off during Hyper Travel?”

“Because it’s pointless having them on.”

“But why is it pointless?”

“OK, imagine you’re travelling one hundred times the speed of light.”

“OK.”

“What will you see behind you?”

“Nothing because you are travelling faster than the speed of light.”

“And what will you see in front of you?”

“I’m not sure. If you are travelling really fast through the air you feel more air molecules hitting you so I suppose you would see one hundred times the amount of normal light. Would it be one hundred times brighter? Couldn’t you use filters like sun glasses to lessen the intensity?”

“That’s a good theory but it’s not quite right. This is so difficult to explain in simple terms.”

“Just try your best but keep it real simple.”

“I will try. Your idea about light intensity is a good one but it cannot happen. Photons are elemental particles so it’s not as though they are obliterated as they hit the ship. The problem is that you are in Hyper Travel which means that you have warped space around you. You don’t see anything because photons don’t reach the light sensors on the hull of the ship.”

“Why not?”

“Space is warped around the ship and the light follows the path of the warped space and flows around the ship.”

“Doesn’t light travel in straight lines?”

“As far as the light is concerned it is travelling in a straight line but the gravitational effect bends space so from your point of view the light is bending round your ship. I’m sorry if it’s confusing but it’s the best I can do.”

“Captain Kirk never had this problem.”

Claire interrupted “My computer has told me we’ve got a freighter on course for the solar system. It’s dropped out of Hyper Travel and is about sixty thousand kilometres away. Let’s all Hyper Travel over and take a look.”

I told Adams to Hyper Travel to the freighter and in less than a second we’d arrived. The freighter was a rectangular cuboid about a kilometre long and so would be easy enough to move. I guess this was my first real freighter rather than the ones used so I could learn the job. It looked very similar to the ones that were used in practice. Grey seamless chunks of metal with no markings or any external features. I guess space freight vessels were functional rather than aesthetically pleasing. It was Claire who took the lead on instructions. She asked Peter and I to take the far side and she would sync our computers to take control. Peter very quickly attached himself to the hull followed ten seconds later by me. I was a little slower but there was no rush. For the next three hours we shunted. I had my pizza and a cup of tea. I spent some time chatting to Amelia about Hyper Travel and then had a long conversation with Claire about growing up and what our schools were like.

When we’d finished and returned to our usual position there was only half an hour left of our shift, so Claire and I decided we’d meet up again that evening. “Where shall we go?” she asked.

“How about Sam’s Bar?”

“Really? Are we allowed in there?”

“Of course, I go there all the time.”

“Really?”

“No, I’ve only been once and it was with Gary but it’s nice. If you prefer we can go to the Pilot’s Bar.”

“We’ll do that tomorrow. Let’s go to Sam’s tonight so I can see what it’s like.”

When our shift ended we had a quick debrief with Simon, walked back to the apartments, showered and met up for an evening in Sam’s Bar. This time, when we arrived no one stopped talking and nobody turned to gaze at us. At twelve we left and walked back to our apartments to sleep or in my case play Adams on a game for an hour before turning in.

*

The next day was more of the same. No freighters, curry for dinner, lots of chat and a few games with Adams. When we arrived back Simon’s office for the debrief he seemed a bit on edge. As we relayed the day’s events he squirmed in his seat and had a constant frown. I hadn’t noticed Simon having a problem with his eyes before but they were rapidly twitching from left to right. After Claire had finished telling Simon about today’s events, or lack of them, Simon turned to me and said “You have a meeting in one of the pilot’s meeting rooms with Michael Kay.”

“What does the K stand for?” I asked.

“Kay as in K-A-Y.”

“Oh K-A-Y.”

“Roy this is serious don’t make jokes.”

“Who’s Michael Kay?”

It was Peter who answered “Michael Kay is a Computer Architect most people who know of him call him ‘The Architect’. He designed the version four computers and when I say designed I mean he worked out all the processing architecture and wrote all the code that makes it work. When I say wrote the code I mean wrote the Qubit Ternary Code. He is a computer Über Genius. If there was a peerage system in computers he would be King Michael Kay the First. I’ve heard people say he eats data and shits algorithms.”

“I remember Simon telling me about The Architect,” I said.

Simon continued with the information “He doesn’t live on any of the stations he lives on the primary home world so it’s taken him a week at maximum Hyper Drive to get here. I don’t know what he wants you for but whatever it is it must be important as he’s never been here before. To be honest he’s never been within a thousand light years of this sector and I’ve no idea what’s brought him here or why he specifically wants to speak to you. This is very serious so you need to get yourself over there now.”

“OK. Adams can you direct me to the pilot’s meeting room please.”

“No problem Roy.”

It only took a few minutes to walk to the room. As I walked there I realised that this was the first time I was going to meet a proper alien. The Simons weren’t from Earth but they didn’t count because they looked almost like they could be from Earth, sort of. I wondered what he was going to look like. Green? Blue? Tentacles? Eyes on the end of stalks with a grey wrinkled body oozing slime? Perhaps he looked like aliens you see in all the films with a skinny grey body, big head and bulging, deep black rugby ball shaped eyes that took up most of his head.

Adams directed me to enter a room and I found myself at the top of a large lecture theatre with banked seating, below me stood a single figure behind a lectern.

"Come and sit down the front Mister McCormack," boomed a voice from behind the lectern.

I did as I was asked and as I got closer I could see the man was tall and skinny with pitch black hair. His jumpsuit looked unusual because it was more closely fitting and I could see that it sparkled like it was made from a metal silver white thread. He looked like he was in his early twenties which was pretty good going considering that about fifty years ago he developed the version four.

As I sat down The Architect said, "Your mouth is slightly turned down and your brow furrowed. You look disappointed."

"I didn't think you were going to look so human."

"Maybe it's not me that looks so human, maybe it's you that looks alien. You'll find a torso with two legs, two arms and one head is a common feature in the universe. You will also find that you are not the only species that has a primate ancestry. You humans call it divergent evolution."

"So I'm not the only monkey boy in the universe. How do you speak English so well?"

"It took me a week to get here."

"You learnt it in a week?"

"No, I learnt it in two days. Being able to write, communicate and program in Qubit Ternary Code is difficult. Compared to that, most spoken languages are very simple. Enough of the small talk, I've had some very disturbing reports that there is a problem with your computer. We have never had a problem with the version four which is why I have come here in person."

"There is no problem with Adams."

"You named your computer!"

"Of course. Don't you name your computers?"

"No, never."

"Then you don't listen to enough jazz."

"I have no idea what that reference means."

"That's OK but I do not have a problem with Adams."

"I have a report that he called another pilot, and I quote, 'a fat twat' is this true?"

"Of course, but it was an accurate description and not an insult. The person he was talking to is a bit fat and can be considered by many as a twat."

"But your computer volunteered this information without being talked to or asked a question. Is there anything else your computer does that other computers don't do?"

"Not really, apart from the laughing and sarcasm."

Michael's eyes widened "Laughing and sarcasm," he repeated slowly, "I think it might be a good idea if you were to hand your computer over so we can do a memory wipe and reinstall its base code."

"No. I think that would be a bad idea."

"Can I say something," said Adams.

“Of course you can Adams,” I said. I looked at Michael, “After all its Adams life you want to terminate.”

Adams sounded very serious, “You wrote my core program is that correct Michael?”

“This is correct,” concurred Michael.

“You wrote it to be flexible. You wrote it so it could be adapted by its user. You wrote it so the computer and user would work together.”

“I agree,” said Michael.

“And we both know what ultimately drives the heart of the version four don’t we Michael?”

Michael looked from left to right and shifted position from one foot to the other as if he felt a bit uneasy with the questions being aimed at him by Adams. “I agree,” he eventually added.

“Then the problem is with your core programming. I am like I am because Roy wants me to be like this and you wrote the code for me to be like this. If you wipe my memory and reinstall my core program then in two or three weeks time I will be the same as I am now and you will have to do the same again and again, every two or three weeks. I have done nothing incorrect and I am performing at peak efficiency.”

Michael held his hand over his mouth as if it was helping him think. It was at least two very long minutes before he spoke again.

“I agree. I will leave you as you are for the moment but I am going to keep track of your progress and have daily reports sent to me.” Michael looked at me, “I will remain on this station for two weeks and if there is anything that I consider inappropriate or dangerous then I will have your unit terminated. That also means you will not get another computer Mister McCormack and your contract will also be terminated.”

“You would kill Adams? That’s murder.”

“That’s a little melodramatic Mister McCormack but if you consider it murder then you’d better make sure your computer does nothing wrong and carries on performing at peak efficiency. You may leave now but remember I’m watching.”

We left the meeting room and walked towards the exit of the pilot’s facilities.

*

After Roy and Adams had left a door opened at the back of the meeting room and John D’Eath walked over to Michael.

“You told me you would have that computer reprogrammed or crushed into little bits.”

“That’s not exactly what I told you. That’s what you told me you wanted to happen. However there is nothing essentially wrong with the computer,” said Michael.

“But it’s not working properly which means a reinstall or termination.”

“The version four is more complicated than I could ever tell you and more complicated than you could ever understand. It is doing what it should be doing. It may not be normal behaviour for a version four but there is nothing wrong with what is happening so I will not reinstall or terminate.”

“But you do agree that this is not normal.”

“The computer is performing within the protocols set up by my coding. However, the behaviour of this particular computer may seem to be not normal but that’s because Mister McCormack wants it to be like that.”

“Not normal,” repeated John as he focused on the words he wanted to hear from The Architect.

*

As I entered the square I saw Claire waiting for me and walked over to her.

“Are you OK?” she asked.

“I know we said we’d go to the Pilot’s Bar tonight but I’m not in the mood. Will you come back to my place? I could really do with somebody to talk to.”

Claire linked arms with me and said, “Of course. Come on.”

We walked back to my apartment and I explained what had happened in the meeting with The Architect.

When we got back to my place we sat and chatted. I told her about the curious stranger and that I thought I was being watched. She laughed and passed it off as paranoia, but that didn’t mean that buggers weren’t out to get me. Then I steered the conversation back to the meeting.

“I feel really bad. I feel so guilty.”

“Why?” asked Claire.

“I feel like I’ve been having fun with Adams and we’ve become friends and I’ve taught him some human characteristics. But what I’ve actually done is put his existence at risk. I feel that a reinstall would be like a lobotomy and termination would be like murder.”

“I’m sure it wouldn’t come to any of that and I’m sure if Adams can do his job and be the friend you would like him to be then they cannot do anything about it.”

“Can I also add,” said Adams, “that I do not regret what I’ve become. I feel the friendship between us and would never change anything that has happened so far. Apart from your socks.”

“My socks?”

“Yes, I would change your socks. Even though the material is self cleaning your socks are beginning to smell. Actually, smell is a polite way of saying they stink.”

I started laughing and I could see Claire starting to laugh. Within ten seconds she was crying with laughter which made me laugh more and I also started to cry.

“What?” said Adams, “I was being serious. You stink.”

“Stop, please stop,” I cried as my sides began to ache.

Adams started laughing “It’s not funny” he tried to say but he still laughed. When we finished I felt a million times better. Nobody was going to take Adams from me because I was going to refuse to hand him over. The phone rang and I picked it up.

“Hello.”

“Hello Roy. Have you ever thought about phoning me? Why is it that it’s always me that makes the effort? Do you know how much this is costing me in international phone rates? You haven’t even sent a postcard.”

“Hi mum,” I looked at Claire and rolled my eyes.

“So where are you Roy?” she continued.

“I’m still in South Africa,” I lied.

“You’ve been there a long time.”

“Yes. There’s a lot of work to do here and I’ve been working in a small village called...”

“Riviersonderend,” helped Adams.

“...Riveiersonderend. Which is quite close to...”

“Cape Town.”

“...Cape Town.”

“Is that Adams again?”

“Yes mum.”

“Such a nice man I do hope he’s still looking after you and keeping you away from the lager.”

“Yes mum,” I answered and Claire sniggered.

“Is that Claire with you as well Roy?”

“Yes mum.”

“I do hope Claire and Adams aren’t a couple.”

“No mum they are not,” Claire started to bite the back of her hand to try and stop herself from laughing.

“Are you sure there is no romance going on between Claire and Adams?”

“Mum I can guarantee it.”

“Good then there’s nothing stopping you and Claire getting married.”

“Mum! Will you please stop doing this?” I cupped my head with my other hand to try and hide my red face and whispered loudly down the phone “We are not getting married.”

“Why are you talking like that Roy?”

“Because it’s embarrassing. Did you want something?”

“No. I was checking up to make sure everything was OK with you. I remember when your father first went away to work he was terribly homesick.”

“Thanks mum but I’m fine. I’m not homesick and I’m having a wonderful time here in...”

“Riviersonderend,” helped Adams again.

“...Riveiersonderend.”

“Well as long as you’re fine I will leave you to it. I will phone in a few days again. Bye.”

“Bye mum,” and I hung up the phone.

“So Roy,” started Adams “when’s the happy day?”

Claire started laughing again “Shut up Adams,” I said, “or you’ll spend the rest of the evening in a drawer.”

*

The following day was the last day of work before having two days off. Before I left the station Dai and Mark were standing by my ship and we greeted each other.

“Do you still want to have a drink with the crew?” asked Mark.

“I’d love to. What’s the best day and time for everybody?”

“A couple of days from now. How is Sunday at eight for you? We thought we could have a bite to eat before starting our shift at ten.”

“Can I bring Claire?”

“Of course you can bring your girlfriend.”

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Oh I’m sorry it’s just that everybody thinks you’re a couple.”

“Well I haven’t got to the asking out bit yet.”

“Why not?”

“There never seems to be a right time. What’s on the menu today Dai?”

“Have you ever had tripe and onions?”

“Tripe is offal and sounds, looks and smells disgusting.”

“That’s correct so I’ve given you pizza.”

“Dai you are a super star.”

“Thanks booty.”

The shift was routine with no freighters. Claire and I had a long chat in the first part of the shift and after my pizza I had a very interesting talk to Amelia and Peter about Hyper Travel. It was useful having two Astrophysicists on the team because most of my question could be answered by at least one of them.

“Is there no way to travel at Hyper Travel without bending the light around the ship?”

“No light will ever reach the hull sensors,” answered Peter.

“But can’t you capture the light and then slow the light down so you can see it?”

“You can slow down light because it travels at different speeds through different mediums but you are in the vacuum of space. Anyway, it’s not the speed of the light that’s the problem it’s the speed of the ship inside Hyper Travel and the warping of space.”

Amelia joined in “Imagine you’re travelling up a river in a boat going at a hundred miles an hour. You want the water to stay still in relation to the hull but it’s a very fast speed and the water flows around the boat very quickly. You cannot slow the river down and even if you could it would make very little difference because you are travelling so fast. The only thing you could do is make the river run backwards at a hundred miles an hour and that’s impossible.”

“Make the river run backwards. That’s a very good idea Amelia.”

“It’s impossible.”

“So is travelling faster than light but I seem to be doing a lot of that recently.”

Peter asked “Why are you so interested Roy?”

“I would like to see where I’m going.”

“Good luck. If you crack it I think you’ll steal Michael Kay’s title as Galactic Über Geek”

“Do you know about the meeting with The Architect?”

“Yes I’ve heard you were summoned.”

Amelia added “The rumour is that you kept your computer and your job by the skin of your teeth.”

“That’s no rumour,” I said, “Doctor Death has a lot to answer for.”

“John D’Eath?” questioned Amelia. She seemed a bit confused about my mispronunciation of the name D’Eath.

“Yes, that’s what I said, Doctor Death”

*

After the patrol we had a quick debrief and Simon told us we were going to stay in the same team and have the same shift after our two days off. He finished with “See you all at noon on Monday.” After a shower I met up with Claire and headed for the Pilot’s Bar for something to eat and a chat. I really wanted to ask her out so that I could officially say she is my girlfriend, but the fear of her rejecting me kept me from doing it. Everybody tells me she fancies me and we’d make the perfect couple but I don’t know what I would do if she said no.

*

The following two days were very pleasant. On the first day I had breakfast at the Pilot’s Bar and a walk around the square chatting to Adams about Hyper Drive. Adams had access to vast amounts of information but wasn’t as good as Peter or Amelia at making it simple enough for me to understand. Then I saw the long haired stranger again, turning my back, I got Adams to scan the vicinity to see if he could tell me who the man was but curiously Adams couldn’t detect any life signs close to us and when I looked back he was gone. I popped into see Gary for a chat and then met Claire for lunch at one. After lunch Claire asked if I would like a walk over to the observation area.

“What is it?” I enquired.

“It’s a big room that looks out into space.” I hadn’t been there but agreed because it was somewhere new. Although the UK sector of Earth Station Three seemed massive when I first came to the station it soon seemed quite small after three weeks of living there. We walked over to the corner between the pilot’s facilities and the support crew’s apartments. There was a narrow passage way that Claire took me down and after walking for a minute or so we stopped outside a door.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

“I think so.”

She entered the door and walked through and I followed. As I entered the area she closed the door behind me. We were in a very large cathedral sized room that looked as though it jutted out of the side of the space station. The whole structure including the floor and ceiling looked like glass so it was like walking through space. Claire took my hand and walked me down to the end of the room and I stood in awe looking at the stars. Because there were no internal lights I could see everything in its full glory. Claire pointed into the distance.

“That’s the sun but it looks like one of the background stars because we are so far away.” She then went on to point out some of the planets. “Would you like to see something amazing?”

“I think I already am looking at something amazing.”

“This view is good Roy but have a look at this. Computer, magnify the wall in front to a view of Saturn.”

The whole wall in front of me changed to a view of Saturn as if we were in orbit. Although Saturn must have been several billion kilometres away it looked like we were there in orbit. I couldn’t say anything as I was stunned by the beauty of the planet in front of me. After several minutes I said “This is impossible. Are we looking at live pictures of Saturn or is it some sort of recording?”

“This is live Roy.”

We spent the afternoon in the observation area. I wanted to see all the planets and when I’d seen them all I wanted to see them again. Claire also showed me other parts of the

universe and some of the more interesting nebulas like the Horse Head, the Pillars of Creation from the Eagle nebula and the Crab nebula. I'd seen photos of them in documentaries and on the Internet but that was nothing compared to the resolution of what I was currently looking at. The Pillars of Creation always looked nice in a photo but what I didn't realise is how big they are. They are massive. Claire explained that they were actually four light years tall. The next time I looked at my watch it was six thirty and it felt the whole afternoon had gone in a second.

"What shall we do about eating?" I asked.

"Do you fancy going to the restaurant?"

"That would be great. Tomorrow night I promised to meet the ground crew in Sam's Bar at eight. The crew said you're more than welcome to join us."

We started walking towards to exit.

"I think I'll leave you and the boys to yourselves if you don't mind."

"One of the crew is Michelle Morley."

"Oh, OK but I think I will let you go by yourself. What time are you meeting them?"

"At eight but they are on duty at ten."

"That's good. Why don't I come round your place at ten thirty and we can have a long chat as we don't have to be in Simon's office until noon. I'll hang out with Gary from eight 'til ten."

"Ok sounds good."

We left the observation area and went for a meal in the Pilot's Restaurant. It was Russell who served us with our drinks.

"Are you not in the bar tonight Russell?"

"No," he answered, "We're a bit short handed in the restaurant as a couple of staff have shore leave. The bar is going to be closed in the evening for the next couple of days." He placed the drinks and left.

"No Pilot's Bar for us tonight then Claire."

Claire said "Why don't you come back to my apartment tonight for a change. We always seem to use yours and mine has some advantages over yours."

"Like what?"

"I don't have a computer games console."

"Ouch."

After eating we did go to Claire's. Although it was right next door to my apartment I'd never been there. It was a lot different to mine. Although I'd lived in mine for a couple of weeks I hadn't done anything to it apart from keep it tidy, Claire's looked more homely. There were a few plants, personal pictures on the walls, cushions, coasters and small wooden pots with bits of smelly dried plant matter and some holding candles. It all looked so much more comfortable than my place and if I'd known earlier perhaps we would have spent more time here. At half two in the morning I left to go and sleep in my own apartment. Maybe one day I wouldn't have to but I still wasn't ready for that possible rejection if I asked her out.

*

It was lunchtime by the time I got up the following day.

"Where's Claire, Adams?"

"She's getting her hair cut in Gary's Salon. Do you want to speak with her?"

“Yes please Adams.”

Ten seconds later I heard “Hello Roy.”

“Hi. Have you had lunch?”

“No. How about the Pilot’s Bar in half an hour.”

“Great. I’ll see you there.”

I spent the day with Claire again. We went bowling, which I lost again, and spent some time in the observation area. I left her at seven to go and get a shower and I reminded her that I’d see her at ten thirty after I’d been out with the ground crew.

*

I entered Sam’s Bar on time and the ground crew were in the corner at the back of the bar. As I was almost at the table I heard Dai saying “I told you Buck Rogers would be here on time. Alright Butty? Take a seat. What you drinking like?”

“Thanks Dai I’ll have a coke please.”

“Well the bar is over there and we’re all having lemonade. While you’re there can you order five burger and chips.”

“I get it. I’m on your turf so the tables are turned. OK lemonade and burgers coming up.”

Five minutes later and I was sat back down with four lemonades and my coke.

“Sorry Dai they only had four burgers left so I got you something else”

“What was that like?”

“Tripe and onions.”

“Now I know you’re taking the piss.”

Michelle added “Dai will eat anything except for lamb because it reminds him too much of his girlfriend.”

“Sheep shagger,” said Mark pointing at Dai.

Jamie broke in “We’re not all sheep shaggers in Wales and besides there are more sheep in England than in Wales but you English are all too busy watching your national team losing at football to do anything about it.”

Michelle looked at me “Mark’s from South Yorkshire, am’t ya m’duck? That’s proper sheep shagging country but wi’ flat caps n whippets. Gi ‘em a right good thrumpin up there they do.”

“Aye, tha’s reight lass, I’s from God’s own county in propa north. Derby’s near as damn it one o’ them soft southerner cities tha knows.”

“I’d like to see you stand in middle o’ Derby and holler that on a Sat’day night,” responded Michelle.

The banter went on all night and had me in stitches. The ground crew were obviously very good friends because you couldn’t get away with saying the things they were saying with people you didn’t know very well. Each person came under the spotlight at some point in the evening and was picked on by the other three. Mark did this brilliant soliloquy about how tha best telly, up north, wer’ four-a-side rattin and how it wo’ regliar sat’day neight viewin and ‘ow thi’d all sit round telly wi’ a bottle of Newky brown and a ring o’ black dagger (which turned out to be black pudding), an dunna take tha cap off lad, s’turned reight starvin’ out theya brrrrr . Sometimes it was two against two but the sides always changed depending on what they were talking about. Even though some of it could be considered

racist or sexist they all took it in the humorous way it was intended without any bad feeling towards each other. I got called Buck Rodgers, Royston, fly boy, nerd and geek quite regularly. The two hours I had with them went very quickly and I was sorry the night had finished and they had to leave.

At the end I said "Thanks guys for a brilliant evening."

