

DISHELLUTION PROTOCOL

By Egg J. Barner

Chapter 1

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DISHELLUTION PROTOCOL

Egg. J. BARNER

PROLOGUE

*NATIONAL GRAVITY LABORATORY
NEW WASHINGTON SPACE STATION
REPUBLIC OF THE ALLIED NATIONS
EARLIER THIS MORNING*

THE digital alarm clock on her desk blinked.
3:08 AM. 3:08 AM. 3:08 AM. Unrelenting.

She'd been sitting in her office for the past four hours. Late night work wasn't uncommon in the laboratory; indeed, she'd passed two colleagues poring over scattered holographic notes upon arrival. Punching in, she'd explained that she was to look over the data one more time before she left for sabbatical (this was followed by nods of

tired understanding). It was sure to become the first lie of many.

She knew what she had to do. At first, she'd only been waiting for her colleagues to leave. The last had left an hour ago. Now, she was frozen from the anticipation; the calm before the storm.

Heart pounding, she broke the inertia of stillness and waved her hand to activate her computer. The holographic screen arose, displaying a keypad and inquiring her ID number. She punched in 12 numbers, and the screen welcomed her with the name she would never use again after tonight. One eye retina scan and three security questions later, she was navigating through dozens of documents with the familiarity that comes with researching one thing for 13 years straight.

Gravity. The only thing Earth had over the entirety of the space stations and colonies in all of the Human Republics. Taken for granted by

Earthlings, yet a priceless commodity in space. Until now.

She'd only wanted to help people. Her whole career, starting from undergraduate research all the way to Head of Laboratory: it had all been in pursuit of recreating gravity for the good of humanity. Not the faulty replacement used on space stations and cruisers, but the real thing.

There was no point mourning it now; indeed, she knew what she had to do. What she had a moral obligation to do. She could not allow Dissolution