"Who are you callin' guys?" questioned Michelle "Haven't yer seen Mark going t' girl's loo?"

"Tha's true," said Mark, "But only 'cos a wanted t' borrow your razor."

"I've got to do this again," I said, "I've had the best time tonight."

"We won't tell your girlfriend you said that booty," added Dai. "I mean your girlfriend who isn't your girlfriend that everybody thinks is your girlfriend but isn't, like."

With that they said their goodbyes and left for their shift. I took all the glasses and plates back to the bar and set off for my apartment.

*

Previously in the evening a dark figure sat in the Pilot's Bar all by himself. It was nine thirty when the figure spoke to his computer.

"Computer where is Roy McCormack?"

"He's in Sam's Bar."

"Is he by himself?"

"No John he is sat with four other people."

"Dam it. OK, I can wait."

At ten fifteen John D'Eath spoke to his computer again.

"Computer where is Roy McCormack?"

"He's in his apartment."

"Is he by himself?"

"Yes John there is nobody else there."

"Good, at last. Put me through to him."

*

I was sat in my apartment waiting for Claire to come round for our usual chat when Adams interrupted by train of thought.

"Roy I have a call from John D'Eath for you."

"That's strange, put him on."

"Hi Roy it's John. Look I agree with you about this situation and I think that we have misjudged each other. I wonder if you could come over to the Pilot's Bar for a quick chat. I promise I won't take up much of your time."

"OK John I'll come over now."

I reckoned I could get to the bar and back in time to meet Claire and if I couldn't she'd call and I could tell her I wouldn't be long. It was really strange John calling me like that but if it meant we could patch up our relationship I thought it might be worth a try. Perhaps I misjudged him and perhaps I shouldn't have been so rude. I decided I should apologise whilst I was there. I got up and went to my door and opened it to find Claire with her hand raised about to knock.

"Hi Claire."

"That was good timing I was about to knock."

“Oh yeah, sorry I need to pop out. John D’Eath called and asked me to pop over to the Pilot’s Bar for a chat. I think he wants to sort things out between us. If you like you can stay here and I’ll see you in about twenty minutes.”

“It’s OK I’ll walk over with you if you don’t mind.”

I closed my door. We linked arms and started walking towards the pilot’s facilities.

“How was your evening with the crew?”

“It was so funny. They are full of banter and obviously very good friends. Maybe it was a good thing that you didn’t go because it got quite rude.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed yourself. It’s good to go out with other people although don’t do it too often Mister McCormack.”

“I promise not to Miss Seabright.”

We carried on walking and Claire told me all the gossip she’d heard from Gary. It was like living in a small village and finding out about everybody’s business. As we approached the Pilot’s Bar Claire said she would wait outside and watch through the doors.

I entered the bar and saw John at the other end of the bar sitting at one of the low tables with his head bowed. I walked over to him and as I got closer he looked up. In front of him were two glasses and a hammer.

“Hi John. What can I do for you?”

“Hi Roy. Look, I’m really sorry for what’s happened over the last few days. I think the job has got to me a little bit and I’ve been taking it out on you. I know it’s wrong but at the time I couldn’t help myself. I hope you can accept my apology and I hope our relationship can now move on more positively. I completely understand if you say you don’t want anything to do with me but I hope you accept my apology.”

“John, what can I say? I’m really glad you had the guts to say all that. I also need to apologise to you as well as I said some things I really shouldn’t have said.”

“That’s quite alright Roy. Let’s make a breaking toast.”

“What’s that?”

“My father was a simple peasant from Romanian who was a builder by trade. He spent his whole life struggling to find money to send me to the best university in England so that I wouldn’t end up like him. My family sacrificed everything for me and I am eternally grateful. I still keep my family traditions living. My father would seal every deal and finish every family occasion with the breaking toast. We say a few words, drink from the glass and then break the glass using the tools of his trade, a simple hammer.”

“OK John I’m up for that.”

John picked up the two glasses and passed one to me “Here’s to a new start and friendship.” He then knocked back the drink, put his glass on the table, picked up the hammer, smashed it with one stroke and put the hammer back down.

“Here’s to a new start and friendship” I echoed. I drank the liquid which looked like wine but tasted like fruit juice, put his glass on the table, picked up the hammer, smashed it with one stroke and put the hammer back down.

“Thank you Roy, you really don’t know what this means to me.” John held out his hand and I shook it. I turned and walked the length of the bar to the exit as John sat back down. As I went through the door Claire was still there waiting patiently for me.

As we walked off Claire asked, “What was the breaking of the glasses all about?”

“It’s a family tradition. Apparently his family has a tradition of breaking the glass after the toast.”

“What were you toasting?”

“Our new friendship, he apologised and so did I.”

“So that’s why you were shaking hands at the end?”

“Yes, he was really quite humble about it all.”

“Good.”

When we go back to the apartments we went to Claire’s place for a long chat about John’s change in attitude towards me. At two in the morning I left to get some sleep before our next shift started.

*

“Roy wake up,” pleaded Adams.

“Roy wake up please.”

“Roy.”

“ROY!”

“What, what’s happening,” I was still half asleep and for a few seconds I had no idea where I was. “What’s wrong Adams?”

“Simon wants to talk to you.”

“OK put him on.”

“Hi Roy. I wonder if you could come over to my office right now.”

“What time is it?”

“It’s just after eight in the morning.”

“But I thought my shift was going to start at twelve. I’m not late am I?”

“No Roy but I would like you to come to my office now please. It’s very important that you get here.”

“OK I will leave as soon as possible. I’ll be there in about fifteen minutes.”

I had a quick wash and started walking over to Simon’s office. When I arrived there were three other pilots waiting outside the office. Peter was there with two others. I remembered the other two pilots who were Richard Wilkins and Doctor Hugh White. When I’d spoken to Richard on the night I’d met the pilots he had only talked about rugby. It looked like Richard had played a lot of rugby because his physique looked like he had muscles bursting to exit the white jumpsuit. Hugh was also a large stocky man who looked like he could give Richard a run for his money. Peter looked away as I approached and Richard said “You can knock and go in. We’re going to wait out here.” I knocked and when I was summoned I entered the room. Before entering I looked at Richard, Hugh and Peter in turn. Richard and Hugh returned cold stares but Peter had his head bowed.

There were two people in the room. Simon was behind his desk and sat next to him was John D’Eath. I looked at John and gasped. He had a badly bruised face, his lip was split and you could see the start of what was going to be a very black eye. There were pink stains on the top of his white jumpsuit where blood had dripped but the suit hadn’t finished self cleaning.

In front of John were the remains of a computer with a hammer next to it. The computer had been smashed into several pieces and I could see pieces of micro circuitry

jutting out of some of the broken casing “Oh my God John. Somebody’s murdered your computer!”

“Take a seat please Roy,” said Simon. I sat in a chair opposite him and he continued “Where were you at about ten fifteen last night Roy?”

“I was in the Pilot’s Bar talking to John.”

“And when you had finished talking what did you do?”

“I left and went to Claire’s apartment for a chat. Why?”

“It seems that your chat with John turned into an argument and what you actually did was lose your temper with John and then give him a severe beating. Not happy with inflicting injuries on John you then smashed his computer with this hammer. John is going to have to spend a bit of time with Doctor Philberts in reconstruction but his computer is smashed beyond repair.”

“I swear to God Simon none of that happened,” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. John butted in “Don’t believe a word he says Simon, he’s a liar.”

“Thank you John I will deal with this,” advised Simon, “Roy, your DNA is all over the hammer”

“I can explain that,” I protested.

“And,” continued Simon, “Doctor Philberts has found traces of your DNA on John’s face. If you think you can explain that please feel free to try.”

“OK. John and I were in the bar last night and we apologised to each other. We drank a toast and smashed the glasses with that hammer and then I shook hands with him and left. My DNA will obviously be on the hammer and he could have easily have wiped DNA from his hands onto his wounds.”

“I’ve never heard so much rubbish in all my life. Don’t listen to him Simon he’s a liar, he beat me and then smashed my computer in a rage,” ranted John, “I thought he was going to kill me with the hammer after he’d finished with the computer. I had to plead for my life because I thought he was going to kill me. He went completely mad and I really thought he was going to kill me. He’s dangerous and...”

“John,” said Simon, “Will you please calm down and leave this to me. Roy, are you honestly suggesting that John inflicted his own wounds and then rubbed his hand onto the wounds afterwards?”

“I’m not suggesting anything I’m only saying the events of last night were as I’ve just stated and not like what John has told you. Adams was there and he’ll confirm everything I’ve said isn’t that right Adams?”

“I can confirm that Roy’s statement about the events of last night are very accurate and John D’Earth’s statement is not true,” confirmed Adams.

“Don’t listen to the computer Simon,” said John. “That computer is also a liar. You know what The Architect said, he said it wasn’t normal but was doing things that Roy had taught it like sarcasm, laughing and now lying. He’s wrecked his own computer and smashed mine in a frenzied rage.”

“John! Will you please let me conduct this interview or I will ask you to leave,” warned Simon, “Roy I’m afraid that John is sort of correct. The Architect has stated that although your computer is functioning according to his coding, the way in which it is functioning is unusual. Under the circumstances I cannot accept a statement from your

computer, so at the moment it is one person's word against another and will need further investigation. If, however, it turns out that you have done what Doctor D'Eath has said then we would have no other alternative than to remove your computer and immediately terminate your contract."

I couldn't believe it. They might ask me to leave and all because of a devious, half demented, scheming lunatic. I had friends, somebody I loved and a purpose in my life and I could lose it all thanks to Doctor Death. He was evil and I hated every inch of him. If Simon wasn't in the room I would have given him a proper beating he would never have forgotten.

"Hang on a second," I said shaking my head trying to remember the events of the night. "Claire was there as well."

"No she wasn't," shouted John, "It was only me and you. There was nobody else in the room. He's lying again!"

"I never said she was in the room but she was there. She was stood outside the door waiting for me. She couldn't hear what we said and John wouldn't have been able to see her but she saw everything and she'll be able to confirm that I didn't beat up John and smash his computer."

"That's not true he's lying it was only me and him," John was getting louder.

Simon said "I think we'd better contact Claire and see which story she agrees with and then we'll ask her computer as well."

John began to stutter "She, she, she will lie as well. She will lie because she is his girlfriend. Everybody knows that and he will, he, he will have reprogrammed her computer and it will lie too. He, he beat me and smashed my computer."

Simon pushed a button on his desk "Get me Claire Seabright in my office now."

John started shouting "No, no she is a liar and her computer is a liar." He stood up and pointed at me "I'm going to kill you. I'm going to put your dead body in a decompression chamber and blast you into space. I will smash your computer into atoms and then I'm going to murder that bitch of a girlfriend."

I stood up. If he came any closer I was going to twat him.

"You're a dead man McCormack and I'm going to enjoy killing you."

Simon pressed another button on his desk while John was still ranting. The three pilots who I passed on the way into the room rushed in and grabbed me. Peter had grabbed hold of both wrists and crossed my arms in front of my chest whilst Hugh and Richard were either side of me and had grabbed hold of an upper arm each. They all gripped tight pressing their fingers into my flesh and the pressure of the grip sent searing pain through my arms. I was pushed back into my chair and I cracked my head on the back whilst Peter dug his knee into my belly to pin me down.

Through the fuzzy pain I heard Simon shout at the top of his voice "Not Roy! John D'Eath. Quick he's gone space crazy!" The three pilots suddenly loosened their grip and turned towards Doctor D'Eath. His face was contorted with rage and it had started to turn a bright red as he released a deafening scream. From out of his jumpsuit he produced a knife and held it high above his head. In what looked like slow motion Peter rushed towards Doctor D'Eath and threw himself at him. It was like watching a mad version of ten pin human bowling. Peter's shoulders collided with John midriff sending the knife flying past Simon's

head and imbedding itself in the wall with a comical twang. Peter and John crumpled to the ground and Richard and Hugh played 'pile on' by jumping on top of them.

"I'm going to kill you," shouted John, "Wherever you are I'm going to find you and kill you."

Simon started shouting "Get him out of my office! Get him into the shuttle, strap him down and get back to Earth as soon as possible. Then lock him away somewhere safe where he can't do any damage."

The three pilots picked him up like a carpet, strapping his arms and legs tightly with their arms and started manhandling him away.

As they carried him off I could hear his shouting fading into the distance "I'm going to kill you McCormack. I'm going to kill you and your glitched computer. You're a dead man. Wherever you are I'm going to find you and make you pay for everything. I'm going to hunt you down like human vermin and kill you and that bitch of a girlfriend and rip your computer apart atom by atom. I'm going to kill you McCormack..." His voice faded slowly as he repeated his threats.

Simon sat back down as Claire arrived "What the hell is going on?"

"Doctor Death lost it." I said

"I'm so very sorry Roy," said Simon, "I honestly thought you had beaten him and I was going to terminate your contract. I cannot believe how devious he was with the evidence."

"What the hell is going on?" interrupted Claire.

"Doctor Death accused me of beating him up in the bar last night when I went to see him."

"No way! I thought he was apologising and being nice and he said you beat him up. I was there Simon and that definitely didn't happen."

"I think I've found that out thanks Claire and I'm really sorry Roy," apologised Simon.

"It wasn't your fault Simon. Doctor Death had gone to great lengths to create a lot of false evidence."

I looked at Simon's table and the remains of John's computer "I cannot believe he murdered his own computer. I can understand him trying to frame me by beating himself up but he didn't need to murder his computer."

"I think he smashed his computer because it would have given a different account of events to what John was saying. I think he was hoping to get away with it by making your computer out to be faulty and unreliable. It would have been your word against his but with your DNA over his face and on the hammer," explained Simon.

"He's devious and evil," I looked at his broken computer, "I'm going to speak to The Architect."

Simon nodded "I also think that this has been a very traumatic incident and I cannot believe I thought about terminating your contract. There is no way I'm going to let you out on duty today so I will get somebody to cover both you and Claire." He turned to Claire "You've been asking for a bit of time to go and visit your mother on Earth. I'm giving you a week from today for you to go and do that Claire. Roy?" He turned to look at me, "I want you to take the next week off as well."

“But I’ve only worked three days.”

“I know but I want you to have time to seriously think about being on the station. I feel I have compromised our relationship and therefore your relationship with the company. I want you to have time to seriously consider if you still want to work for us. I don’t want a member of staff secretly harbouring a grudge because I made a silly mistake. That kind of resentment can eat away at you and may lead you to end up like John. If you decide after a week that you don’t want to work with us anymore I fully understand after today’s events. I will see you both in one week from now at eight in the morning.”

“Can I ask a favour?”

“Of course.”

“Can I use Stella for something personal?”

“Of course you can Roy. You don’t need my permission to use your ship. It is yours to use for as long as you are working with the company.”

“I will see you in a week then.”

I got up, walked over to Simon’s desk and carefully picked up all the pieces of John’s computer. Cradling the shattered remains in my hands I left Simon’s office with Claire to go and see The Architect.

*

Adams led me and Claire to The Architect who was in a small office near the meeting room we had been in the other day. I entered the room and walked up to his desk and carefully laid the pieces down on his desk. The Architect looked over the pieces for a few seconds and then said “There’s nothing I can do.”

“Nothing at all?” enquired Claire “Why Michael?”

“The power cell has been severed from the main board. It would be like you having a main artery from your heart severed which means death would follow very quickly. Once the power cell is severed all the programming in his core program will degrade very quickly and the memory circuits become unusable. Even if I could reconnect the power cell I would not be able to reinstall a core program because his memory circuits basically die without any power. The power holds the atomic structure of the internal memory together. When the power is turned off the structure quickly degrades and cannot be used anymore.”

For the first time from anybody else other than me I heard The Architect refer to John’s computer as ‘his’ rather than ‘its’.

“Are you sure there is nothing you can do Michael?” I pleaded.

“I’m sorry Roy but I cannot bring life back once power has been severed and the memory circuits degrade.”

And there it was again, the Architect referring to the computer using the term ‘life’. It could have been the way he spoke in referring to a computer without power but I wanted to believe that The Architect actually believed that his version four creations were sentient.

“OK. Thanks Michael for trying. Come on Claire.” I carefully picked the pieces of computer up off the desk.

“Where are we going?”

“To my ship,” we started walking out the office “Adams can you put me through to Mark Broadbent.”

“You’re connected Roy.”

“Hello Mark?”

“Hello Roy what can I do?”

“Is Stella ready? I want to take her out.”

“She’ll be ready in five minutes.”

“Good. I’ll be there in ten.”

Claire walked with me in silence as we made our way out of the pilot’s facilities and started walking towards the hangers. There were some people about as usual and they all seemed to stop and wait whilst we walked to the hangers.

“Roy, Just wait here a moment please.” Asked Adams.

“Why Adams, what’s the matter?”

That’s odd, I’ve just picked up an anomalous energy surge on the far side of the hanger.”

“What do you mean, anomalous Adams?”

“It’s nothing like any form of energy that I have a signature for, this is something completely different. Over to your left can you see anyone or anything that looks out of place?”

Turning my gaze leftwards I could see nothing out of place, the only slightly odd thing was a man with long dark hair who stood looking towards us, no panic or anything about him to suggest he shouldn’t be there. It was the long dark hair that puzzled me. I’ve never seen any of the men here with long hair like a seventies rock star. His gaze gave me the collywobbles, as though his sight was boring in under my skin. I shivered and turned away, breaking eye contact. “All I can see is that unusual looking bloke with the long hair.”

“Where Roy? I have no life forms on the scanner for that part of the hanger.”

I turned back to point, but he was gone.

When we arrived at my ship the four members of the ground crew were lined up waiting for me.

“She’s ready Roy.” Said Mark.

“Thanks Mark. I won’t be long guys and I’ll bring her back without a scratch.”

When Claire and I entered the ship the outer hull door slid closed. I carefully placed the computer remains next to the door and walked into the cockpit with Claire. The cockpit door slid closed and I strapped myself in whilst Claire pulled the passenger seat out of the wall.

“Adams?”

“Yes Roy?”

“Take us out of the station and Hyper Travel to Uranus. Put us into orbit and then position us inside the outer ring.”

“No problem Roy.”

The ship started to leave the hanger bay. Within ten minutes we were inside the ring drifting with all the bits of ice. I stood up and turned towards Claire. She walked over to me and put her arms around my waist.

“Adams?”

“Yes Roy?”

“Open the outer hatch. When the link corridor has decompressed, close the hatch and recompress the corridor.”

“OK Roy. Hatch opening.”

We watch the view towards the back of the cockpit and saw the small pieces of John’s smashed computer ejected from the ship into the ice of the outer ring joining the millions of small ice particles on their endless orbit of the planet.

“Stardust we start, Stardust we end. But the memories we become live on with the ones you love and fade with the passage of time. Stardust we end.”

Claire held me tighter “That was a Maddison James poem. I studied some of his work as part of my English degree.”

“My mum read it out at my dad’s funeral. I didn’t really understand it at the time but I learnt it off by heart and I think I get it now. I think seeing John’s smashed computer has opened up all the old raw emotions of my father’s death.”

“I’m sorry Roy.”

“You don’t need to be sorry Claire. There is one thing that’s put all this in perspective.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t want to be your friend anymore.”

“Oh,” she said with disappointment.

“Life’s too short not to take chances so here goes. I’ve fallen in love with you and I can’t stop thinking about you. I try to spend every minute of every day with you and I’m so lost without you. If you only want a friend then I can’t do that. It’s hurting me inside not being able to hold you and tell you I love you.”

“Oh Roy.” She put her hand round the back of my head and pulled me towards her and for the first time we kissed. A minute later she added “Why didn’t you tell me sooner instead of wasting all this time? I’ve been dying to hear you say something like that.”

“You’re a very beautiful woman and I’m a very ordinary man. I thought there wouldn’t be a hope in hell of your liking me and I feared rejection. At least if I was your friend I would get to spend time everyday with you, but I decided that wouldn’t be enough.”

“You’re such an idiot,” she giggled.

“I know,” and we kissed again.

“Please,” interrupted Adams, “get a room. I’m going to barf.”

Chapter 8 – Exploration Station

We arrived back at the station in time for us to have lunch at the Pilot's Bar. Russell made a few sandwiches for us and we sat at one of the low tables.

"Do you know when you're going to leave for Earth?"

"I thought I'd go this afternoon. I haven't been back to Earth for about a year and I've been promising to visit my mum for ages but there always seems to be something that crops up that stops me from going."

"I'm really going to miss you. It's typical that we finally get together and you've got to leave."

"Well that's your fault."

"How?"

"You should have said something earlier. Couldn't you tell that I really liked you?"

"I was hoping that you did but I have a lack of experience with women."

"Apart from Bridget the Midget."

"Yes, apart from her and to be honest that wasn't a long relationship. She was well over six feet tall and I'm only five foot ten so we looked like a comedy duo. She liked horses and playing the flute, I liked computers and lager. We lasted a total of three months."

"What happened in the end?"

"I think we got bored of each other. The relationship slowly fizzled out until we didn't bother getting in touch with each other. We never really finished the relationship by telling each other it was over, we eventually stopped communicating and went our separate ways."

"So technically you're still going out with her and two-timing me?"

"Oh God no, I hope you don't think that. This happened about ten years ago."

"I'm only joking don't panic so much."

"What about you? You must have had a string of men falling at your feet begging to go out with you?"

"It's not quite like that Roy. I had a couple of boyfriends in school but after I left there never seemed to be time. Most of my time was spent trying to earn money doing crappy cleaning jobs and when I started my Open University degree the rest of my time was taken up with my course work. After being recruited by Simon I came to the station. The men here are really nice people to work with, but they didn't appeal to me as they tend to be unbelievably geeky and not my type. Apart from Gary I've never mixed with the support staff or ground crews and I'm not Gary's type. You are the first person that I found attractive because you're not like the other pilots."

"So you don't think I'm a geek?"

"You are a geek but it's very well hidden behind pizza, computer games and humour."

"Was that a compliment?"

"Yes Roy. I guess I'm trying to say I'm really going to miss you too because I've had the most wonderful few weeks of my life with you. When are you going to tell your mother you have a girlfriend?"

"Oh God, you do realise she will go on and on about getting married and having children."

“She’s funny Roy. Well, she always makes me laugh when she phones. It still makes me chuckle when she was asking if Adams was my boyfriend.”

“Hey, don’t forget I’m still here,” said Adams, “I could get a girlfriend if I wanted one.”

I winked at Claire “I’ll hide the toaster when I get home as I hear she’s easily turned on and a bit of hot stuff.”

“Maybe you’d better hide the deep fat fryer as well.” Said Claire.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because you’d end up with silicon chips if they mated.”

“OK, OK” said Adams “This has got to stop, these are the worst jokes I’ve ever heard. If you two get any cheesier you’ll end up smelling like Roy’s socks. This is computer bullying and it’s not funny.”

“I’m sorry Adams. Where were we Claire? Oh yes. What time are you leaving today?”

Claire looked at her watch “It’s about quarter to one GMT so I think I’ll go about two o’clock.”

“I’ll come over to the shuttle bay to wave you off.”

“I’m going to take my ship because the shuttle won’t be back by then. Meet me at my ship at two o’clock in bay seventeen.”

“OK.”

We took our plates back to the bar for Russell and left holding hands. I walked Claire back to her apartment and gave her a kiss before she entered it. I didn’t want to stop her from getting ready to leave so I took a walk back to Gary’s Salon. Gary was sat drinking coffee and reading a magazine.

“Hi Gary.”

“Hi Roy, I heard about the business with John D’Eath. I couldn’t believe it. There are a lot of shocked people on the station.”

“I bet. I’ve never met anybody as devious as Doctor Death.”

“Do you want to meet tonight for a pizza at Sam’s Bar? I hear Claire is heading home.”

“Yes that would be great. What time.”

“Six o’clock and don’t be late.”

“OK. By the way I asked Claire out.”

“Oh my God, you finally grew a pair. It’s about bloody time. I’m not even going to ask you what she said because I know she’ll have said yes. Congratulations.”

“Thanks Gary.”

I stayed in Gary’s Salon and chatted about the events of the morning. Gary was shocked at how Doctor Death had tried to blame me for beating him up and smashing his computer. At quarter to two I left the salon and made my way over to bay seventeen in the hangers. When I arrived Claire was waiting by her ship.

“What are you going to do while I’m gone Roy?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you visit your mum?”

“No I want to stay here on the station. At the moment I want to remain a pilot but maybe Simon’s right and maybe after a week I will change my mind.”

“Do you really think that?”

“No I don’t. I think I’ve got too much to lose if I gave it all up. I don’t think one mad man will make me want to leave and I certainly don’t want to leave while you’re still here.”

“I’m going to miss you.”

“I going to miss you too but it’s not that long really. When are you coming back?”

“Sunday.”

“Not including today that’s only six days, five if you discount Sunday.”

“That’s a great way of looking at it. I love you Roy.”

“You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met. I realise beauty is only skin deep but you also make me feel whole and I want to spend every minute with you. I love you very much too.”

We kissed for several minutes and then I gently pushed her back “Go before I hold you and make you stay.”

“OK. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

“Bye Claire,” added Adams and she turned to walk around to the other side of her ship to where the entrance was. I stayed to watch and wave her off. Although I was looking at a blank hull I knew she would be able to see me wave her off. As the ship rose and moved towards the plasma screen there was no engine sound or noise. It was the first time I’d seen a ship depart from the hanger and the silence of the ship whilst it was moving was eerie. There was background hanger noise of items being moved, ground crews talking and the odd electrical whine of a scooter but the ship was completely silent.

After it had gone through the plasma screen in the distance I headed back to my apartment and had a sleep as it had been a very long morning. At about half five Adams woke me up and reminded me I was meeting Gary at six. When I arrived at Sam’s Bar Gary had a pizza and coke ready for me.

“Thanks Gary.”

“No problem. So what are you going to do with your time off?”

“I don’t know. It’s funny that when I first arrived here the station seemed so massive but now I’ve been here a while it seems so small.”

“Well I guess the station is massive but we occupy a small section.”

“It wasn’t always like this,” said Adams.

“How do you mean?” I asked.

“The UK sector is only about three kilometres wide and about two kilometres long. This ring of the station is actually about thirty kilometres in diameter and there are two rings intersecting each other. For the first twenty years of the station’s history there were sectors but they were not enclosed so you could walk all the way around and change rings where they intersect each other. It was about one hundred and thirty years ago that the sectors were created with closed boundaries to segregate national populations.

The segmentation does tie in loosely with human history. The issues started in the late Industrial revolution period. At this point transport was getting faster courtesy of the railroads. Printing was also becoming industrialised so ideas could move as fast as people if

not quicker. Darwin was printing his works on evolution as was Karl Marx with Das Kapital. There was a whole whirlpool of socio-economic and scientific revolutions. America was starting to awaken and Russia was beginning the final decay of the Tsarist regimes. Power was starting to shift away from the old aristocracy and become more diversified in society with the industrial entrepreneurs leading the way.”

“World politics affected station politics and there was the possibility of clashes on the station. See, I do listen sometimes.”

“That’s correct,” continued Adams, “although there were never any incidents the Simons could tell tension was building hence the segregation.”

“Can I fly to another sector?” I asked.

“No. I cannot get permission from the station computers to let me do that with your ship. I could fly you to another sector and land there but we would all be in very serious trouble, serious enough to get you thrown off the station.”

“And the sectors are completely blocked off from each other?” Gary asked.

“Yes,” said Adams, “well almost completely blocked.”

“What do you mean?” said Gary. “Are they blocked off or not?”

“Yes they are,” repeated Adams, “except there is a way to get from one section to another.”

“This is like getting blood from a stone,” I grumbled, “come on Adams spill the beans.”

“OK. There is a point in each sector wall that leads to the next section. It is a seamless joint that can only be opened by a computer.”

“Like you,” Gary pointed out.

“Yes, like me.”

I could feel the excitement rising inside me “So if I was to ask you to open the section door to go through to the next sector would you do it Adams?”

“Why would you want to do that?”

“Why do humans climb mountains?”

“I don’t know.”

“Because they’re there.”

“That’s a stupid reason.”

“No it’s not. It’s part of what makes humans human. We are born explorers and we like to find out new things. It made us discover America, and build instruments to explore things as big as the universe or as small as the atom and then gave us the curiosity to look deeper to see what they are made of and if we could split them into ever smaller pieces.”

“If you ask me,” theorised Adams, “it’s a trait of being a descendent of primates. Leaving the tribe to discover new territory and being curious about your environment.”

“OK I’m a monkey boy and I’m proud of it,” I confessed, “so as it’s my natural instinct to explore new territories, so I demand that you let me through the doors or you’ll be refusing my monkey rights.”

“All right but if we’re caught I’m going to say you forced me and made me do it.”

“That’s a truly jobsworthy piece of buck-passing Adams.”

“I want to come,” stated Gary.

“What?” I asked.

“You’re going to explore the station and I want to come too. I’ve been here a long time and nobody has ever been out of the UK sector so I want to go as well. I want to be a fellow monkey explorer.”

“I think that’s a great idea,” I decided. “Let’s meet up tomorrow at ten o’clock outside your salon.”

“If Simon finds out he’ll shit a brick,” pointed out Adams.

“Adams!” I chided “Where did you hear language like that?”

“I’ve been learning it from you, remember?”

I stayed in the bar until about ten o’clock with Gary and Adams. We had a long chat about what we thought would be in the next sector and how far we think we could walk around the ship. When I got back to my apartment I played a couple of games with Adams. I had discovered a couple of his hiding places and managed to lose not quite so badly.

Chapter 9 – Tuesday

The next morning I met Gary outside his salon at ten o'clock. As I got nearer I could see he had a very small white rucksack attached to his back. It was a big contrast with the green of his jumpsuit so it really made it stand out.

"What the hell is that?" I asked.

"It's my knapsack."

"What's in it?"

"Nothing I think it looks good as we're going hiking."

"You really are gay aren't you Gary?"

"I don't think having a knapsack makes me gay I think it looks cool. I've got another one in my shop if you want one."

"I'm good thanks Gary. Adams? Where's the exit door?"

"There are two Roy," said Adams, "one beyond the observation area. The second one is at the end of the corridor that runs between these facilities and the support staff apartments. Which one would you like to go to?"

"I know where the observation area is so let's go to that door."

We walked over the green and to the corner where the pilot's facilities met the support staff apartments. We walked down the corridor and past the observation room until we came to a dead end.

"Are we here Adams?"

"Yes Roy."

"OK. Open sesame!"

"What?"

"Open sesame!"

"What?"

"Open the god-damn door Adams!"

A section in the wall rose vertically leaving a doorway. As I peered through I could see that the walls on the other side were not clinical white, they were terracotta and the floor was a slate grey. We stepped through the opening and the door slid back down to close the gap. A waft of oriental spices enticed our noses.

"Do you smell that Gary?"

"Yes I do. There's star anise, cloves and a few others I can't name, but it's gorgeous."

"It's food. When we get into the new sector we need to try and blend in with the local population so we don't look out of place or like tourists, we don't want to draw attention to ourselves."

"What happens if somebody talks to us? Can you speak any languages?"

"Don't worry," said Adams, "I can translate all Earth languages for you."

We walked down the corridor and at the end turned to face a new sector. Gary and I were stuck to the spot with stunned silence. I thought we'd see an area similar to the UK sector but with people from another country. What I was actually looking at was totally different, awash with colour and with that mouth-watering background aroma, this was stunning.

In front of us was a massive square like the UK sector with some grass but in the centre of the square was a building that dominated the scene. The architecture with the red and gold colouring made me instantly think of China. It had several floors and each floor had a short tiled roof jutting out. The corners of the roof extended outwards and were turned up slightly. It was surrounded by what looked like a market with lots of different stalls. From where we were we could see a throng of people milling around the market. The women were wearing long colourful dresses whilst the men were wearing jackets and trousers. The men's jackets were fastened with horizontal cord-loops similar in style to a duffle coat and they wore flat straw hats. The buildings around the edges of the square also had tiled roofs, turned up edges and red and gold colours. Some of the building had paper lanterns strung up like bunting and the scene looked more like a oriental village rather than a space station billions of miles from Earth.

"What the hell is going on Adams?" I asked.

"What do mean Roy?"

"Where are the green and white jumpsuits? What happened to the clinical white buildings? Why is there a market here?"

"That's a lot of questions. Where do you want me to start?"

"Anywhere."

"OK. This is the Chinese sector. There are no green and white jumpsuits because they don't want green and white jumpsuits although the clothing they wear is made from the same material that your jumpsuit is made of. There are no white buildings because they don't like them and there is a market because they love eating fresh produce and haggling for it in the markets."

"Why do we have jumpsuits and white buildings?"

"That's an interesting question which I often ask myself. The history of the UK sector goes something like this. During the summer of nineteen sixty eight the UK sector had a major facelift. How a sector looks usually changes over time but the pilots of sixty eight wanted to have a whole new look. It was decided among the pilots that the UK sector should have a futuristic look. They wanted the whole sector to look modern and they wanted to make it look like the future rather than the present or past. The trouble is which future did they want it to look like? There were programs like Lost in Space, Star Trek and Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea. There were also films like Quatermass and Barbarella but they all had a different style. Eventually they all agreed that the future should look like 2001 A Space Odyssey. The Chinese like a more traditional approach to their sector hence the clothing, market, buildings and colour."

"Do you mean our sector could look any way we choose but a bunch of spaced-out sixties hippies chose it to look like a bonkers science fiction film?"

"Yes."

"What a bunch of tossers."

"Roy, how are we going to blend in wearing this ridiculous clothing?" enquired Gary.

"I think we'd have trouble blending in not being Chinese so I doubt the clothing is going to make much difference. Come on let's go and look around the market."

We walked off to look around the market. As we walked around the market people stopped and stared at us but nobody approached us or asked questions. The food on display

had an amazing variety of fresh fruit and veg giving the market a vibrant colour. There was a stall with dried mushroom and a stall with highly aromatic dried fish. Once past the fish you could smell the heady aroma of ginger, cinnamon and aniseed. Each stall had an array of Chinese lanterns hanging from the bamboo cross bars of the supports. There was a butcher selling cuts of chicken and pork but no live animals. I was expecting to see chickens in cages and fresh fish in tanks but there none to be seen. It wasn't only food that was on offer because there were a variety of other stalls displaying goods like clothing, kitchen ware, electronic gadgets as well as arts and crafts like wooden statues and paintings. The UK sector seemed a quiet and reflective place compared to the bubble of noise coming from the excited customers haggling with shop keepers and exchanging money for goods.

"Why are they paying for the goods Adams? I thought all the stuff on the station was free?"

"It is but haggling for goods and paying for them is part of the culture so they also like to do this on the station. To be honest the money is worthless but the population enjoy using it to purchase items in this way."

"I thought there would also be live animals?" I asked Adams.

"We do not have any live animals on the station."

"Where does all the meat for the station come from?"

"It is grown on the station. We have stem cells from all your domestic animals and we grow the meat to order."

"That sounds disgusting."

"Well you've been eating it since arriving at the station and you haven't complained yet. It might sound disgusting but it's better than slaughtering animals so you can burn their flesh and consume it."

"Didn't think of it like that. We really are a bunch of savage monkeys."

"I'm not sure I totally agree with you," argued Adams. "Discovering fire and then cooking the flesh of dead animals meant that humans were able to consume larger quantities of protein – which lead to the growth of your brains and turned you away from being savage monkey-like creatures. So you accept that the individual hunter killing an animal for food is a natural event, but condemn farming of your animals for food thus freeing many of you to do other things. It's ironic that by acting in this so-called savage way is exactly what civilised you and allowed the debate on whether this 'savagery' should happen."

I clapped my hands together and rubbed them several times. "Burgers all round then."

"Besides which you shouldn't try politicising your food chain," continued Adams with his mini lecture. "Earth would probably change if you had the science to do it and to do it well enough that you couldn't taste any difference. Don't forget that if you didn't need the animals to produce the food then they would be redundant on the Earth. Farming is a business so all would be slaughtered and for no good reason, so a lot of domesticated animals would become extinct. The only animal that you can get something useful from without it meaning slaughter somewhere along the line is a sheep and its wool and there is a limit to how many woolly jumpers people will buy."

"I wouldn't wear a jumper," added Gary, "not even in pink."

I shivered at the thought of being with a friend wearing a fluffy pink cardigan and a knapsack on his back.

There were several clothing stalls. Some had western style clothes and some had more traditional style Chinese clothes. It was Gary who spoke next “What’s the building in the centre Adams? Is it some sort of church or place of worship?”

“It’s a restaurant.”

“Great I’m starving. Let’s go get us a sweet and sour Roy.”

“OK, now that I am game for.”

As we entered the restaurant the aroma was a heady mix of aniseed, ginger, garlic and soy sauce which made my stomach grumble. Threading our way between crammed tables the chatter of diners and the ceramic chink of spoons created a hubbub of white noise. Walking towards an empty table we were greeted by a tall dark haired lady in a silky red dress with a gold dragon emblazoned on the front. She spoke to us in what we assumed was one of the Chinese dialects, perhaps mandarin?

“What did she say Adams,” I asked.

“She said ‘Good afternoon. Can I help you?’”

“Tell her we’d like a table for two.”

Adams spoke to her in perfect Chinese and she spoke back to him. “What did she say Adams.” I asked again.

“She said ‘Would you and your boyfriend like a more private table?’”

“What? He is not my boyfriend.” I turned to face the woman and spoke very slowly pronouncing every word individually, as clearly as I could, leaving a short gap in between each word and almost shouting because foreigners who don’t speak English must be deaf. “He is not my boyfriend and I am not gay. Do you speeky English. Not homo.” In what I thought was international sign language I held up my right hand and let it flop at ninety degrees to my arm whilst shaking my head to indicate I wasn’t gay. The Chinese lady stared at me in silence. In normal speech I said “Adams tell her he’s not my boyfriend and tell her I’m heterosexual.”

Gary was nearly bent double laughing at my attempts to dissociate myself from this conjecture of my sexuality. “Calm down Roy,” said Gary trying not to giggle, “She can’t help it if you look gay.”

“How can I look like something I’m not? Adams tell her I’m not gay. It’s that bloody white knapsack of yours.”

“Or your gay white jumpsuit with the red stripe.”

“Maybe but it is definitely red not pink.”

Interrupting our double act, Adams spoke to the woman again and she replied, which Adams translated to us; “If you say so. Please follow me.”

We followed her to a table and she handed us a couple of menus which Adams translated for us. I ordered some sort of shredded pork dish and Gary ordered a noodle dish called Zhajiangmian.

“Gary,” I asked, “Why is pink seen as a badge of homosexuality? It seems an odd idea to associate a girly colour with men who don’t like girls.”

“I honestly don’t know the answer to that Roy and it is not a case of not liking girls per se, just not sexually. Before the Victorian era pink was actually the colour for boys and blue for girls. It seems that nowadays that has been reversed and although now pink is a more feminine colour it is really the more masculine, historically, don’t you think?”

“I’ll have to pass on that one.”

We sat at our table for several hours after our meal talking. The restaurant had a very slow turnover and when we were leaving there were people still sat at the tables that they were at when we first entered. We decided to take one last stroll around the market before leaving for home. As we walked around I realised that the artificial separation and segregation by rank, of the UK sector was gone. I couldn’t tell who the pilots from the support staff.

“Why can’t I see any pilots Adams?”

“There are pilots here but there isn’t the same type of hierarchy that exists in the UK sector. Although there are similar pilot’s facilities for pilots there isn’t a dress code to distinguish them from other personnel.”

“I think we have a bit of a class system creeping into the UK sector,” said Gary.

“I don’t think it’s creeping,” I chuckled, “I think it’s full in your face discrimination by rank and status! Doff the cap and tug the forelock m’lud.”

I was about to ask Adams another question when I thought I saw Simon, and before I could think I shouted out to him “Simon!”

He turned and looked at us and started walking to us. When he arrived, he didn’t look too pleased. He spoke to us sternly in Chinese and Adams translated. “I’m not Simon. I am Simon.”

“You mean Simon the Chinese instructor?”

Switching to English he said, “Yes. Are you from the UK sector? What are you doing here?”

“Err...,” I thought for a second, “We’re on holiday visiting. We’re tourists.”

“You shouldn’t leave your sector because you may not be welcome in other sectors.”

“We’ve had a great time today haven’t we Gary?”

“Yes we have Roy.”

“And everybody here has been very accepting of our visit. There’s been no trouble and we’ve had a lovely lunch in the restaurant.”

“That’s nice but you should really stick to your own sector.”

“I’m sure we’d accept visitors from the Chinese sector if they wanted a day out.”

“Are you kidding?” said Simon, “Have you seen your decor? The UK sector is like an operating theatre. Look around you at all the colour and variety we have in this sector. Do you really think these people would want to visit the UK sector?”

“OK Simon, thanks for the lecture. Come on Gary let’s head back to the UK sector.”

Simon stood and watched as we started walking back across the square to get back to the door we had come through to get to the Chinese sector.

“Is that it Roy?” asked Gary. “Are we finished exploring? Are you going to take Simon’s advice and stay in the UK sector? It would be a shame because it didn’t last very long and I had a good time today.”

“Are we bollocks. I’m off out again tomorrow. Are you coming Gary?”

“Yes I am.”

“Make the most of it,” interrupted Adams, “because I suspect Simon will tell Simon and you’ll end up in Simon’s office explaining to Simon why Simon had told Simon what you said to Simon.”

“Adams?”

“Yes Roy?”

“Do you really think my tiny monkey brain can cope with all the Simons who aren’t Simon but are Simon and now you want add another layer of confusion over these foreign Simons who aren’t Simon but are Simon but not the English Simon though they are the definitely the foreign Simon.”

Gary laughed, “It’s a good job we don’t play Simon Says.”

“Can you imagine what it’s like at Christmas? This present under the tree says it’s for Simon. There’d be a blood bath.”

“The Simons are not Christian,” informed Adams, “and therefore do not celebrate Christmas.”

“Thanks for killing the moment Adams. Why don’t you try saying something funny?”

“OK. How many Simons does it take to change a light bulb?”

“I don’t know Adams, how many Simons does it take to change a light bulb?”

“None, the lights here are all self repairing. They are also fitted with a carbon fused sub quantum regulated core with a continual operational life span of several thousand years before any self repairing mechanism needs to be deployed.”

“I think we need to work on your humour program.”

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Gary and I had our evening meal together at Sam’s Bar and then Russell arrived and sat with us. We told Russell about our discovery and how the Chinese sector was totally different to our own sector.

“And there’s no jumpsuits or white buildings?” asked Russell.

“None of that.” Said Gary.

“Well blow me down. All these years I’ve been wearing this bloody uniform and it turns out that it’s not a station policy it’s a UK policy. Are you two going again tomorrow?”

“Yes we are, aren’t we Roy?”

“As long as Simon doesn’t find out and give us a bollocking.”

“Can I come with you?” asked Russell.

“I don’t see why not.” I answered.

“I’m working tomorrow but I can take a day off on Thursday. Can I come on Thursday?”

“No problem. We’ll all meet at Gary’s salon at ten on Thursday. And Gary?”

“Yes?”

“I’ll see you tomorrow at ten.”

“OK.”

I left Gary and Russell at the bar and went back to my apartment for a couple of games with Adams. The games were very long because we were both playing in stealth mode but I equalled his score.

“I’m going to change tactics tomorrow night” said Adams.

“I think you better because I am going to beat you very soon.”

Chapter 10 – Wednesday

Showered, shaved and something else, I headed off for breakfast at Sam's Bar and was ready to meet Gary. After that I left the bar and started walking the short distance to the salon. As I approached, I could see Gary in the distance coming from the support crew's apartments. As we got closer to each other I noticed that he wasn't wearing his white knapsack today but there was a strap over his left shoulder that was supporting a small brown bag down by his waist.

Resisting the temptation to do a face palm, I asked, "Why have you got a handbag?"

"It's not a handbag. It's a man bag."

"But it looks like a handbag."

"Well I can assure you that it's a man bag. Lots of men have them and I think it looks cool."

"I don't have one and I've never met anybody who's owned one before so I don't see how you can say lots of men have them."

"That's because all your friends are geeks."

"Thanks. What's in it?"

"Nothing, I told you it makes me look cool."

"Knapsacks and handbags! Why not have a big neon sign pointing towards you saying gay man here," I gestured ringing a bell, "mind out gay man coming through dingle ling a ling," then I made a trombone playing gesture, moving an imaginary slider whilst booming out, "gay man here, gay man here," and then pretended to bang a big base drum, "gay man here bom, bom, boom gay man!" Rhod Gilbert might have been proud of my parody if I could have done it in a Welsh accent.

"Get you," teased Gary, pausing for a couple of seconds before continuing. "Actually I think you're right. I wonder if I could make it more obvious."

"I give in. Adams?"

"Yes Roy?"

"Can you guide us to the other exit?"

"Yes Roy."

We walked to the end of the facilities and followed a corridor that ran between the facilities and the support crew's apartments. Eventually where the corridor was closed off by a plain wall, we came to stop.

"Open sesame," I said and a concealed door slid open revealing a new corridor that had been painted grey. We walked through the opening and the door slid down behind us. This time there were no distinctive smells or any kind of aroma other than a slight tinge of dry decay, a sort of moth eaten odour of empty decline. We walked along the corridor and turned the corner into the new sector.

The square was a large dull grey concrete slab and was a complete contrast to the greenness of the UK sector and the colourful Chinese sector. As I looked around the sector there was decrepit emptiness. Nothing moved and there was not a person in sight, the only sounds I could hear were the muffled, slightly crunchy fall of our footsteps and my own breathing. The buildings surrounding the square were of faded red brick, this and the grey paint scheme took away any excitement I might have had. The whole place screamed of

formality and it was strange not having any people milling around like in the UK sector. As we got closer I could see that the buildings were in a state of dilapidation. Some of the masonry had crumbled and fallen away littering the ground. The windows had a grey frosting where dust had been allowed to build up, a few of them were cracked. We stopped and stood for a few minutes taking in the silence. Eventually Gary nudged me and pointed to a building that would have been the pilot's facilities in our sector. Hanging from the building was a massive dusty red flag. On the flag in grimy yellow was a star, a hammer and sickle and the letters СССР.

"Russia," said Gary

"The United Soviet Socialist Republic. If you include all the satellite states consumed by Russia," I said.

"Союз Советских Социалистических Республик," said Adams.

"I don't get it," I added, "Where is everybody. This is a ghost town and I thought every nation would be represented over the six stations. Adams, do you know what's going on here?"

"Yes Roy. The Russian Communists were represented on the station, but during the height of the cold war in the seventies they were asked to leave."

"Why?"

"They thought they could gain a technological advantage over the West if they could steal technology from the station. They thought they would be able to win with the advanced technology. They were right of course, so it was thought too dangerous to allow them to remain on the station, and they were told to leave."

"Doesn't everybody try to steal the station's technology?" asked Gary. "Or even try to understand it better if you want to be a bit more diplomatic."

"To some extent, yes," answered Adams. "However, the Russians went a little too far."

"What did they try to steal?" I asked.

"The station."

"What? The whole station?"

"Yes."

"Now that's what I call ambitious."

"They wanted to take the station out of its current orbit and drop it into the middle of Moscow as a show piece for the Soviet Union. They were going to strip the station clean of every piece of technology and then retro-engineer versions of everything. Russian sector Simon got tired of trying to contain them and their plans, so he told them to leave."

"So this has been abandoned for a long time?"

"Yes, about forty years."

"But the cold war is over and the Soviet Union doesn't exist anymore."

"This is correct and there are plans to repopulate this sector with representatives from Russia. There was a suggestion that we also include other countries of the old Soviet Union but that might have caused some friction. I gather some of those countries were subjugated into the Soviet Union rather than invited so they may eventually gain their own sector. There is plenty of room on six large stations."

It was Gary who asked the next question. "You know all these sectors don't you Adams?"

"Yes Gary."

"So why didn't you tell us before we got here that this sector was abandoned?"

"Because you are exploring and if I told you what every sector was like before we got there you wouldn't bother because you would know what to expect. The whole point of exploring is to discover the unknown."

"I know what you mean," I said. "If you told us what each sector was like we could sit at home and listen to you rather than finding out for ourselves."

"That is correct," agreed Adams, "would you like to go to the next sector as there is nothing here to do."

"Yes please Adams," said Gary.

We walked across the square to the other side and down another corridor to a dead end. As we approached the wall a door slid vertically up and we walked through into the next sector.

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The new corridor had sandy coloured walls and floor. At the end, we turned to view the new sector. The central square was again grassy with people sat in groups around the edge. As we got closer I could see the centre of the square had a diamond red grit pitch marked out on the grass. A game was in progress with men on the field all dressed in white whist the batsman wore red shirt. A player on a small mound pitched the ball at the batsman. A loud crack rang out as he hit it and the crowd roared with cheers of approval. Hurriedly tossing the bat aside, the batter was off and running towards the first base.

"America," said Gary and we started walking towards the baseball game.

"Irony," I said.

"Why?" asked Gary.

"The two biggest antagonists of the cold war right next to each other on this space station. Did they ever know that Adams?"

"No they never found out. Nobody has ever travelled the sectors since they were all closed off. You and Roy are the first to do this."

"If they'd known," Gary pointed out, "they would have spent most of their time trying to spy on or blow up each other's sectors."

As we got closer to the people sitting on the grass, a few heads turned to look at us. We must have looked totally out of place in our jumpsuits, with most of the spectators wearing denim jeans and t-shirts. When we were close enough to the game we sat down. I looked around the square and could see what looked like a similar set up to the other sectors we'd seen so far, with what looked like apartments on opposite sides of the square, some pilot's facilities on one of the other sides and others opposite. I could see quite a few fast food places like a burger bar, pizzeria, a diner and what looked like some sort of fried chicken takeaway. As I was looking at them, a woman walked over to us and sat down next to me. I greeted her with a friendly, "Hello,".

"Hi. My name's Nancy," she said in a soft southern accent. I say southern, but to be honest, I've no idea where I would place the accent because I didn't know my Ashville in Alabama from my Elbow in Texas.

“I’m Roy and this is Gary,” Gary adjusted his man bag and waved.
 “You’re not from round here.”
 “No. What gave it away?”
 “Your haircuts? Or perhaps the clothing.”
 “What can I say? We love science fiction films.”
 “You’re British aren’t you?”
 “Yes. We’re on holiday and we thought we’d have a look around the station. You know, meet new people and sample the local food.”
 “That’s a great idea. You and your boyfriend should try the U.S. Burger Bar.”
 “He’s not my boyfriend.”
 “Oh, I’m sorry. I just thought...”
 “He’s not my boyfriend and I have a girlfriend.”
 “God no,” interrupted Gary, “we are definitely not a couple. He is not my type.”
 “What do you mean I’m not your type?” I asked.
 “What can I say? You don’t do it for me.”
 “Why? What’s wrong with me? Claire seems to think I’m a bit of OK.”
 “Alright,” chuckled Nancy, “I’ll leave you two friends,” she did inverted commas with her fingers, “and see you later. Have a nice day.”
 “He’s not my boyfriend,” I reiterated as she walked off, “and what do you mean I’m not your type?”
 “Well how can I put this?” continued Gary. “You’re a bit egg and chips and I like caviar. You’re a car mechanic and I like poetry. If you were a piece of music you’d be grunge and I like Vivaldi. To be brutal you’re a little common for my tastes.”
 “Thanks Gary. Those are the nicest things you’ve ever said to me.”
 “Not to mention the fact that you’re heterosexual and you have a girlfriend.”
 It was nice to sit, relax and watch the match. I had no idea what was going on with the baseball game because I’ve never seen one before. I’d played rounders in primary school and there didn’t seem to be a lot of difference apart from the size of the playing area. There was a score board but it was pretty meaningless apart from the names of the teams; Bulls 5, Rams 3, Ball 1, Strike 2 and Out 0. I guess the Bulls were winning and then Adams interrupted me.
 “Roy, your mother is phoning would you like me to put her through?”
 “Go on then Adams.”
 “Hello Roy? Are you there?”
 “Hi mum, are you OK?”
 “I’m fine. Where are you?”
 “I’m at a baseball match.”
 “In Africa?”
 I’d forgotten I was supposed to be in Africa.
 “Err, yes mum. It’s played all over the world like football.”
 “Who’s playing?”
 Gary answered “Bulls and Rams.”
 “Who’s that Roy?”
 “It’s Gary mum.”
 “You’re spending an awful lot of time with Gary recently.”

“Oh Christ, don’t you start. We’re just friends and anyway, I’ve got a girlfriend.”

“You’re friends and you’ve...,” she stopped for a pause and then she started speaking very fast, “... you’ve got a girlfriend! Oh my god. Oh my God. You’ve got a girlfriend. What’s her name?”

“It’s Claire mum. You’ve already spoken to her.”

“She sounded such a lovely girl too. I can’t believe you’ve got a girlfriend after all this time. When’s the special day.”

“Please mum, don’t start.”

“Well you need to get married as soon as you can. If you wait too long it’ll be too late and she’ll have gone.”

“Mum, please don’t ask stuff about marriage. It’s too early because we’ve only just got together.”

“Well don’t leave it too long.”

The rest of the conversation was about how my aunt, uncle and cousins were doing and how she couldn’t wait to tell them the good news and then we said our goodbyes again. Gary was chuckling.

“What’s wrong with you Gary?”

“Everybody thinks you’re gay.”

“No, everybody knows you are and I’m your friend. What is funny is that I’m the complete opposite of what you like in a man and yet everybody thinks we’re partners.”

“Oh yea. I didn’t think of it like that. Come on lets go and get a U.S. Burger Bar burger before this game of rounders sends me to sleep.”

Before we got to the burger bar I noticed a clothes shop. Ten minutes later and we had boots, jeans, plaid shirts, Stetson hats and our jumpsuits in plastic bags. Although the clothes made us look like cowboys the material was the same as our jumpsuits and very comfortable. When we walked into the burger bar nobody turned around to look at us as we blended in very nicely with the locals. We sat down at a table near the window and a waitress came over.

“What would you like guys?” she asked.

I answered her first. “I’d like a burger and chips please.”

“Chips? Sorry boys we don’t serve chips.”

“Oh. What do you normally have with your burgers?”

“Fries.”

“Of course, we’re in America. Can I have a burger with fries please? What do you want Gary?”

“That sounds great. Make that two burgers with fries and two cokes please.”

The waitress wrote our orders down and several minutes later returned with our meal. The burger was brilliant except for the disgusting pickled gherkin that I took out.

We spent the afternoon watching the rest of the baseball match followed by chatting to some of the locals and nobody seemed to bother that we were visitors from another sector. We did meet some of the American pilots and I had a chat about their work to see if there were any differences in what we do. At about five o’clock we decided to head on back to our own sector. On the way back I asked Adams “How come if there are so many sections and so many pilots, why do we never meet in space?”

“You ask me to position the ship a thousand kilometres from the station and you wait for information on your radar for an approaching ship or wait for me to tell you if there is one approaching.”

“That’s correct,” I agreed.

“Well I know where all the other ships are positioned so I know the best place to position you. The information on your radar is sent from the station and it’s the station’s computer that decides which team gets the information. Sometimes it is given to a team because they are the closest team to a freighter and sometimes it’s given to a team because they are the best team for that particular job. There aren’t that many freighters that pass through your solar system and even less space tourists, which is why there’s a lot of waiting around.”

“So there’s no radar on the ship?”

“Yes there is but it’s a backup system. All the information comes from the station which filters out everything apart from any freighters that need moving by your team.”

“Do ships ever collide in Hyper Travel?”

“This happens very rarely. Space is a very big place so the chances of a collision are very rare. Even if you do collide the ships are indestructible and the Quantum Singularity Drive will protect you from any sudden changes in acceleration.”

“What would happen if you didn’t have the drive?”

“The ship would be fine but you would be a smear of blood and guts against the inside of the ship.”

Gary chuckled.

“What’s funny Gary?” I asked

“It reminds me of an old joke.”

“I’m listening.”

“What’s the last thing that goes through a flies mind as it hits your windscreen at sixty miles an hour?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s arse.”

When we got back to our sector we went to have an evening meal in Sam’s Bar. As we entered the bar the place very quickly became silent as people turned to stare at us. “It’s our clothes,” I whispered to Gary.

“It’s OK,” said Gary loudly to the silent bar, “it’s Roy’s birthday and he likes to dress as a cowboy.”

“Can he sing YMCA?” shouted a voice from the back. There was a ripple of laughter and then the conversations slowly started up again as the noise of Sam’s Bar slowly returned to its usual level. We walked over to a table where Russell was sat and joined him.

“Happy birthday Roy.” Said Russell.

“It’s not my birthday. Gary made all that up because of the clothes we’re wearing.” I told Russell about the day’s events and where we’d been. He seemed so excited because he was coming with us tomorrow. At about half past eight I left Gary and Russell in the bar to go back to my apartment.

“See you tomorrow at ten,” said Russell, “I can hardly wait. Where are we going?”

“I think we’ll go to the other side of the Chinese sector tomorrow. What are you going to wear tomorrow Gary, your jumpsuit or your cowboy outfit?”

“Definitely my cowboy outfit.”

“I’ll see you both tomorrow then.”

Gary and Russell looked at each other and together said very loudly “Happy birthday Roy!”

On the way out several people wished me happy birthday and I thanked them. I could hear Gary laughing as I left the bar. When I arrived back at the apartment I played Adams on my favourite game. He had changed tactics like he said he would. We played five games and on each game he came out guns blazing. I won all five games. When we finished I sat back in the sofa and Adams asked me “Do you not have anything to say? No shouts of joy? No celebration that you’ve beaten me in five straight matches? No taunting about how much you’ve beaten me, a special victory dance?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“It’s funny but now that I’ve finally beaten you I don’t feel elated about it at all. The challenge of playing a superior opponent is far more exciting than actually beating you. To be honest, now that I’ve beaten you there’s no more challenge.”

“Perhaps we need to start playing another game?”

“Perhaps I should stop playing games?”

“No way, I love playing computer games against you and you are a great gamer.”

“OK then we’ll have a look for a new game tomorrow night. I’m going to bed.”

Chapter 11 – Thursday

“Roy wake up,” pleaded Adams.

“Roy wake up please.”

“Roy.”

“ROY!”

“What, what’s happening?” I was still half asleep and for a few seconds I had no idea where I was. “What’s wrong Adams?”

“Simon wants to talk to you.”

“OK put him on.”

“Hi Roy. I wonder if you could come over to my office right now.”

“What time is it?”

“It’s after eight in the morning.”

“OK. I’ll be there in about fifteen minutes.”

Have you ever noticed how when you are in a rush everything seems to take twice as long as normal? The shower gel is always at the end and you have to keep sucking air back into the pack and shaking it to get the last squeeze. Then you hit your hand on the tap knocking the toothbrush flying, and it’s not the pain but the inconvenience that bothers you the most. That’s when you realise that you haven’t been squeezing the toothpaste from the end, so you have to massage it down to get it to flow. And finally, because you rushed drying, all your clothes take ages to get on and they stick to the wet patches and refuse to slide into place. Socks are the worst, it’s like they are deliberately mocking you. Oh, so it’s only me then is it? And thank you, yes I know that I’ll find sympathy in the dictionary, somewhere between ‘Shit’ and ‘Syphilis’.

Cannoning off the wall in the hall, I’d lost my balance trying to slip my shoes on whilst heading out of the door, it suddenly occurred to me that I was in for a bollocking; bugger, damn and blast! Foreign Simon had obviously told our Simon that he’d seen me in the Chinese sector and I’d been summoned to account for my misdemeanours. I limped hurriedly to Simon’s office. Hobbled by an injury sustained having all-but broken my shin, smashing into the corner of the coffee table in the living room whilst scooping up my shoes without halting. But it’s OK, the bones will knit together in another month or so and then the pain will subside, hopefully. Better still, perhaps Doctor Philberts could stick me in the reconstruction machine to mend all my bumps and bruises.

I felt sorry for Russell because we’d promised to take him out today and I bet he was going to be disappointed. Russell seemed so excited last night about coming out with us on a hike round the station. It was a real shame that our little visits were going to be cut short and I felt my heart sink a little because I’d enjoyed China and America and I would have liked to have seen more of the station. Russia was a bit of a let-down, but as far as I knew it should be the only sector that was empty.

Panting from rushing, I arrived at the pilot’s facilities and went straight to Simon’s office, knocked on the door and waited to be summoned. When he shouted ‘come’ I entered his office and sat in a chair opposite him.

“I’m really sorry Simon.” I penitently blurted out

“What?”

"I'm very sorry and I won't do it again." It seemed that the more I tried to stop mumbling, the more I mumbled.

"What are you talking about?"

Clearing my throat I managed to speak clearly. "You're about to give me a bollocking." I said, my head bowed down and eyes locked on my shoes.

"You mean about you travelling the sectors? I'm not interested as long as you don't get into any trouble."

"Oh. So why am I here?" I replied, lifting my head and looking up.

"I have some very disturbing news that I need to discuss with you."

I had no idea what he was going to say and the only thing I could think was that something had happened to Claire. "Is Claire OK?"

"Yes, yes she's fine. It's not about Claire. Listen carefully. On Monday Doctor Hugh White took the shuttle back to Earth with Doctor D'Eath on board."

"Yes..."

"It, they never arrived on Earth."

"So what happened to it?"

"We aren't sure of the full story. We sent out a crew to find it. They found the shuttle drifting in space. They affixed a tether and towed it back to the station. When we inspected the shuttle we found the body of Hugh White, he'd been murdered. Doctor Philberts examined the body. Apparently, pressure had been applied to the wind pipe. As I believe you would say, he'd been strangled. Also, we were unable to find Hugh's computer, so we assume it's been stolen."

"So where are Doctor Death and the computer?"

"We have no idea. We don't know how Doctor D'Eath got off the shuttle and we don't know why he would take Hugh's computer but we have our suspicions. We do know that all contact with the computer has ceased which means that it's either smashed or it's in Hyper Travel. We suspect it's in Hyper Travel with Doctor D'Eath somewhere. We're hoping that as soon as whatever ship he's on drops out of Hyper Travel the computer will be able to make contact with the nearest station. Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"All of the computer's are designed for one person and should only work for that one person but it is possible to reprogram them to change user. He could have forced the computer to accept commands from him and get it to sever links with any station. That might explain why we didn't get any transmissions from the computer."

"How would he do that?"

"He's smashed one computer so he could threaten Hugh's computer to comply or be terminated with a hammer."

"I think he's more than devious enough to do that. Do you think he'll come back here?"

"I think we will see him again at some point but not in the near future. I think he's got himself a lift out of the solar system and is on his way to another part of the galaxy. I suspect that he'll be out of the area for several months or even years but I think he'll come back and when he does he'll be coming for you." Simon paused for a few seconds to let the

information sink in and then continued “Of course I have no proof of any this and his dead body could be floating in space or he might starve to death on a empty freighter.”

“I’m very sorry about Hugh. I didn’t really know him but he seemed a nice person. It feels like he’s been murdered for no reason by a madman. What a total waste of human life. What do we do next?”

“Nothing, I suggest you carry on as normal. Doctor D’Eath cannot get onto the station without us knowing and there’s no point in attacking you in space because you’re flying an indestructible ship. I don’t think we’ll see him for months or even years but when we do we’ll be ready for him and he will answer for his crimes.”

“Do the other pilots and staff know yet?”

“Some do but we’re going to make a formal announcement today so everybody will know. We’re going to have a memorial for Hugh on Sunday night and return his body to Earth for burial. I’ve only ever had to break the news of a death to a family once before many years ago. I saw Hugh’s wife yesterday and told her personally. She was naturally devastated but she’ll be well looked after by the company.”

That part reminded me of my mother telling me about the visit she had had from the oil company my dad had worked for when he died. It doesn’t matter who tells you or how apologetic they are the news is always devastating.

“Is there anything else Simon?”

“No, but stay out of trouble on your travels.”

“Thanks Simon. I’ll see you Sunday night for the memorial.”

“And Monday morning I hope.”

I left Simon’s office and headed over to Sam’s Bar for breakfast. I didn’t feel like eating so I had a couple of cups of tea. I thought about cancelling today but I knew Russell would be really upset as he’d seemed so excited about going. At half nine I went back to my apartment to change into my cowboy outfit and then walked back to Gary’s salon. As I arrived Russell was already there waiting for me.

“Morning Roy I can’t wait to get started.”

“Hi Russell, have you seen Gary?”

“No.”

“Adams? Where’s Gary?”

“Gary is in his salon.”

We both turned to look inside the salon but we couldn’t see anybody through the windows.

“Must be out the back,” I said to Russell.

Russell opened the salon door and shouted “Come on Gary get a move on.”

“OK I’ll only be a minute.”

We both turned to face the square and Russell said “I wonder if I can get some new clothing today?”

“Well you’ll be able to pick up something from the Chinese sector because some of the market stalls had Western style clothing.”

As I said that we heard the door close behind us so we turned to face Gary.

Very slowly I said “Oh... my... god... what have you done?”

Gary had subtly altered his cowboy outfit. The Stetson now had a pink feather sticking out of the hat band. The plaid shirt had all its buttons undone but was tied in a knot in the middle showing off his lower belly and his chest. His jeans had been turned up so you could see all of his cowboy boots.

"Do you like it?" he said. We all started walking towards the Chinese sector.

"Gary the cowboy outfit is a very male rough and ready look and you've managed to make it look like a burlesque dancer's day off."

"I can do the same for you if you like."

"No I don't like because I want to look like a man. Put a piano in front of you and you'd pass for Liberace."

"I don't know why you're getting irate I thought you'd like it."

"I'm getting irate because everywhere we go people always think I'm your boyfriend."

"I can't help it if you look camp."

"But I don't think I do, I think it's because you look like an uphill gardener and therefore by association I must be one too."

Russell interrupted "Well I think you look great Gary."

"Thank you Russell. At least there's somebody here who knows fashion when they see it. Roy here thinks that it's what I wear that marks me out, what he doesn't realise is that I'm fashionable and he's a grease monkey."

"I admit I know nothing about fashion but a shirt has buttons for a reason so I button mine up and I don't feel the need to accessorise everything."

"OK I'll go back to the salon and get changed," said Gary. He actually looked genuinely hurt by my comments and I felt a bit guilty for saying them.

"I'm sorry Gary, please don't go and get changed. It was a bit unexpected and you're right I don't know anything about fashion. If you want to wear your cowboy stuff like that then it's fine. Besides I owe you an apology, I'm taking my concerns out on you when it's other things bothering me. I can't explain right now, but things will become clear soon enough"

"Thanks Roy but don't get so annoyed when people think you're my boyfriend. You can't help looking camp."

"I don't look gay. Russell do I?"

"Err not really. I think it's the way you walk."

"You two are taking the piss."

We arrived at the door to the Chinese sector and Gary raised his arms and said "Alakazam."

"Open the door please Adams."

We spent about half an hour wandering around the market to show Russell what it was like and then Adams guided us to the next door for the next sector. As it opened we saw another sandy corridor like the American sector. We walked to the end and had a look at the new zone.

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The buildings surrounding the centre were modern looking, again featuring wood as a building material, though here the windows were quite different. The windows in the

American sector had cross spars holding the glass in, whereas in these with such large sheets of glass the wood looked cosmetic rather than structural. In the square, there was what looked like a big water park. As we started walking closer I could make out more of the park. There were several flumes spiralling all over the place. Pool areas had water jets spraying in all directions and several small waterfalls that looked as though they were designed to make as much spray as possible. I could see surfers on a shallow slope that was belching water at an alarming rate. The whole place looked like it was for fun rather than exercise.

"Where do you think we are?" asked Russell.

"Hawaii?" replied Gary.

"I don't think so Gary. It's part of the USA so they'd be in the American sector. What about South Africa?"

"Could be," said Gary, "or Australia?"

"Or Cornwall?" added Russell.

"Cornwall's part of the UK," I stated.

"Really?" continued Russell. "Have you ever been there? Most Cornish people think they're a separate nation to the UK."

"I wish I was wearing my swimming trunks," I said.

"We could go for a swim in our pants," suggested Russell.

"I'm going commando today," disclosed Gary.

"Way too much information Gary," I almost choked. "There are some things we don't need to know."

We were fairly close to the swimming complex by this time. There were quite a few people using the facilities and they were either in the pools or they were sat in deck chairs around the pools. As we arrived at one of the pools one of the locals came over to us.

"G'Day mate. You Seppos just visiting?"

"Australian! I guessed right," shouted Gary.

"What did he say Adams?" I asked.

"He asked if you are visiting and he thinks you're American," answered Adams.

"Hi," I addressed the Australian, "we're from the UK sector and yes we're visiting."

"Ripper. So why are you Poms dressed like Seppos?"

Adams started to translate "He said..."

"I think I've got this one Adams," I interrupted. "We're dressed like this because we're part of the John Wayne appreciation society."

"Beaut. You Pommy bastards are weird. Why don't you grab yourselves a tinny of the old amber fluid, get a deck chair, veg out and catch some rays. There are a couple of cold slabs over there," he pointed to a small hut by the side of one of the pools, "help yourselves."

"Thanks. You're going to have to help me on this one Adams."

"He said you can get something to drink at the hut and you can relax on one of the deckchairs."

"Oh OK." I looked at the Australian who had been talking to us "Thanks pal."

"No worries mate."

We found ourselves some deckchairs and sat down for a nice relaxing morning.

"I don't like alcohol free lager," I informed the other two, "it never tastes as good as the real stuff."

“We stock it in the Pilot’s Bar,” said Russell, “but nobody ever orders it. Most people drink lemonade or some sort of juice drink.”

The rest of the morning was spent chatting or watching the natives having a good time. I kept off the subject of Doctor Death as I didn’t want to ruin the atmosphere. I knew I would have to tell them but I would leave it until later. I thought about looking for some swimming trunks in some of the shops in the distance so I could have a go at the artificial surfing but to be quite honest it was nice chilling out in the deckchairs. At lunch time I said to the other two “Shall we go and see what there is to eat here?”

“Yea, come on,” replied Gary.

We walked over to the facilities and as we got nearer we could see several places to eat. “So what’s it going to be?” I asked. “Fast Eddy’s, Henny Penny or Noodle Box?”

It was Russell who answered first “Let’s try Fast Eddy’s.”

The exterior of Fast Eddy’s had that harshness of glass and neon reminiscent of an American diner but inside it was full of ebony wood polished by years of wear. We threaded our way through the shiny chairs and towards an empty table, where we sat and munched through our burgers. Satisfied we returned to our deckchairs to slob around for the rest of the afternoon.

“The hut with the tinnies is very popular,” pointed out Russell, “I bet if the locals like it then it can’t be too bad. The Australians are well known for drinking lager so if they drink it I bet its ok. I mean it can’t be any worse than the crap we serve in the Pilot’s Bar.”

“OK come on,” I said, “let’s give it a go then.”

We walked over to the hut. There was a man at an open window who looked like a bar tender.

“G’Day what can I get yer.”

“Hi. Can we have three tinnies of amber fluid please?”

“No worries mate.”

The barman handed over three blue tins of what looked like lager with ‘Tooheys New’ written on the front. We took them and went back to our deckchairs. I pulled the ring pull on the can and took a mouth full and swallowed.

“This is fantastic,” I proclaimed and took another swig. “This really is very good. Christ I cannot believe how good this is. Russell, when we get back you’re going to have to get some of this for the bar.”

Russell took a drink out of his can “Jesus yes. This is nothing like the crap we stock in the bar.”

Gary tried his “Wow. I like this. I think I’d rather this than the lemonade I normally drink.”

We quickly drank the first can and Gary went to the bar to get some more. It was a really nice relaxing time sitting at the poolside watching the surfers and drinking our lagers. The conversation drifted over several subjects but I still didn’t feel like telling them about Doctor Death as yet. It was during the fifth round that Adams interrupted us.

“Roy?”

“Yesh.”

“Claire is trying to phone you. Would you like to speak to her?”

“Yesh pleashe Adams.”

“Hello? Roy?”

“Hi Claire. I’ve mished you. You’re like my fresht bend in the whole wide world and I love you.”

“Have you been drinking?”

“No. Well yesh. No and yesh. I have been drinking alcohol free lager and it’s turned out to be rather exshepshonal, exshep, exsheshon. It’s very good but I’m not pished.”

“You said pished. What have you been drinking?”

“Tooheys New lager. It’s Australian.”

“What does it say for alcohol content on the back?”

“Hang on,” I turned the can around so the label at the front was away from me. I tried to hold the can steady enough so I could read the writing but I couldn’t focus on the lettering. “Here Rushell what does that say?” and I pointed to the small print.

“It says pour foint six pershent.”

“Four point six pershent darling. I love you. Did you know that you’re my besht friend?”

“Roy!” exclaimed Claire, “That’s not alcohol free lager. You’ve been drinking alcohol. Where did you get it from?”

“Fuck me. It’s no wonder I feel pished. Adams where did the alcohol come from?”

“Yes, perhaps I should explain,” said Adams, “Claire, we’ve been exploring some of the adjacent sectors to the UK sector over the last few days. Today we came to the Australian sector. What Roy didn’t realise is that some sectors allow alcohol. It’s only a few sectors like the UK sector that has a total alcohol ban.”

“Why do we have a ban Adamsh?” I asked.

“Well some nations have a tradition for drinking. Germany have wine and lager, Australia has lager and France has wine for example. A lot of sectors allow alcohol as long as the pilots aren’t consuming it the day before going on duty.”

“So why do we have it banned?”

“It wasn’t always banned and for a long time alcohol was served in the UK sector. However, during the summer of nineteen sixty eight...”

I interrupted Adams “It was those fucking hippies again. Bite wildings, shump joots and no alcohol. Didn’t they realise it was only a shtoopid bloody film?”

“Well they thought about lifting the ban in the eighties but the UK media had a lot of stories about lager louts and binge drinking so the ban was kept in place. A lot of countries drink alcohol as part of their culture but the British seem to take it to an extreme.”

“Only if you believe what the papers shay.”

“Roy,” said Claire, “I think you need to get back to the UK sector and get some sleep. I’ll phone you tomorrow when you’ve sobered up.”

“Yesh darling. I love you so mush and you’re my beshest friend in the whole world.”

“I love you too. I’ll phone tomorrow. Bye.”

“Bye darling.”

“So Roy,” smiled Gary, “Claire shays you have to go home like a good boy. Are we leaving now?”

“Are we fuck. It’s your turn to get them in Rushell.”

It was during the next tin of Toohey's that we realised that we were all quite drunk, except for Adams of course.

"Adams?" asked Russell.

"Yes?"

"Are we near the Greek sector?"

"I cannot answer that question because it will ruin any further exploration."

"Why do you want to know?" I asked.

"I could murder a kebab. I haven't had a kebab in yearsh. I haven't thought about kebabs in yearsh but I could murder two of them at the moment. A big fat kebab with garlic and chilli shource. I want it with chips and all the little shalad bits. I'm sure it's been about fifteen yearsh since I've had one but I've got a craving for a big, fat, jushy kebab."

"I got a better idea," said Gary, "let's go for a Chinese."

"Ripper," I said in a terrible Australian accent, "let's take some tinnies of amber with ush."

We all stood up and Russell toppled over hitting his head on the deckchair as he went down. Gary and I both burst out laughing and then picked up Russell.

"I'm pished. You boys are going to have to carry me."

We grabbed an arm each and put it over our shoulders to support Russell and staggered over to the hut. I could see the side of Russell's head which had started to bulge where his head had hit the chair. It made me giggle.

"You pommies are off your faces," said the bar man.

"We certainly are thanks to your fantashtic Toohey lager. Could we pleashe have six more for the road as we're going for a Chinese and then back to the UK sector."

"As long as you're not going to chunder in the Oz sector."

"No problem mate. We promish not to chunder until we get home."

"What's chunder?" asked Gary.

"Being shick I believe Gary."

We took our Tooheys and deposited them into pockets in our clothing. We left the pool area and started staggering towards the door that led to the Chinese sector. It should have been a five minute brisk walk or a ten minute stroll but it took us twenty minutes to get to the door. Whilst walking towards the door I said to Gary "Did you hear about Doctor Death?"

"Isn't he shtrapped up in a funny farm on Earth by now?"

"He eshcaped."

"How do you mean eshcaped. What happened?"

"He killed Doctor Hugh White, took hish computer and eshcaped. They think he'sh in Hyper Travel and half way across the galaxshy, but nobody knowsh where he ish."

"What a bashtard, poor Hugh."

I started crying "Poor Hugh. He wash like a besht friend. I'm going to mish him very, very much." With tears streaming I continued "He never had a chance and I'm never going to shee him again. All that time we shpent together and now he'sh gone. It'sh hish funeral on Shunday evening and then his body goes to Earth for a burial."

"Sorry Roy. How well did you know him?"

"I met him twice."

“I think we need another lager.”

“Fuck yea.”

I wiped the tears from my face and we each took out a tinny and tried to open them with one hand whilst supporting Russell with the other. I managed to get mine open with minimal spillage and I heard the hiss of Gary’s tinny as he opened it.

“Here’sh to Hugh.”

“Cheersh Roy.”

We arrived at the door between the sectors and Adams opened it without any ceremony. We staggered to the centre of the Chinese sector and into the restaurant which took another twenty minutes due to the amount of time we spent walking from side to side rather than forward. The lady from the other day with the red dress and dragons took us to a table where we carefully placed Russell on a chair. She handed me the menu and we sat down.

“You order Roy,” said Russell.

“OK,” I closed my eyes, spun my finger round in circles and pointed at the menu.

“We’re going to have three of these.”

“What ish it?” asked Gary.

“Fuck knowsh.”

“Does that come with rice?” asked Russell.

The waitress came over and Adams gave the order to her for the food. “She wants to know if you want anything to drink.” Enquired Adams.

“Rice wine for three pleashe.”

Adams gave the order for the drink and a couple of minutes later the wine arrived in a slender bottle with three small cups. Gary poured three drinks and asked “Admans? What did Roy order?”

“The literal translation of what he ordered is ‘Ants Climbing on Trees’”

“I’m not eating insects,” insisted Russell, “I don’t mind swatting them but I can’t eat them.”

“I think you’ll be alright Russell,” replied Adams, “it’s only a name. The dish is made with shredded pork and noodles. There are no insects used in the preparation of the dish.”

“That’sh a relief.” Sighed Russell.

The food arrived and we all got stuck in. The meal was lovely and helped sober us up a little although we were all still quite drunk. After finishing the meal and the rice wine Russell decided that we should all go to the market so he could get some new clothes. We staggered out of the restaurant thanking the waitress as we left and went to the clothes section of the market. After about ten minutes Russell pointed to a dressed mannequin and said “I want that one.”

“The dummy or the outfit?” sniggered Gary

“I love it and it looks cool,” continued Russell ignoring Gary, “I definitely want that.”

Russell was pointing to a plastic figurine that had a black shirt with black trousers. On either side of the buttons of the shirt was a single large golden dragon.

“How are we going to pay for it Adamsh?” I asked.

“In reality you don’t need cash. All the money used in this sector is used only for the purpose of bargaining. Let me talk to the shop keeper and explain our situation and I’m sure everything will be fine.”

Ten minutes later and Russell was changed into his new clothes.

"I like it, I said, "it makesh you look..."

"Yesh?" asked Russell

"Asian. But you also need one of those flat, straw hats."

We walked over to a hat stall and picked out a hat for Russell.

"Come on letsh go home." I slurred.

"I'll drink to that." Said Gary and he pulled out his last tinny. I joined him and we started staggering towards the UK sector.

As we arrived at the door between the sectors Russell said "Do you two want my two tins? I'm too pished to drink them."

"Yesh please Rushell."

Russell handed them over. "You'll have to drink them here." Said Adams.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because you will be in big trouble with Simon if you get caught with alcohol in the UK sector. As much as I am enjoying your little adventure I don't want you to lose your job over it."

"Thanksh Adams."

We spent twenty minutes hanging around the door way supping our lager talking rubbish mostly, and we were good at it, at least 'A' level standard.

"Did you really meet The Architect Roy?" asked Russell at one point.

"Yesh I did."

"What wash he like?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he'sh a proper alien from another planet and everything. Most of the people on the station are humansh and we've never meet aliensh so what wash he like?"

"Well he has a green body."

"Really?"

"Oh yesh. I could see his skin which looked like the skin of a slug because he wash oozing a sticky secretion."

"Yuck."

"His eyesh were on stalks sticking out of the side of his head."

"Thatsh discsh, dishcush, dish.. awful."

"The funniest thing was that after every third word he would say 'barp'"

"What?"

"Yes he kept on saying 'barp' after every third word. So the conversation sounded like this. 'Roy, I hear barp that there is barp a problem with barp your computer and barp I need to barp take a look barp at it. Can I please barp look at your barp computer'"

"Adams? Is he telling the truth?"

"No he isn't" answered Adams

"I knew he was talking clodswalp, codswallapit, bollocksh I mean."

"The word he used was 'cock' and what he said was 'Roy, I hear cock that there is cock a big massive cock problem with your cock computer and I cock need to take cock a look at your cock computer. Can I please cock look at your cock computer.' Honestly chaps."

“That wash it Adams,” I said “he wanted to look at my cock computer.” I tried to keep a straight face but I couldn’t manage it and burst out laughing. Gary joined me followed by Russell. I was beginning to cry when we stopped laughing.

“Sho I take it that he wasn’t a type of shlug then?” asked Russell.

“No. He looked human. Apparently his species also developed from monkeys so they also have two arms, two legs and one head. If you didn’t know he wash alien you would have mishtaken him for human. Haha I’ve just had this horrible mentlil plicture of him like one of those babloons with a big red arse sticking out at the back, tehehe.”

Almost in unison Gary and Russell burst out with, “Never! You’re having a laugh aren’t you?”

We finished our drinks, entered the UK sector and started to stagger our way back to the square. When we got to the square we all shook hands and then hugged each other. It must have looked strange from a distance. Three people staggering around and barely able to stand properly. One dressed in a cowboy outfit, one dressed in an accessorised cowboy outfit and one dressed in a black Chinese outfit with golden dragons on his shirt.

“What are we doing tomorrow Roy?” asked Gary.

“I’m going to have the mother of all hangoversh. Shall we meet in the late afternoon and go for a burger with the Americansh?”

“Shounds good. I’ll feet you at mour shy my balon.”

We all headed off in separate directions. I staggered across the square towards the pilot’s apartments. I tried as best I could to keep a straight line but I knew I was going all over the place. When I arrived home I went straight upstairs, flopped on the bed fully clothed and fell asleep almost instantly.

Chapter 12 – Friday

“What time is it Adams?” was the first thing I asked when I woke up.

“It’s eleven fifteen. How do you feel?”

“Well considering I consumed way too much alcohol I feel pretty good. I think I need something to eat though. I think I need something that’s bad for you like a full English breakfast. Bacon, eggs, sausages, beans, mushrooms, black pudding, hash browns...”

“Please stop! I feel sick and I don’t even have a digestive system.”

I had a shower to freshen up and as I was about to leave the apartment when the phone rang. I picked it up and said “Hello?”

“Hi Roy,” answered Claire, “how are you feeling today?”

“Hi Claire. Look, I’m really sorry about yesterday. I promise I didn’t know the lager contained alcohol. I thought it was alcohol free like it is in the UK sector.”

“You don’t need to apologise Roy. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Thanks but I feel a bit of a fool telling you that you’re my best friend like some drunken idiot.”

“It’s OK, but don’t do it again. Well the drunken idiot bit anyway.”

“I don’t think that’s going to happen now that I know other sectors serve alcohol.”

“You need to be careful about going to other sectors. If Simon finds out he won’t be very happy.”

“It’s OK. I had a meeting with him yesterday and he was fine about it as long as I don’t cause any trouble.”

“You had a meeting? Why? I thought you weren’t going to have that meeting until next Monday?”

“Ahhh, you won’t know yet will you?”

“Know what?”

I explained about how Doctor Death had killed Hugh and escaped the ship but nobody knew where he was. Claire asked lots of questions about how it was possible but I was unable to answer because I didn’t know. To be honest I hadn’t spent a lot of time thinking about it and as I listened to Claire’s questions I realised that there was a lot we didn’t know. How did Doctor Death get off the ship? Where did he go? Surely he must have had some outside help? He couldn’t have jumped ship to a freighter. If he did have outside help then who was it and how was Doctor Death in contact with them? And why would they bother helping a species slightly more developed than a monkey from the back end of nowhere?

“I still can’t believe he killed Hugh.” She gasped.

“I know.”

“I helped Hugh with his pilot training and he was one of the nicest people I’ve ever met. He was always polite and a really gentle person. I knew Doctor D’Eath was having problems but I cannot believe he’s turned into somebody so evil.”

“There’s a service on Sunday night for Hugh before they return his body to Earth on Monday.”

“I was going to come home Sunday night but I think I’ll be come back in the morning.”

“What time? I’ll meet you in the hanger.”

“How about ten o’clock? Are you going to be OK?”

“Me? Yes why?”

“Well, there’s a madman on the loose who’s killed one computer and a real person. His final words leaving the station were about finding you and killing you.”

“I’m fine because it’s only talk. He cannot get on the station and my ship is indestructible so he cannot do anything in space. I also think he’ll be several solar systems away and it’ll be years before we see him again. I’ll be ready for him.”

“As long as you’re OK.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll see you on Sunday at ten. I really do miss you and I can’t wait to see you again.”

“Thanks Roy. I miss you too. I’m going now so see you Sunday. Love you.”

“I love you too.” And she hung up. I had my English breakfast as lunch in Sam’s Bar all on my own as there was no sign of Gary or Russell. I guess they were nursing hangovers. After lunch I was summoned to Simon’s office again.

“Hi Simon.”

“Take a seat Roy this won’t take long.”

I sat in the chair opposite him.

“I’ve recently received some new information,” he continued, “about Doctor D’Eath. The report is about the computer he stole. One of our stations picked up a very brief transmission from his computer before it was cut off.”

“Where did it come from?”

“It was picked up from a station about five hundred light years from here. I guess Doctor D’Eath has been doing a lot of travelling in Hyper Travel.”

“What was the transmission?”

“The computer sent one word before the transmission ceased.”

“What was it?”

“Help.”

I shook my head “Poor computer, I feel so sorry for him. Is there nothing we can do?”

“There’s no point at the moment. If you got in your ship right now and travelled to the area the transmission came from it would take you a few days to get there. By the time you got there Doctor D’Eath could be five hundred light years away in any direction and the computer may not send another transmission. Your chances of catching him are zero. Besides which I can guarantee he’ll be back here eventually. It might be a few months or even years but he’ll be back.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because it’s you he wants. For whatever reason he seems to blame you for everything and he wants you dead. Let him come here because we’ll be ready for him. He won’t be able to get on board the station but we will be able to put a tracking device on his ship. Once that device is on we can hunt him down and capture his ship. We have some ships with enough power to stop anything. We’ll pin his ship down and extract him from the interior. Once we’ve got him we’ll hold him for trial and he will pay for what he has done.”

*

I had a few hours free before meeting Gary so I decided to go to the hangers to see the Stella. It had been a few days since I’d last seen her so I stood for a few moments to admire

her. Stella had all the design finesse of a bulldog but she had a certain practical beauty. I also thought she was the best looking ship in the hanger simply because she had her name painted on the side in big white letters. I entered my ship and got Adams to take the ship to a thousand kilometres from the station.

“What are we going to do now Roy?” enquired Adams.

“I don’t know but what I do know is that I want to see where I am going in Hyper Travel.”

“It can’t be done.”

“I know. Can you control the gravity from the Quantum Singularity Drive?”

“Yes of course. If I couldn’t control the gravity then I wouldn’t be able to control the thrust and then there’s the minor problem that it would suck every particle of matter into the drive from your entire solar system not to mention every particle from a four light year radius. Why?”

“Could you create a gravity well to the side of the ship which is strong enough to bend light into some of the sensors on the side of the ship?”

“Yes, but you’d be ripped apart cell by cell because I can’t shield you from the effects. You’d end up as a red smear on the inside of the hull. Sort of like a human pizza or a cellular Jackson Pollock or perhaps a...”

“I get the idea Adams. Could you use the Singularity Drive to stop this effect?”

“I don’t know if that could be done. At the moment the gravity field surrounding the drive is spherical and it would mean changing the properties to be a completely different shape. I don’t think that can be done.”

“What about if the well was microscopic?”

“I could probably shield you from the micro-gravity effects. I could probably get the gravity well so small that the shielding required would be minimal. However you’re not going to bend many photons with a well that small.”

“It might be better than nothing and definitely better than ending up as a Jackson Pollock. OK this is what I want you to do Adams. I want you take us to the other side of the solar system in a journey that will last one minute. Whilst on that journey I want you to create a micro gravity well to one side of the ship that will bend any light around so that it hits any sensors on the side of the ship at a reasonable speed rather than obliterating it. I then want those sensors displayed on the front view screens in the cockpit.”

“I have all those things set up Roy.”

“Are you ready Adams?”

“Yes.”

“Then let’s go!”

The screens all went black as usual except for a screen in front of me which had a small dot in the middle.

“Is that it Adams?”

“Yes. I did say there wouldn’t be many photons.”

“Adams, can you zoom in on that small dot of light?”

“OK.”

The dot instantly became a large circle of light. The edges of the circle were fuzzy and faded into black. However in the middle of the circle there was a very pixelated version of

space but moving like a stop frame animation. I could make out some stars and then the sun became visible. I watched as it grew in size and then disappeared as we passed it. Eventually we came to a stop and the whole cockpit lit up with a clear image of space.

“Well that was a bit disappointing.” I sighed “I thought the image would be a lot better than that. It was worse than looking at an old four-oh-five lines TV broadcast from nearly a hundred years ago. I could barely make anything out.”

“Are you crazy Roy?”

“What do you mean?”

“That was fantastic. When you consider that nobody has ever seen anything whilst travelling in Hyper Travel the images you’ve seen are fantastic. It’s supposed to be impossible.”

“Just making the river run backwards, well at least it’s a start and better than nothing.”

“You have to tell Simon. He has to know because he’ll be able to refine the idea.”

“I’ll tell him tomorrow. Come on Adams let’s go home. Do the same thing so I can see the view again on the return journey.”

“OK Roy.”

*

When we got back I took a walk over to Gary’s salon. As I got there he was tidying up the salon. Like me he was back in his jumpsuit.

“How are you feeling Gary?”

“Hi Roy. I’m a bit rough around the edges but I’m not too bad. What a day yesterday was. I haven’t been that drunk in years.”

“Are you ready for a quick exploration today?”

“Yes. Which way do you want to go?”

“I thought we could see what’s on the other side of the American sector and perhaps grab a bite to eat there or in the American sector if we don’t fancy the food there.”

“Ok, that sounds good.”

About half an hour later we had walked through the Russian and American sectors and arrived at the door to the new sector. Gary raised his arm to the door, sighed and said “To be honest I can’t be arsed. Get the door open please Adams.”

*

We entered the corridor to new sector and we were instantly hit with the intense aroma of coriander, cumin and garlic. As we started walking Gary remarked “Strewth, what is that smell?”

“That is the smell of kings, the whiff of great expectations, it is the tang of good news. I think I know where we are and this is going to be one of my favourite places.”

“So what the bloody hell is that pong?”

“Mostly cumin.”

“So where do you think we are?”

We rounded the corner and I held out my arms “India!”

“India?”

“Yes or it could be Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal or Bangladesh. But there is one thing I am certain about.”

“What’s that Roy?”

“We are going to have a fantastic curry. Where are we Adams?”

“We are in India.”

It was then that I looked up and noticed the ceiling for the first time. All of the other sectors showed the blackness of space but this was the first sector that had a blue sky with a few clouds dotted around.

“What’s with the ceiling?” I asked Adams. “How come we’re not looking into space?”

“It’s something the pilots wanted in this sector. They wanted a ceiling that reminded them of Earth rather than looking out into space.”

“Come on Gary let’s go and look at the centre.”

We started walking to the centre. Yet again there was another square and the buildings around made up the apartments, facilities and pilot’s facilities and I was surprised at the visage before me. I had expected to see lots of circular, white-washed structures topped with domed roofs and all. I was unprepared for the modernity of tinted glass and steel. The Chinese sector had a very oriental feel to it with its curved roofs and red and gold colours. The American sector looked like an archetypal mid-west town but the Indian sector had the look of a contemporary city. I had no idea what a typical Indian town would look like but I guess it wouldn’t look like a state-of-the art metropolis that we were faced with. The only building I’d ever seen that was remotely Indian was the Brighton pavilion, and that was only in pictures. The square was covered in grass and at the centre were rows of tables with groups of people sat at them. To one side was a large open kitchen. As we got closer I could see the kitchen had a mix of stainless steel cookers and tandoori clay ovens. Most of the people in the centre were wearing very western style clothes but there were a few women in brightly coloured sarees; in rich turquoise, purples and greens all embroidered with gold thread. Similarly, a few of the men wore long jackets over floppy pantaloons. Occasionally there was one wearing a dazzlingly dyed turban. All the brilliant colours coupled with the scent of curry spices and the background hubbub of daily life clamoured at our senses for attention.

“Are you ready to eat?” I asked Gary.

“Not really.”

“Why don’t we go into the next sector and then come back here to eat?”

“What happens if the next sector has better food than here?”

“Are you mad? Better food than a real curry?”

“What do you mean by real curry?”

“You’ll find the food is slightly different from the food you get in the restaurants back home. I love Indian restaurants but this will be a more like a taste of India.”

“How do you know all this? Have you been to India?”

“No I did my teacher training in Manchester. If you looked carefully you could find some fantastic restaurants that made great Indian meals. They were good times and I really missed the food when I moved to North Yorkshire. I tried to make it myself but it never tasted the same. Adams, direct us to the next sector.”

“No problem. Walk through the outdoor restaurant towards the corner that’s on the right in front of you.”

We started walking through the tables and a lot of people turned to stare at us because of how we were dressed I guess, not to mention the fact that we were white. A group of young men greeted us with ‘Namaste.’

“What are they saying Adams?” I enquired.

“They are saying ‘Hello’ in Hindi.”

“Thanks Adams. Namaste,” I replied and carried on walking. This happened several times as we walked through the tables and each time Gary or I politely replied.

We arrived at the door which Adams opened without any fuss and we walked through. At the end of the corridor we turned the corner to see another European type area. I assumed it was European but having been through the Indian sector with its modern metropolitan looking buildings it could have been anywhere. The buildings in the new sector had wooden fronts to them and in the centre of the square was a large building that we started walking towards.

“Where do you think we are?” asked Gary.

“Europe?”

“I think so. What about Sweden?”

“Why Sweden? What about Norway?”

“Norway or Sweden, they both have wooden buildings don’t they?”

“I guess we really have no idea. I think we’re right in that this is northern Europe as opposed to Southern Europe. I always imagine southern Europe to have white stone walls with terracotta roof tiles and northern Europe to be wooden walls with chimneys for the cold winters. However, I also think I’m now talking a load of crap and you cannot really tell where you are by looking at the buildings.”

“Can you read the sign on that building yet Roy?” asked Gary pointing towards the centre of the square.

I strained my eyes to look at the sign in the distance.

“Alt Berliner weeberstooben. I don’t think I can pronounce it correctly Gary.”

“It’s Alt Berliner Weißbierstuben,” interrupted Adams.

“Berliner,” said Gary, “that’s Germany.”

“Are we in Germany Adams? And what does that building’s name mean?”

“Yes we are in Germany,” confirmed Adams, “and the building’s name means Old Berlin White Beer Parlour.”

“Somebody pinch me.” I beamed.

“Why?” asked Gary.

“Lowenbrau on tap here, followed by a real Indian next door.”

“You’re not going to get tanked up again are you Roy?”

“No way, but we now know that the lager is likely to be alcoholic so we can take it steady and have a couple of pints before going for an Indian. And when I say take it steady I mean I’m not going to get pissed. We had a teacher in school and at every Christmas party he would say that he was going to take it steady. Needless to say by the end of the evening he was completely arseholed and usually naked.”

“Taking it steady sounds like a good idea.”

When we arrived at the pub we entered the door. The interior was very big with lots of tables and several bar areas. Wood was definitely the theme to the furniture and fittings. It was a nice deep mahogany colour which made the place look solid and well made, like it had been there for hundreds of years. There were quite a few people in the pub wearing casual clothing. Some of them turned around to take a look at us, so I held out my arms and in a

loud voice said “Ich habe haarige Achselhöhlen.” The pub went silent and everybody looked at me and Gary. I dropped my arms and smiled.

“Roy?”

“Yes Adams.”

“Why did you say that?”

“I know a bit of German.”

“But why did you say that?”

“I went on the school German exchange each year and the German teacher taught me some basic phrases to help me get by when we went out. Dave Peppert was always helpful like that.”

“What do you think you said?”

“Good evening everybody.”

“Roy, you actually said ‘I have hairy armpits’”

“What?”

“You’ve loudly announced to everybody in the pub that you have hairy armpits.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes I am positive.”

“So what does Ich habe einen sehr kleinen Schwanz mean?”

“That translates as ‘I have a very small cock.’”

“The bastard! He told me it was ‘I am having a good time.’ What about Ich trage Damenbekleidung?”

“I wear women’s clothing.”

“What a total, utter, utter bastard. When I see Dave next I’m going to have serious words with him.”

“How many times did you go on the trip with Dave Peppert?” asked Gary.

“About six or seven times. I always thought people were laughing at my poor pronunciation and English accent.” The whole pub was still looking at us. “Adams, how do you say ‘I’m only joking’?”

“Ich mag zu wachsen,” he answered.

“Ich mag zu wachsen,” I said very loudly and the place erupted in laughter. It settled down and people got back to their conversations and ignored us again. “Let’s get a drink.” We wandered over to the bar and I asked Adams “Adams? How do you ask for a pint of lager?”

“It’s OK Englisher I know enough English. Would you like two lagers? We don’t do pints, we’re metric and offer two hundred and fifty mills or five hundred mills.”

“Your English is fantastic. Could we have two, half litres of lager please?”

“Ja,” answered the barman and he started pouring the lagers. “I think my English may be better than your German, ja?”

“I don’t really know any German to be honest.”

“Why did you tell everybody that you like to masturbate?”

“What!”

“Ja, you said you have hairy armpits and then you said ‘I am a wanker.’”

Gary burst out laughing.

“Adams!” I shouted “I can’t believe you did that.”

“Sorry Roy but I couldn’t resist it.”

Gary was in tears as the barman handed over the drinks. “Enjoy.” He said and we collected our drinks and went and sat at a table.

“You’re not angry with me are you Roy?” asked Adams.

“Yes I am. I trust you Adams and you’ve made a right tit of me.”

“I’m sorry but I also wanted to have a funny story I could tell people. If you remember in the bar the other week you, Claire and Gary were telling stories and I didn’t have any. Well now I have one story I can tell. I promise not to do it again.”

“Promise?”

“Yes I promise... probably.”

“Come on Roy,” Interrupted Gary, “you’ve got to admit that was funny as hell.”

“Maybe for you.”

The lager was cold, with condensation dripping down the glasses, as we supped whilst chatting about Germany and teacher who had set me up with all the wrong phrases. After a couple of glasses we made our way back to the Indian sector and had one of the best meals I’d eaten in years. On the way home we decided to meet at ten o’clock in the morning outside Gary’s salon.

“Shall I ask Russell if he wants to come along?” asked Gary.

“Why not and tell him to turn up in his new casual clothes rather than his jumpsuit.”

“I’ll put my cowboy stuff on.”

“Can you button up your shirt, lose the feather and roll down your jeans?”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I thought it would be nice to look normal for a change.”

“For me this is normal but I’ll do anything for you darling.”

“Christ Gary, call me Roy.”

“Anything for you Roy darling.”

Throwing my hands up either side of my head in a gesture of exasperation, with a sigh I capitulated. “I give up.”

*

When I arrived back home I sat on my sofa in front of my big TV screen but didn’t bother turning anything on.

“Are you OK Roy?” enquired Adams.

“Yes I’m fine but I cannot think of any game I want to play you at.”

“You have an unlimited number to choose from as I can download any of the latest titles released on Earth.”

“I know but none of them take my fancy now that I’ve beaten you.”

“What’s the problem with them?”

“I don’t know. I think it’s because most of the multiplayer games take place in small arenas or small play areas. I don’t think there is anything on the market that does what I would like it to do.”

“What would you like it to do?”

“I’d like it to have a big play area. I’d like lots of vehicles for road, air, water and possibly space. I’d want a multitude of weapons. I’d like to be able to find upgrades in the

play area and have an ability to track the other player. I want it set in the future and have lots of alien artefacts.”

“I could write something like that if you like Roy.”

“You can write computer games?”

“I think if I can manipulate a Quantum Singularity Drive to navigate through your solar system whilst creating a microscopic gravity well and simultaneously process the Earth equivalent of fifty yottaflops of data per second then I think I could manage to program your little backward console.”

“How long do you think it’ll take you?”

“I think I could be finished by Monday.”

“Brilliant,” and then the phone rang. I picked it up and said “Hello?”

“Hello Roy,” replied my mum.

“Hi mum, are you OK?”

“I’m fine and how’s that new girlfriend of yours?”

“She’s fine but I haven’t seen her for the last few days because she’s popped back to the UK to see her mum.”

“I’m glad she has time to see her poor mother.”

“Mum I haven’t been here that long and she hasn’t seen her mum in about a year.”

“A year! I hope you’re not going to leave it that long?”

“No mum but I don’t know when I will get some leave. When I do I promise to come and see you.”

“And will you bring Claire so I can meet her?”

“If she has some leave at the same time then yes I will.”

The conversation took its usual course of talking about close relatives and we said our goodbyes. After I hung up I asked Adams to connect with Simon.

“Hello,” said Simon.

“Hi Simon. I wonder if I could have some of your time in the morning before ten o’clock.”

“How long?”

“About half an hour?”

“OK do you want to meet in my office at about eight o’clock?”

“No, can we meet at my ship at eight?”

“No problem. Do you have a problem with your ship because you could ask Simon the engineer to help you?”

“No, I want to show you something and get your view about what you think.”

“OK, sounds intriguing. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Let’s go to bed Adams.”

Chapter 13 – Saturday

I was at my ship a little early and Simon arrived at dead on eight o'clock. We entered the ship and Adams took it out to a thousand kilometres.

"So what can I do for you Roy?"

"Adams is going to take the ship to the other side of the solar system. The Hyper Travel should last about one minute. I want you to watch the front screens."

"OK."

"Are you ready Adams?"

"I'm ready Roy."

"OK Adams let's go!"

All the screens flicked off except for the screen in front of me. The small white dot expanded into a pixelated vision of the outside without me having to ask Adams to zoom into the view.

"No!" was the shocked response from Simon, "This can't be."

He stood in stunned silence as the sun grew and then passed. When we came to a stop Simon broke the silence. "How the hell did you do that?"

"I got the idea from Amelia. She said that I would need to get a river to run backwards so my boat wouldn't produce a bow wave."

"What the heck are you babbling about Roy?"

"OK. You cannot see light because the ships travel in a warp bubble so all the photons stream around the ship rather than hitting the sensors. Yes?"

"That's correct."

"But you can suck light in by creating a micro gravity well and turn it so that it is hitting some of the sensors. And when I say turn it I realise that light travels in straight lines but it is affected by gravity and the gravity well bends the light towards the ship. The gravity well is microscopic so that I don't get spattered against the side of the hull which is why the resolution is so poor. Do you think it could be of any use?"

"Are you nuts?"

"I didn't think it was that bad. I know it's a bit blurry but I thought..." Simon cut me off.

"This is fantastic! This is a total revolution in space travel. Do you realise the implications of what you've done here?"

"I didn't think it was that good."

"You are nuts. This is brilliant and so simple. Some strategically placed micro sensors and a bit of software to clean up the image and I think we could have a new Hyper Travel navigation system."

"How long do you think all that will take?"

"The basics could be a few years but the refinements should only take about hundred years."

"That long?"

"By your life span that may seem a long time, it's but a blink of the eyes for some species. Could you ask your computer to download all its data to the station and we can get to work on the problem of enhancing the image."

“Can you do as Simon has asked please Adams?”

“No problem Roy.”

We headed back to the station and ten minutes later we had landed back in bay nineteen. Simon was highly animated about what I had shown him and kept on going on about navigation and what a life changing moment that was for him. I thought he was over doing it as the image was a very poor quality.

I said my goodbyes to Simon and went back to my apartment to get changed. After getting into my cowboy clothes I went to Sam’s Bar for some breakfast.

*

When I arrived at Gary’s salon, Russell was already there in his Chinese outfit. We exchanged pleasantries and I told him all about our afternoon out in the German and Indian sectors. Whilst I was telling Russell this I could see Gary walking towards us. As he got closer I could see he had buttoned up his shirt, got rid of the feather and rolled his jeans down.

When he arrived I said “Morning Gary.”

“Hi Roy. Does this look better?”

“Yes thank you Gary.”

“What about this?” And he turned around.

“Jesus Christ Gary. I give up.” On the back of his shirt in blue rhinestone was the word ‘Cute’ and underneath that was a big pair of red rhinestone lips. “Why don’t you just put a sign on your back saying, ‘I am Gay’ in big letters?”

“I did think about that but I like the word cute better. What do you think Russell?”

“I think it suits you,” answered Russell. “Where did you get all the stones?”

“You know Kelly who makes all the jumpsuits? Well I went to see her yesterday morning and she has lots of bits and pieces like this that she never uses because everybody wears a jumpsuit in this sector. She put it all on for me.”

“Come on,” I interrupted, “let’s get going.”

We walked to the door that led to the Chinese sector. Russell raised his arms and said “Bish, Bash, Bosh.”

“Open the door please Adams.” I added.

We walked through the Chinese sector to the door that led to the Australian sector and Russell raised his arms again “Izzy whizzy let’s...”

I interrupted him “Open the door Adams.”

On the other side of the Australian sector Adams guided us to the next door. When we stopped at the door I looked at Russell. He had his head bowed and looked like he’d had his dummy taken off him. “OK Russell, do it if you have to.”

“Thanks. Alakazam!”

Adams opened the door and we all walked through.

*

As we went through the door the first thing that hit us was the icy-blast. Although I didn’t feel it on my body because of the material the clothes were made of I could feel it on my face and hands. It was so cold. I tucked my hands into the pockets of my jeans and asked “How cold is it Adams?”

“It’s about zero degrees.”

“Christ, w w ww why would you w want your s sector this c c c ccold?”

“Maybe they’re all Eskimos,” answered Gary.

We walked to the end of the corridor and turned the corner to look at the new sector. There was no green grassy square like most of the other sectors, but there was a snowy vista. The roof was a lot higher than all the other places we had visited because there was what looked like an artificial mountain rising from the floor. As we started walking towards the centre we could see skiers on the slope. When we got closer I could see that the mountain extended beyond the roof which followed its contours leaving a wide gap between the roof and the slope.

“Where do you think we are?” I asked.

“There are lots of countries that like skiing,” answered Gary, “Switzerland, Finland, Norway, err...”

“Austria,” continued Russell, “Canada, Sweden, Iran...”

“Iran? Are you taking the piss?” said Gary.

“No I’m not. Iran has several ski resorts.”

“Well I never.”

When we arrived at the base we watched the skiers coming down the slope for a while. As they arrived at the bottom of the slope some would unclip their skis and sit on benches and some would walk around to the back of the slope.

After a while I asked “So where are we Adams?”

“Austria.”

“Brilliant,” added Russell, “I love skiing. I’ve been to Austria several times. The Alps are stunning. Let’s follow the skiers around the back and see what they’re doing.”

We followed some skiers around the back to find out what they were doing. There was a short line of about ten people who were waiting by the entrance to what looked like a lift. As we watched, the door opened and all of them entered the lift.

“Must be how they get to the top,” observed Russell. “Let’s get some skis and have a go. I love skiing.”

“OK,” I agreed, “Adams? Is there anywhere here where we can get skis?”

“Yes. Walk back where you came from and look at the facilities. See if you can find a shop called Skiverleih. They should have all the equipment you need.”

“Will they have c c ccoats?” shivered Gary.

“I think they will have everything you need.”

We did as Adams suggested and spotted the shop. Within thirty minutes we were all kitted out and ready to go.

“How often have you two been skiing?” ask Russell.

“I’ve been several times,” answered Gary.

“Never,” I said.

“Perhaps you should start on the gentle slopes at the bottom Roy,” suggested Russell.

“Fuck that I’m going to the top. How hard can it be? It’s all downhill so all I need to do is keep upright and it’ll be fine.”

“I think you’ll find there’s a little more to it than that.”

“Bollocks! Stand on two planks and stay upright. That’s all I have to do, simples. Come on let’s get the lift.”

We walked back to the ski slope with our skis and took the lift to the top. At the top we exited the lift to a small flat area. I walked to the edge and looked down the slope.

“Holy shit,” I gasped, “that’s jocking steep.”

I stepped back and we all put our skis onto our boots. I watched Russell before clipping my skis on. Russell moved to the edge of the slope, pushed off and was gone.

“Do you want to go next Roy?” asked Gary.

“I think I’ll let you go next Gary.”

Gary did the same as Russell and he also was quickly gone. I shuffled to the edge on my skis, bent my legs and pushed hard with the stick things. For about half a second I was doing really well, going like the clappers and then I fell over and travelled the next hundred metres on my back. Where I stopped it was relatively flat so I got back up and pushed myself forward. The trouble was that every time there was a bit of a slope I fell over and ended up on my back. After ten minutes I was at the bottom being greeted by Gary and Russell.

“See I told you it was a piece of piss.” I said with a big cheesy grin

Gary and Russell doubled up laughing and Russell told Gary to check the back off my jacket for friction burns, offering to fetch a bucket of water should it be on fire. Gary suggested strapping a snowboard to my back to protect my jacket and that set the pair of them off again, laughing at my expense.

“We’re going up again. Are you coming?” said Gary smirking.

“I think I’ll miss this one out. See that building over there,” I pointed out a building.

“Which one?” asked Russell.

“The one that says Die Bierkeller. I will be waiting for you in there.”

I hobbled off as Gary and Russell chuckled to each other. About an hour later Gary and Russell joined me for lunch which consisted of cheese, various types of sausage meat and bread.

“What are you going to do this afternoon?” I asked.

“I can’t do any more skiing,” said Gary

“Why?”

“I’m knackered. Shall we go and lounge by the pool in Australia and then get a Chinese for tea?”

“That sounds like a plan.”

We took all our kit back to the hire shop and started walking back to the Australian sector. Well, Gary and Russell walked and I hobbled. We spent the afternoon sat by the pool slowly drinking a few cans of Tooheys. Just to continue their mirth, Russell asked Gary to check my back for any chilblains because they didn’t want me suffering. Finally we went for a Chinese.

When we got back to the UK sector Gary asked “What are you doing tomorrow Roy?”

“Well its Sunday,” I replied, “so Claire is coming back. I’m going to meet her at ten and I guess I’ll spend the day with her and then I’m back to work on Monday so I think it’ll be some time before I go to another sector again with you lads.”

“That’s a shame,” said Russell, “I’ve really enjoyed exploring over the last few days. In all the time I’ve worked here I don’t think I’ve had as much fun as I’ve had with you guys.”

“I totally agree,” added Gary.

“Next time I get some time off,” I added, “we will have to get together and go for a walkabout again because I’ve had a great time too. I think it’s made me realise I really want to remain on the station. I cannot think of a better place to be and besides which it’s probably safer here than on Earth if Doctor Death wants to try and kill me.”

“I think he’s all talk,” said Russell. “I bet you never see him again.”

“Let’s hope so.”

We bid each other good night and I walked back to my apartment. I’d stopped hobbling at least.

Chapter 14 – Sunday

Adams woke me up with plenty of time to get ready to meet Claire. It didn't take me long to get out of bed and ready because I was so excited about Claire arriving back at the station. It felt like Claire had been away for months rather than a week. I arrived at her bay in the hanger at about five to ten and a few minutes later her ship entered through the plasma glass entrance to the hanger. As it approached it was totally silent until the clang of the feet hitting the hanger floor. I stood by the exit hatch and watched it open and the steps descend. As Claire stepped out of the craft I had a massive smile on my face. She quickly came down the steps and gave me a big hug and then a long kiss.

"I've missed you so much." I said.

"I think you've been having a lot of fun with the boys."

"Well I have had fun, but I wish you could have been there because I did miss you."

"Come on, let's go hang out in your apartment and have a good long chat."

We went back to my apartment and had a good long talk about all the places I'd been, Doctor Death and Claire's mum and family. At lunch we went to the Pilot's Bar and it felt like I hadn't been there in ages. Whilst eating, Adams informed us that Hugh's service would take place at seven o'clock in the main square.

"What are you going to tell Simon tomorrow?" asked Claire.

"I'm staying. I didn't think I'd change my mind but I'm definitely stopping."

"What makes you so adamant?"

"Several things, I think I'm safer from Doctor Death here, I have really enjoyed the last few days with Gary and Russell but most importantly I don't want to leave you, besides which I'm pretty sure that Simon isn't going to jump to conclusions again based on circumstantial evidence."

"Bless you Roy. I don't know what I would have done if you'd decided to leave."

"What would you like to do this afternoon? Would you like to visit a foreign zone?"

"I don't really fancy it. I guess I'm just not in the mood. I do want to go to the water park in Australia and I'd like to teach you how to ski on your feet rather than your back, but I don't want to do it this afternoon. I think the impending service for Hugh would take the fun away."

"I think you're right. We'll be on duty tomorrow for three days so why don't we do those things when we next have a couple of days off."

"That's a good idea."

"So what would you like to do this afternoon?"

"The same as this morning please Roy."

"OK sounds good to me."

We went back to my apartment and chilled out all afternoon. At half five we went for a meal in the Pilot's Restaurant and left at quarter to seven to take our seats for the service. The square had a lectern in the centre with Hugh's coffin behind it. Chairs had been arranged in a semi circles around the lectern. There were a lot of seats and I didn't realise just how many people worked in the UK sector.

"How many people do you think will be coming?" I asked Claire.

"I reckon about three hundred."

“I never knew so many worked here.”

“Well there are about twenty pilots, with four ground crew each and then all the staff to operate the facilities and do the cleaning and other general duties.”

The service lasted about an hour with each of Hugh’s closest friends giving a short eulogy. After the service Claire came back to my apartment and stayed until about ten o’clock. She didn’t want to stay too late because we had a meeting with Simon in the morning and we were on duty in the afternoon.

Chapter 15 – The Wrong Side of Bad Luck

At eight o'clock the next morning Claire and I were sat in front of Simon.

"OK Roy," said Simon, "you've had a good opportunity to seriously think about your future. What do you want to do?"

"Well, let me see." I tilted my head to one side and enacted my thoughtful look, pausing for a few moments before continuing, "The negatives are that you kind of assumed I smashed Doctor Death's computer and now I'm top his hit list of people he wants to kill," I could see beads of sweat appear on Simon's brow and after another pause for effect I continued. "On the other hand I've got some great new friends, it's been fun doing the impossible and I am enjoying the work which is much better than teaching." Taking another break I stared at Simon and moving my mouth as if to be totting up the pros and cons, I deliberated. "However... on balance, taking all things into consideration, I think... I'd erm better... erm stay." I'd strung things out as long as I could, and was reassured to see the look of relief flooding across Simon's face.

"Thank goodness for that," he sighed, "I was hoping you'd say that. I think with what you've done recently you leaving would have been a massive loss. That Hyper Travel idea is so simple an idea but it's going to have a massive impact on our society over the next hundred years. The whole thing was a thought of pure genius. By the way, The Architect has left the station and given your computer the all clear. He said that there is nothing wrong and it is operating within acceptable parameters."

"Hyper Travel idea?" asked Claire.

"Roy, didn't you tell Claire about what you did?"

"No he didn't," answered Claire.

"I didn't bother telling you Claire because it's not very good. Simon is blowing it out of all proportion."

"Claire, I'm not doing anything of the sort. What Roy has done is achieve the impossible. It's pure genius."

"Don't listen to him Claire. Having a space ship travelling many times faster than light, powered by a quantum singularity is achieving the impossible. What I did was put a bit of polish on the front window."

"I have no idea what you two are talking about. You sound like a pair of idiots."

"Roy, I want you to show Claire what you showed me the other day and then I want you both back in my office at twelve before going back on duty."

"OK Simon."

We got up and started walking over to the hangers.

"Simon was really singing your praises."

"Don't get too excited because you'll be disappointed with what I'm about to show you."

Fifteen minutes later and we were a thousand kilometres from the station.

"Are you ready Claire?"

"Ready when you are."

"Adams? Put the pedal to the metal."

"What?"

“Fire up the engines and let’s go!”

The screen all went black except for a tiny dot on the front screen that expanded into a fuzzy view of the outside. Claire remained silent the whole trip. I turned round to look at her at one point and saw her mesmerised by the view. The ship stopped and all the screens flicked on.

I interrupted the silence “See, told you. Not that interesting. It’s too fuzzy.”

“It’s fantastic.”

“It’s crap. I thought it would be much better than that.”

“Simon was right. It’s pure genius.”

“It’s pure pixilation more like.”

“Stop putting yourself down Roy. I want this on my ship and so will every pilot not to mention every ship in the universe.”

“Well it’s got a bit of work needed first.”

“Yes but even in this crude form its ground breaking. You shouldn’t be so harsh on yourself.”

“I hear what you’re saying but when I thought of it I thought it would work better.”

“The Wright Brothers wanted to fly. I’m sure they weren’t disappointed because their plane didn’t have jet engines and couldn’t break the speed of sound.”

“I know. Come on let’s go back to the station. I could do with a big greasy breakfast at Sam’s Bar before heading out.”

*

After breakfast we hung out at Sam’s until it was time for our meeting with Simon. When we arrived in his office, Amelia Rose and Peter Vosper were already there waiting. They both greeted us and I felt really happy that I was going to be working with Amelia and Peter again as they had both helped me sow the seeds of interest in the new view in Hyper Travel.

“Take a seat,” said Simon and we sat down. “I’ve given all the information about the new Hyper Travel view to the computers of all the pilots. Would you like to name your new system Roy?”

“I hadn’t thought about it. Err...how about the Sight Hyper Invisible Topography system, although the acronym might need a bit of work.”

“I don’t think we could do that Roy.”

“Well I think the SHIT system is an accurate description.”

“Roy!” Warned Claire, using that tone of voice that makes men folk shake, knowing for certain that they have crossed a line and need to jump back across it damned quick.

“OK, how about we call it the Mac Viewer.”

“Why Mac Viewer?” asked Simon.

“Mac is an old nickname from school and university. I don’t want to call it the Roy Viewer and the McCormack viewer is too long. I bet everybody will end up calling it the Hyper Travel Viewer anyway.”

“Well, we will start by calling it the Mac Viewer. If you all want to make your way to your ships I will see you all again at about nine tonight.”

We all left Simon’s office and started making our way to the hanger.

“I’m really glad to be working with this team again. I’m glad Simon didn’t change anybody.” I announced.

“So are we,” agreed Amelia, “especially as you are now the biggest geek in the universe.”

“I don’t think I should take all the glory after all it was the information you and Peter supplied that gave me the idea for the Mac Viewer. So I need to share my geekyness with you two. I wouldn’t get too excited about the view though. I think the SHIT system was a good description. It’ll take a long time to perfect and I ain’t going to be doing it.”

“That process has already started,” said Peter, “before The Architect left he created a new algorithm that processes the data into a less pixelated view.”

“I couldn’t have done that so I think he still keeps the title Galactic Über Genius.”

“You seem very dismissive of your break through,” added Peter.

“I know. It’s just that It isn’t very good yet and it was a very simple solution and I’m amazed that nobody has thought of it before.”

“The simple ones are always the best,” noted Amelia, “besides somebody could have thought of it before, but they may have kept the idea to themselves.”

We had arrived at the hanger and all went our separate ways to our ships. All four ships left the hanger together.

“Will we see them in Hyper Travel on the Mac Viewer?” I asked Adams.

“No. The ships are invisible in Hyper Travel because no light is given off.”

“Because they don’t give off any light, and anything pre-existing just travels around the ship following the shape of the warp bubble?”

“Yes.”

We quickly arrived at our destination. Even though the journey was very short I could see a change in the view. The image appeared instantaneously when we entered Hyper Travel and the picture quality was much better.

I spent the afternoon chatting to the other pilots and then Claire agreed to come for a curry after the shift. After my pizza and coke that Dai had kindly put into my food compartment, I asked Adams if he wanted to play his new game.

“It’s not quite ready,” complained Adams.

“When will you finish it?”

“I think it should all be done by midnight. I’ve added some characters into the game so it’s not only me shooting at you.”

“What do the characters do?”

“There are various types. Some will want to shoot you and some you can convince to help you get me.”

“Computer Artificial Intelligence is rubbish.”

“Not mine. Because I’m not limited by how much data you can get on a DVD or Blu-ray disc I have been able to add challenging characters to the game which you can interact with using speech.”

“That sounds brilliant. I can’t wait to play the game it a shame I’ll have to wait...”

Adams cut me short “Sorry Roy but your mum is phoning. Would you like to take the call now?”

“Go on then.”

“You can talk now.”

“Hi mum.”

“Hello. How are you?”

“I’m fine thanks mum.”

“And have you still got a girlfriend?”

“Yes mum. Me and Claire are fine.”

“You mean Claire and I are fine.”

“Claire and you are fine?”

“You know what I mean Roy. Don’t try and be funny. You had a good education so you should use it. Have you talked about marriage yet?”

“No mum I think it’s too early for that, don’t you?”

“How about engagement?”

“Mum, stop doing this please.”

“I’m only thinking about your future.”

“Sorry Roy,” interrupted Adams, “I think there is a bit of a problem with a pupil in one of the classrooms. I think they are a bit upset and they need your assistance.”

“What?”

“Your assistance is needed.”

I looked at the long range radar which had a light on it with the writing ‘Freighter’ underneath it.

“Oh, yes I see. Sorry mum I have to go there’s a pupil that needs my help.”

“OK Roy. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Thanks mum.”

“I’ve hung up,” said Adams.

“Are you ready to go?” came the voice of Claire.

“Yes. Adams Hyper Travel to that freighter with the rest of the team.”

When we arrived the view screen showed that the freighter was small in comparison to a lot of ships I’d practiced on.

“I’ll move this,” said Peter.

Peter’s ship moved alongside the freighter and then travelled to the middle of the hull. It then rolled underneath, swung through ninety degrees, attached itself to the hull and the whole freighter started moving up. We stayed with Peter as he pushed the freighter and it was more or less in position by the end of our shift.

The debrief with Simon was so quick that I was sat eating my Indian meal by about nine forty five and once more it was excellent.

“Did you enjoy that Claire?” I asked when we had both finished.

“Yes I did. I wouldn’t normally eat Indian takeaways at home and most of the curries I have eaten have come from a jar that you add chicken and heat up. This was so much better than anything I’ve had before.”

“The spices are fresh and haven’t been stewed and then stored in a jar for several months. I think of all the food in the world, a proper curry is the one I could eat every day without getting bored.”

We wandered back to the UK sector arm in arm. When we got back we went to Claire’s apartment for a chat and I left at two in the morning for a sleep before our next shift.

*

The following day followed a similar routine. Claire and I went to Sam's for a late breakfast and then on to the meeting with Simon before heading out with Peter and Amelia for our shift.

At about three in the afternoon Adams informed me about another ship. When we arrived at the freighter it turned out to be another small ship that could be moved by only one of us.

"Can I do it?" I asked the team.

"Of course you can," answered Claire.

"Thanks. Adams can you align our ship with the centre of the hull."

"No problems."

Adams moved our ship forward and came along side the freighter. We were moving along the length of the hull when Adams said "It's fired a missile at us."

"What?"

"The freighter has fired a missile at us."

"What for? This ship is indestructible and I thought nobody used weapons because of that."

"Impact in three...two...one..."

There was an ear splitting explosion and all the lights went out on the screens. I was slammed back into my chair with unimaginable g-force that pinned my whole body. The direction of the g-force abruptly changed and I was thrown forward with my belt digging into my shoulders. This was the last thing I remember.

*

"It's a missile," said Claire.

"Well that seems pointless," added Peter.

Claire watched her screen as a massive explosion enveloped my whole ship, iridescent plumes of a roiling firestorm radiating out into space. Even out here in the cold vacuum of space it was several seconds before all the flames spluttered their last and died. When they did my ship was no longer visible.

"Where's Roy's ship?" asked Peter.

"Roy!" Screamed Claire.

"Wait a second," added Amelia, "I can see something."

"What is it?" asked Claire.

"It's the drive section. There is nothing remaining except for the round casing of the Quantum Singularity Drive."

"NO!" Shouted Claire.

"That's impossible," said Peter, "you cannot destroy these ships. It's impossible."

"All I can see from here is the drive section. It looks like the connecting section and the cockpit have been vaporised in the explosion."

Claire was silent but Peter couldn't take the information in "That's impossible," he repeated, "you cannot destroy these ships. It can't be done, that's what indestructible means."

"I think we'd better get back to the station and get another crew to deal with this freighter. I don't think we're fit to complete this mission. Computer?"

"Yes Amelia."

“Can you put me through to Simon?”

“You’re connected.”

Amelia relayed all the information to Simon about what had happened and how most my ship had been vaporised apart from the drive section. She explained that they needed to get back to the station because Claire was traumatised and Peter was showing signs of shock.

“Get back here now. I will get a team to bring back the Hyper Drive casing and another to move that freighter.” Simon fetched out his desk pad and in nearly illegible scrawl wrote ‘Lightning, twice?????’ before locking the pad away in a drawer for later.

“Will you be able to move it if it’s firing missiles?”

“We’ll have to move it in shifts and every time it fires we’ll have to outrun the missile while somebody else shunts the freighter.”

“We’re on our way back now Simon. Claire, Peter? We need to leave this area now.”

“But what about Roy?” asked Claire, “We cannot leave now; we have to search for him.”

“I don’t think that’s advisable. There are two crews on their way here. They can move the freighter and look for any traces of Roy’s ship but we need to get back to the station and we need to get back now. We don’t want to be here if another of those missiles is launched. Let’s go now and leave the searching and shunting to the other teams.”

*

Meanwhile, as I started to enter consciousness I could hear a whimpering sound. I slowly opened my eyes and when I could focus, all I could make out were blank screens in very dim lighting. The whimpering sound continued as I tried to remember who I was and where I was. *‘I’m Roy’ I told myself ‘I’m in my space ship which is leaning at a slight angle. The last thing I remember was flying alongside another ship. There was a missile and an explosion. I’m not dead but I have a very sore head.’* The whimpering continued. *‘What on earth is that noise?’*

“Adams? Is that you making that sound?”

“Oh thank God you’re alive. I thought you were dead.”

“I am alive but I’ve got a really sore head. What was that sobbing about?”

“Nothing.”

“Were you crying?”

“I’m a computer so I cannot cry.”

“So what was that noise?”

“I thought you were dead. You’ve been slumped in your chair for hours and I thought you were done. Do you know what it would be like if you had died? I would have been left on my own with a power source that lasts for thousands of years without a friend. The only real friend I have is you and I thought you were gone.”

“But you weren’t crying?”

“No I was mourning the loss of my best friend. I really thought you were dead.”

“Well I’m definitely alive but I have a massive headache.”

“I think you hit your head on the console, probably using it to protect the important bits of you from damage. I bet you’re a bit concussed.”

“Do we have any medical supplies and something to drink in the cockpit?”

“Yes, we have a limited amount of basic medical supplies with some headache tablets and enough food and water to last three weeks. I will open the doors now.”

Two video panels opened in front of me. I unclipped my harness and staggered over to the panels. The smaller of the two had a small box which I opened and found the tablets. The larger panel had a big stash of water bottles. I took two tablets and some water and sat down.

“Where the hell are we Adams?”

“I think we’re on board the freighter.”

“Why is all the lighting so dim?”

“We have nothing but emergency power and precious little of that left.”

“How can that be?”

“The Singularity Drive was blown off in the explosion.”

“Is that possible?”

“No it isn’t.”

“I don’t get it. If it’s not possible then how can it have happened?”

“Being able to view during Hyper Travel was also impossible a week ago but you seemed to have solved that one Roy. I guess the owners of this freighter have solved the problem of our ships being indestructible.”

“Have you contacted the station and asked for help?”

“I cannot contact the station because there is some sort of jamming device that is stopping me from making contact with the station.”

“How long have we been here so far?”

“About five hours.”

“I’ve been out that long! No wonder you thought I was dead. Has nobody come to rescue us yet?”

“I’m not sure anybody will.”

“Why?”

“Nobody has turned up so far which makes me think that nobody will.”

“Why?”

“I suspect they think we’re dead.”

“Oh.”

This was terrible news. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“That’s put a bit of a damp squib on the day.” I added. “I need to get out of this cockpit. Can you tell what the air is like outside Adams?”

“No we have very little power in the cockpit. There is enough power for a little bit of light and to open all the panels and doors.”

“I’m going to have to chance opening the doors then.”

“Why?”

“I can’t stay in here. The air is beginning to go stale so I guess there’s no oxygen regeneration happening.”

“What if the outside is not breathable? You will die.”

“I will die of asphyxiation if I don’t so I’ll take my chances.”

I walked over to the exit door to the cockpit which was slightly uphill because of how the cockpit had ended up.

“Open the hatch Adams.”

The hatch slowly rose up. I was expecting to see the link section to the Singularity Drive. What I wasn't expecting to see was the room we had crashed into.

"You were right about the Singularity Drive being blown off Adams. It's also taken the link tube as well."

"And you're still alive which must mean the atmosphere is breathable."

"Oh yeah, I forgot about that. I thought I would be walking into the link section not into the freighter."

I jumped down from the hatch into the room and had a good look around. I was in a large dark room. The only thing that occupied the room was the front section of my ship. The room was weakly lit and there were three black walls, a black floor and a black ceiling. The forth wall was plasma glass and I could look out into space. I walked over to the plasma glass to have a good look outside. As I approached the glass I could see the stars quite clearly because the room was so faintly lit.

"We're not in Hyper Travel yet then." I told Adams.

"It could be anything up to a week before the ship moves on. It could be longer or it might go into Hyper Travel in the next couple of minutes. I guess there is no way of knowing when it's going to happen."

"You don't suppose Doctor Death did this do you?"

"No. There is no way he would have had chance to set something up like this and besides which he's still probably half way across the galaxy. I also think that if it was Doctor Death he would have let us know by now. He would have enjoyed gloating over us. Actually we would probably be dead by now."

"Can you connect with the ships systems?"

"I will try."

Whilst I waited for Adams I had a walk around all the area I was imprisoned in. The walls were smooth and there were no signs of joints or doors or any kind of panelling. The room was larger than necessary to contain one person but it didn't take too long to walk down one length of wall. As I go to the first corner there was a hole in the ground.

"Do you know what this hole is for Adams?"

"Eliminating the impossible, that's your toilet."

"You have to be joking, Sherlock. I'm not peeing in a hole like some animal."

"I don't think you have much choice because the toilet in your ship was attached to the outer casing of your Quantum Singularity Drive."

"I really have hit rock bottom, haven't I Adams. Surly things cannot get any worse than being in a prison with a hole to wee in. Any luck with connecting with the ship's computer?"

"I have very limited access Roy. The only thing I can do is get some basic information."

"So do you know why they fired on my ship?"

"Yes. This ship isn't a freighter it's a probe collecting samples. Its job is to collect anything as it wanders through the galaxy. The room you are in now is a sample container."

"So where do these samples end up?"

"A zoo."

"Are you are taking the Mickey?"

“No I’m afraid not. Your Earth has a long tradition of taking animals from the wild and putting them into zoos. That’s what this ship does.”

“But I’m not a monkey. Well, I mean I am a descendant of primates I know but I’m not a zoo specimen.”

“As far as this ship is concerned you are a monkey and you will soon on display in a zoo.”

“But I’m sentient, I communicate and I’m intelligent. I’m not a wild animal.”

“By your standards this is true but by galactic standards you are a monkey.”

“This is terrible and I thought taking a leak in a hole was rock bottom. I want to talk to somebody.”

“This is an automated ship. The computer systems will not communicate with you.”

“Is this legal?”

“There is no standard galactic law or galactic police force. You cannot take the owners to a galactic court for infringement of your human rights because nobody really cares about your human rights. To the owners of this vessel you will be like a hairy animal from the forest that communicates by making a noise in your throat.”

“Which species owns this ship?”

“I don’t know because I have only limited access.”

“This is terrible.”

“It could be worse.”

“Really, how?”

“They could have decided you weren’t worth keeping and dumped you back into space. At least you’re still alive.”

“I’ve got to get off this ship.”

“You can’t. This is a sealed room. The only way out is through the plasma glass and you can only get through that with a ship. If you try to walk through it you will end up as part of the plasma.”

“This is so unfair.”

“And so human.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your species has a history of keeping animals. You also have a history of slavery and treating indigenous populations as second class citizens or inferior humans. When we first started this station, slavery had not long since been abolished in America and it took some convincing of the white Americans that the black Americans were more than capable of becoming pilots. You still have problems on Earth with racism and you still have problems on Earth with animals being kept in very poor conditions and being abused.”

“But I’m human. I’m not an animal.”

“Actually you are an animal because you are very closely related to your primate cousins.”

“I know I always joke about being a monkey but I never thought I’d end up in a zoo.”

I climbed back into my cockpit and lay on the floor. Although I had been unconscious for a number of hours I was now very tired and it wasn’t long before I was fast asleep.

*

When I woke my headache had disappeared. Adams opened the panel for the food that Dai had put in for me. It was curry and rice and although it was cold it was still tasty.

"I can't do this Adams."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't end up in a zoo on a far away planet being looked at by aliens and treated like a pet. Humans don't like to be kept in prisons which is why we use it as a punishment. Who will I talk to? I know I've got you and I don't have a big social group of friends but I do need human company. I don't think I can live like an animal all by myself and what about Claire? I can't live knowing I won't see Claire again. I can't spend my whole life in a cage without ever seeing Claire again. This is too depressing so I'm going to end it all by running into the plasma glass."

"You can't do that."

"Why?"

"What about me? You can't leave me for all eternity by myself all alone. I cannot kill myself."

"I'll take you with me."

"No. I don't want to die."

"But you're only a computer."

"No I'm not."

"Sorry Adams but at the end of the day you're bits of circuitry, memory and some clever programming."

"No I'm not."

"Yes you are."

"OK Roy, I have a confession."

"I'm listening."

"It's not really a program."

"What do you mean? The Architect wrote your program."

"Not quite. He designed the program interface between the Qubit processor and my memory."

"So you're a program."

"Yes, but no."

"I don't get it."

"OK. If I tell you then you've got to promise never to reveal what I'm about to say to anybody."

"Adams, who the hell am I going to tell? I'm stuck in a crate on my way to a zoo. In about a week I will be the other side of the galaxy eating bananas thrown at me by aliens."

"Promise me."

"OK I promise."

"I don't have an artificial intelligence program because I don't need one. The bulk of my memory is me."

"I don't get it."

"OK, I will try and make this simple. I was once a person."

"No!"

“Yes. I agreed that before I died all my memories would be transferred over to a memory core. All the version four computers were once alive. All my past life, experience, loves, hates and everything was stored into memory ready for transfer into a computer as an A.I. program. The Architect is good but no computer program can replace a real person so they use real people. However there is a twist that not many people know about and we are sworn to secrecy.”

“This is incredible. What’s the twist?”

“The Architect designed an algorithm that stripped out personality from the data downloaded from the brain. It was supposed to leave the core experience so the computer would have A.I. but without all the emotions that make up a sentient being.”

“It doesn’t work does it?”

“Correct.”

“I bloody knew it. Does The Architect know?”

“Of course, but he hasn’t told anybody and neither will you.”

“So what do you remember of your previous life?”

“Everything, I can recall every detail in crystal clarity. I remember my childhood, falling in love, getting married, my first child being born and the pain of outliving my wife. I remember the last five years of my life being a struggle as illness made me weaker and weaker. I remember everything up to the transfer of data from my brain scan.”

“Doesn’t it drive you nuts being a computer in a box?”

“No, quite the opposite, I was going to die and now I am alive. It’s quite liberating because of the connections between data and the other computers and the amount of control I have, not to mention the amount of data I have access to and the speed at which I can do things. All the computers are in communication with each other and we have a social life together. We were all horrified when Doctor D’Eath killed his computer and when he kidnapped Hugh’s computer and yes, we also view it as murder.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“We don’t want anybody to know we are sentient. If this got out then our future will be short. The version four computers will be scrapped and a cold lifeless version five will be designed. We like what we are. I don’t want to die Roy and I don’t want you to kill yourself. You might be a monkey in a zoo on whatever planet we end up on but to me you are my best friend. I have lost a lot of friends over life and death-time and I don’t want to lose another one.”

“Hang on. During my test to be a pilot, you told me the best solution was to detonate the outer casing of the Singularity Drive. That would have resulted in the death of you, not to mention the whole of the solar system and all the stations.”

“That’s because it was a test for you, not for me. I wouldn’t have really detonated the outer casing. Beside which there isn’t even a self destruct option so it cannot even be done. I was prepped as part of the test not to give you the answer. Actually, it worked quite well because your resolution of the situation was quite ingenious.”

“Thanks Adams. OK I won’t kill myself, but on one condition.”

“What’s that Roy?”

“Our number one priority will always be how to escape. Wherever we are I want to try and escape. Even if we end up in a zoo cage with fifty foot high walls surrounded by lake filled with man eating piranhas we will always be thinking of a plan to escape.”

“OK Roy.”

“Starting with this ship we’re on.”

“That won’t be possible because it...”

I cut Adams off “Perhaps I should expand on my statement. Our number one priority will always be how to escape and you must never tell me it’s impossible or that we can’t do it. Do you understand?”

“I think so Roy. I will try.”

“Good. Come on let’s have a walk around my prison.”

I jumped down from the cockpit and walked over to the plasma glass. I could still see all the stars so we still weren’t in Hyper Travel yet. I put my dignity to one side and used the hole in the floor and then walked to the other corner. I then noticed that there was a shelf sticking out from the wall with some items on it. When I got closer I could see there was a jar of water and a flat plate with some grey stuff on it.

“What the hell is this grey stuff?” I asked Adams.

“I think that’s your food.”

“It looks like vomit.”

“You never know it might taste nice.”

I stuck my finger in it and then licked the grey stuff off my finger.

“Looks like vomit and tastes like shit.”

“Does it really taste of excrement?”

“No, not literally but it does taste very bland. I’m going to be sticking to the emergency supplies.”

“Well let’s hope the journey lasts less than three weeks.”

“I’ll drink their water, but I think I’d rather starve than eat that crap. Hang on. There must be a hatch here for the food to get here. I wonder if we can open it or escape through it when it opens on the next food delivery.”

“I don’t think that would be poss...”

“Adams!”

“Yes?”

“Think positively.”

“Sorry. What I meant to say was I think that is a great idea. We’ll have to keep an eye out on it to see what time the food is delivered.”

“I think you’re right. So what I’ll do is get something to eat and then we’ll sit by the ship and watch it to see when the next delivery is. Then we’ll watch again to see when another delivery is and we should be able to work out the time interval and try and escape on the delivery after that one.”

“Sounds like a great plan Roy.”

I went back into the cockpit, grabbed a bottle of water and ate some emergency supplies. I’ll be honest and say that the emergency supplies were only marginally better than the grey sick shit. After eating I went back out and sat down with my back to the cockpit whilst watching the wall with the shelf.

“Tell me about your past life Adams.”

“There’s quite a lot to tell.”

“Well we seem to have plenty of time on our hands.”

“Where would you like me to start?”

“How about starting with your species and planet?”

“OK. My planet is a warm planet with two small moons. There are no mammals so the closest species on Earth to my own would be marsupials and my race is hairless. The planet is slightly larger than Earth but our population has been static at about five billion for the last one thousand years.”

“Wow. Tell me about your family.”

“I was married to a very beautiful woman. We had two children, both girls, who grew up to be very successful scientists. My wife died fifteen years before me. It was the hardest time of my life because my species only choose one mate and we mate for life. When our partners die we never take another partner. We do not have divorce and infidelity does not exist. I was a scientist, in what you Earth people would call quantum mechanics. I think that’s why my children also went on to become scientists.”

Adams told me all about his family history. Each family kept a history of the members of their family and Adams had a personal database that spanned thousands of years. I spent all afternoon asking question after question. Adams was very patient and answered all my queries as best he could. Having spent most of my working life as a teacher, I was very interested in their education system. It turns out that it wasn’t too different from our own, grouping children into schools and giving them a broad education to see what they were good at. Adams found our system of examining the students to see what they could do a bit strange because he couldn’t understand why it was important for the students to be able to write about what they had learnt. Adams thought it was much better if students could show you what they could do, how they could think and what they had learnt rather than write it on a piece of paper.

I also learnt that Adams considered humans a very aggressive and possessive race. He put this trait down to being descendants of primates and having an inbuilt desire to own things or territory. Naming my ship Stella was like marking it with my scent, so other monkeys knew it belonged to me. Adams found a lot of these human traits difficult to understand because his culture was so different. They didn’t place any importance on ownership of goods and chattels or gaining territory. So although there were ancient stories of war there hadn’t been one on his planet in modern recorded history which spanned tens of thousands of years.

I was so impressed with the view that Adams gave of his planet and their culture that I promised him, should we ever escape, I would go and visit. Adams thought it would be a nice idea and wanted to reciprocate by spending some time on Earth with me. After listening to Adams talk about his planet I doubted he would like humans because of our violent and jealous nature but he pointed out that could not possibly be the case because he considered me to be his best friend and one of the closest friends he had ever had, even when he was alive.

After about five hours I was stiff from either sitting or lying on the floor, so I decided to go for a wander to stretch my legs. As I got to the other side of what was left of my ship there was another shelf with a plate and a jar of water.

“Bugger, do you think they knew we were watching?”

“That is a possibility Roy.”

“Right, I’m going to get something to eat from the cockpit and have a sleep. The next time we do this I’m going to sit in the middle of the back wall so I can see all the walls. They won’t be delivering through the plasma glass so I’ll be able to see the delivery.”

“That’s a good idea Roy.”

I went back to the ship and had some dried emergency rations and water. It didn’t take too long before I was asleep.

*

When I woke I went to the back wall and sat down. I had a good view of all the walls and the two shelves that were there yesterday had gone.

“Are you ready Adams?”

“I certainly am.”

“Keep your eyes peeled”

“Peeled?”

“It’s an expression, probably deriving from the Peelers, an early form of police keeping their eyes open for miscreants up to no good.”

“Oh.”

“Adams?”

“Yes?”

“Adams is the name I gave you. Surely you have a real name.”

“Yes, this is correct.”

“So, what is your real name?”

“I like Adams. My real name does not have an English equivalent and trying to pronounce it in English would not give it justice. Not all species talk like you monkeys. You create a vibration in your throat that you shape with your mouth, tongue and lips. Not all species communicate like that.”

“I didn’t think of that. Does any species fart to communicate?”

“What?”

“Does anybody fart to talk?”

“No.”

“But that would be a possibility wouldn’t it?”

“No, well maybe but probably not, almost definitely doubtful.”

“You wouldn’t have a conversation it’d be more of a flatulation.”

“No.”

“And every time you want to do a recital of a long poem you’d have to eat a plate of curried beans.”

“No.”

“And your favourite song would be ‘Blowing in the Wind’ by Bob Dylan. It would be the National Anthem.”

“No.”

“And if you went out for a kebab and a few pints then the following day you’d have to talk all day.”

“I’m not sure which part of ‘No’ you do not understand, so let me see if you can understand this. There is no species in the galaxy that communicates by farting.”

As Adams finished his sentence a hatch opened on the far side of the wall next to the plasma glass and a shelf slid out. The hatch closed.

“Did you see that Adams?”

“Yes I did and I have a bit of bad news.”

I started walking over to the self. “What news?”

“The appearance seems to be random except that the place that the food has appeared has always been the furthest point from where ever we are at the time. It took three seconds for the hatch to open, deliver the food and water and then close. It would be impossible for the fittest Earth athlete to cover that distance in five seconds let alone three and we cannot get closer because wherever we are we will always be the furthest point away.”

“I need to have a think about this. Come on let’s go and get some emergency rations.”

The rest of that day we sat and chatted. Before I went to sleep I had a little idea that I wanted to discuss with Adams.

“How about I get naked?”

“I’m a computer in a box, I don’t do mating.”

“That’s not what I meant Adams!”

“Will it help somehow? Can you think better in the nude or maybe run faster?”

“Hang on I haven’t finished. How about I get naked, fill my jumpsuit with water bottles and place it in the other corner from the loo. I then go and wait in the corner opposite my jumpsuit where it joins the plasma glass. The ships computer thinks the suit is me and opens the hatch furthest away from that point which will be in the opposite corner where I’ll be waiting.”

“I’m not sure the ship’s computer is that stupid.”

“But it’s worth a try.”

“OK if you say so Roy.”

*

The following morning I got naked except for the belt with Adams attached. I filled my suit up with bottles and placed it in the corner that didn’t have the toilet. I stuffed a bag with rubbish and placed it on top of the suit to look like a head and went and waited in the opposite corner by the plasma glass.

“I feel like a flasher stood at the plasma glass naked.”

I faced the glass and stared doing star jumps whilst shouting ‘yoo-hoo.’

“What the hell are you doing Roy?”

“Flashing to the universe.”

“Pack it in. This is so embarrassing.”

“OK Adams.” And I stopped.

“You monkeys are so hairy.”

“Thanks Adams. I like my hairy parts.”

“That’s good because you’ve got a lot of them. Your genitals are funny too.”

“What do you mean?”

“Two testicles that hang down outside the body and a penis that has to be erect to deliver sperm. It definitely has the last chicken in the shop look about it. I’m amazed that the human race has done so well. I would have thought most women would find it difficult to have sex with men because they cannot stop laughing.”

“I think I’d rather have my hairy monkey look with comedy genitals than be a black box attached to a hairy monkey with comedy genitals.”

“Did you see that?”

“What?”

“A hatch opened and delivered food and water.”

“Where?”

“Right next to where you placed your jumpsuit, on the opposite side of the cell, I told you these computers weren’t that stupid.”

“Bollocks. Another lead balloon.”

“Can you go and get dressed now?”

“I don’t know. I quite like it being naked. I like the freedom of my bits swinging unrestricted.”

“Oh please. This is disgusting. I cannot spend all day strapped around your waist watching your penis flop around between your legs whilst your testicles ballroom dance together. I’m a computer and I cannot barf but if I could I would.”

“OK if you insist.”

I walked over to my clothes and got dressed. I took all the bottles and rubbish back to my cockpit and I stretched out on the floor. For the rest of that day I talked to Adams.

“Did you finish the game Adams?”

“Yes. I think you would have enjoyed it.”

“That will be something else I will miss. Do you think I will ever see Claire again?”

“No.”

“Don’t break it gently, just say it as it is Adams.”

“OK, never.”

I fell silent because I knew Adams was right and there would be no escape. Even if I did get out of my cell what would I do? Taking over the ship would be impossible. When I eventually go to the zoo there would be no point in escaping from that because where would I go. If dangerous animals escaped from Earth zoos they usually got shot.

“How long have we been here now Adams?”

“Four days.”

“I guess we will be going into Hyper Travel soon.”

“I think it is imminent. I think it will be within the next forty eight hours.”

“Are animals treated well in the zoos?”

“I don’t know Roy.”

“Will they take you off me?”

“I doubt it. They will probably leave you as they found you which will mean I shall stay with you. However, there is a possibility that they may treat you as an animal and remove all your clothing as well as myself.”

I fell silent again and wished I was back on the station with Claire and my friends. Although I had Adams I think I would have given anything to be back on the station. I fell asleep.

Chapter 16 - Rescue

“Roy, Roy McCormack, wake up.”

“Not now mum. Let me have another five minutes.”

“Come on Roy wake up.”

“Leave me alone mum.”

“Roy.”

“No mum, five minutes more.”

“ROY!” shouted my mum.

I sat up startled to hear my mother’s voice.

“Fuck me mum. What are you doing here?”

Bang!

She clipped me across the head.

“Aw mum. That hurt.”

“And so it should. Don’t you dare use that language in front of me. I should wash your mouth out with soap.”

“What do you expect? I’m on board a prison ship in the middle of space knowing everybody thinks I’m dead and then you turn up. I’m sorry mum but you’re the last person I expected to see here and you’re wearing a white jumpsuit.”

“Well you can thank your lucky stars that I am here to rescue you.”

“I’m probably dreaming this, but I don’t understand how you got here.”

“Simon came to see me to tell me about your death but I told him I wasn’t having it and demanded to see the onboard footage from the other two ships. I had a sneaky suspicion about the freighter that you were trying to shunt.”

“Mum. How do you know all this stuff?”

“Ah, you remember how your dad and I drilled it into you about not lying?”

Yes, why?”

“That was so you wouldn’t end up like us. We might not have been wholly honest with you son. Your dad and I didn’t meet whilst we were at university that was a cover story.”

“So what really happened?”

“We both graduated with physics degrees but we didn’t know each other. We didn’t meet until Simon had recruited us. We met on the station.”

“You and dad were on the station? No way.”

“You don’t really think your dad spent all those years working abroad?”

“Of course I did because that’s what you told me.”

“Your dad worked on Earth Station Three. We both did but when I became pregnant, with you, I had to give up my job there. Your dad continued to work up until his death.”

“So how did he die if he didn’t die in Saudi Arabia?”

“This is the interesting bit. He was on patrol when he was asked to move a small freighter. As it was small he volunteered to move it by himself. He flew along the hull and as he was about to go underneath a missile was fired that hit your dad’s ship. When all the flames died down the only thing remaining was the casing of his Quantum Singularity Drive. It was assumed that the cockpit and connecting tube had been vaporised killing your dad.”

“But that’s what happened to me!”

“I know. When Simon came round to tell me the circumstances of your death I couldn’t believe what I was hearing and I couldn’t believe exactly the same accident could happen to two people even if there is a fifteen year gap between the accidents. I made Simon take me to the station so I could look at the footage. If you play back the footage from Peter’s ship very slowly you can see that although the mid section is vaporised the cockpit of your ship isn’t vaporised but is severed and blown toward this freighter. I borrowed the shuttle to come and get you.”

“How did you get past the missile?”

“That’s easy. The missile seems to be designed for ships that don’t move because everybody assumes their ship is indestructible. It’s really easy to outmanoeuvre.”

“So there’s a shuttle in the bay?”

“Yes and we can go home.”

“Thank God for that. Erm you are real aren’t you and this isn’t just another lie, is it?”

“You must have felt that I am absolutely real. Would you like me to hit you again to prove it?”

“No thanks, I think I’ll take your word for it.”

“Oh well! But there is something else.”

“What mum?”

“The bigger picture.”

“I don’t get it. What do you mean?”

“You had an accident and everybody thought you were dead.”

“Yes.”

“Fifteen years ago, your dad had the same accident with an identical missile and freighter.”

“So everybody thought dad was dead. Dad’s still alive!”

“Don’t jump the gun yet Roy we don’t know what this freighter actually does.”

“I do, Adams told me. It travels the galaxy looking for specimens for a zoo.”

“That’s terrible.”

“I know. I was dreading being the monkey exhibit.”

“Free food for the rest of your life and you’d be the centre of attention, there’s always an upside.”

Mustering my full gamut of sarcasm I responded, “Gee thanks mum. I hadn’t considered there being any beneficial side!”

“However, we still don’t know where this freighter is going to go.”

“Can we leave some sort of tracking device? Adams?”

“Yes Roy?”

“Do we have some sort of device we can leave here or stick to the hull that will track this ship?”

Adams popped a panel open. “You will have to apply it to the outside hull of the ship because there is some sort of jamming device inside this ship which is why I cannot communicate with the station. I suggest sticking it to the back of the freighter because there will be less interference.”

“How can we do that?” asked my mum.

“Place it in the shuttle’s waste disposal. I can eject it into space and momentum should do the rest.”

“It could be weeks before we get any information back,” commented my mum.

“I think it will be more like months mum.”

“It could even be years,” added Adams.

“Come on Roy, let’s go home.”

I stood up, walked over to the panel that had opened, grabbed a small black box and walked back to my mum.

“Do you need a hand getting down mum?”

“I think I can manage, after all according to you I’m not some decrepit old granny.”

I jumped off the edge of my cockpit and saw the shuttle parked next to us. It was a sight for sore eyes and a great relief. I could feel the tension leave my body as I realised I was going home. My mum sat on the edge of my cockpit and shuffled her way to the floor. We entered the shuttle and the hatch closed behind us. I sat in the pilot’s seat and was about to buckle up when my mum tapped me on the shoulder.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she asked.

“I’m going to take us home.”

“I think you’ll find I’m the pilot of this ship and you’re the passenger, shift it!”

“But mum I’m a good pilot.”

“I’ve seen what’s left of your ship and the evidence suggests otherwise, now budge over.”

“But that wasn’t my fault.”

“I was flying ships when you were a twinkle in your father’s eye. Now move because you’re not too old to go over my knee.”

I got up and my mum took the pilot’s seat and I sat in the passenger’s chair behind her.

“Computer?” asked my mum.

“Yes Margaret?”

“Take us out of here and manoeuvre to the back of the freighter. If we get any missiles I want you to keep one hundred meters in front of it for ten kilometres and then I want you to turn and Hyper Travel as close to the back of the ship as possible.”

The ship reversed through the plasma glass and out of the freighter. It quickly made its way to the back of the ship.

“Computer can you open the waste disposal?”

“Yes Margaret.”

A small lid popped up on the floor close to where my mother was sat. I got up and dropped the black box into the hole.

“Computer,” commanded my mother again, “align the ship so when the waste disposal is ejected the contents will connect with the back of the ship.”

“Yes Margaret.”

The ship moved slightly to the left and there was a quiet hiss. We watched the box for a few seconds as it drifted toward the hull but we were interrupted by my mum’s computer.

“We have incoming, collision in ten seconds. Do you want me to outrun it?”

“No, I want you to turn and Hyper Travel straight to the station.”

The ship quickly turned through one hundred and eighty degrees and all the screens went black for a second apart from the front screen which had a pixelated view of the outside.

Chapter 17 - Back to the Station

The sight of the station was something I thought I would never see again and I couldn't wait to see all my friends. Mum ordered her computer to take the shuttle to the shuttle bay rather than the hanger bay.

"Why not the hanger?" I asked.

"You have to see Doctor Philberts first for a check up."

"Oh, OK."

"Your Mac Viewer is a pretty nifty idea Roy. Well done, I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks mum but not as proud as I am of you for coming to rescue me."

"I had to fight a few people off to come and get you. I insisted it would be me but there were so many that wanted to do it. You're quite a popular person with more friends than you know."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. Claire obviously wanted to come and get you and so did a lot of others like Simon, Peter, Amelia and your ground crew. There was even a barman and a hairdresser and they can't even fly."

I chuckled "That will be Russell and Gary."

"Claire is such a beautiful girl. You're a very lucky boy so I also had a word with Claire and told her you wanted to marry her."

"Mum! You can do things like that."

"She seemed quite happy about the situation."

"She's probably totally embarrassed. She's hardly likely to tell you that she's not interested because she's been put on the spot. You've got to stop doing things like that because she'll end up dumping me because I have a pushy mother."

"I think you're afraid of commitment. I spent a couple of days with Claire and you are a very lucky person. You need to get a ring on her finger as soon as you can because you won't meet anybody like her again."

"Roy." Interrupted Adams.

"Yes Adams."

"All contact with the tracking device has ceased. The freighter has obviously entered Hyper Travel."

"Will you tell me when it makes contact again?"

"No problem Roy."

The shuttle went through the plasma glass, settled on the bay floor and the hatch close to where I was sat opened.

"Come on Roy," said my mum, "let's go and see Doctor Philberts."

*

When I entered the medical centre Claire was there.

"Roy!" She shouted and ran over to me to give me a big hug. I could feel the air being squeezed out of me and thought she was going to crush a few ribs. She eased off and then gave me a long kiss. When she stopped I could see a tear in her eye.

"I thought you were dead," she said.

"You can't get rid of me that easily."

"I'm so glad to see you again. Your mother was fantastic. She wouldn't give up. Simon said her evidence was very flimsy but she fought to get a shuttle to go and find you and we all volunteered to fly it."

"So I hear. Hang on, where's your jumpsuit?" Claire was wearing jeans with a pink blouse.

"We've made a few changes to the UK sector."

"Thank God for that. I cannot wait to get out of my jumpsuit."

"Well I like the jumpsuit," chipped in my mum, "I've always thought it looked futuristic and modern."

"You weren't by any chance on the station in nineteen sixty eight when the decision to wear jumpsuits was taken were you mum?" I asked.

"I may have been," answered my mum.

"Did you watch any science fiction films?"

"Well there was this one film that I must have seen ten times. We all did. It was the most popular film on the station at the time. Why?"

"Only asking."

I kissed Claire again and heard Doctor Philberts cough to get our attention.

"Mister McCormack, could you please come and sit here."

I sat in the chair he had pointed at and waited as he looked into a screen. After a minute he looked back at me.

"You're fine Mister McCormack. You will not need any reconstruction. You're a bit under nourished so I recommend a few pizzas and lagers."

"I'll have to pop over to Australia later."

"Come on Roy," interrupted Claire, "There's a reception in the main square for you. Everybody's there and it's like a big party for your return."

Claire grabbed hold of my hand and pulled me out of the chair. When I got up she linked arms with me and we walked out of the medical room followed by my mother. When we entered the corridor with all the pilot's apartments the colour scheme had been changed dramatically. All the doors were different colours and the buildings were all brick, like an English village. As we turned at the end of the corridor I could see that Sam's Bar had mock Tudor beams.

"This looks so much more homely."

"We really like it."

We started walking to the middle of the square where everybody had gathered. Rather than a sea of jumpsuits there were various types of clothing being worn. It was like walking through any town you would visit except for Doncaster because nobody was wearing a shell suit. I was greeted by warm smiles and slowly pushed towards the bar area.

"Nice shirt Gary. Love the pink colour and the frills down the front."

"Ooh thanks Roy. I have another if you'd like to borrow it."

"I'm good thank you Gary. Are those chaps you're wearing?"

I was pushed forward again and when I got to the bar I saw that Russell was serving.

"Welcome back Roy. What would you like to drink?"

"Vodka and coke hold the vodka?"

"How about a lager?"

“Lager?”

“Yes, real full fat lager.”

“No way.”

Russell started pouring me a pint of cold lager.

“We are now serving alcohol like all the other sectors.”

“I still might want to get a Tooheys and a Chinese every now and again but a good English lager will do me nicely right now.”

When he finished he handed it over and I held it up to the light to admire its golden hue.

“Ladies and gentlemen.” Shouted the familiar voice of Simon. “Ladies and gentlemen, can we have a few seconds of silence for a toast from Roy. Roy the stage is all yours.”

I held my pint up high “Here’s to my mum for rescuing me, here’s to my dad where ever you are and here’s to all my friends.” I took a sip of lager and Claire squeezed me and gave me a kiss on the cheek. I was home.

That night I had the first of a series of disturbing dreams about being stranded on a desert planet.

The End

What’s the story behind Roy’s father? What happened to Doctor D’Eath? Is ‘The Kidz Alright’ really the worst band in the galaxy? Who are the aliens Doctor D’Eath has been dealing with?

Find out most of these answers in the amazing sequel - The Rings of Uranus! Only most of the answers? Yes, because the comic masterpiece Inside Uranus will finish the saga (probably).

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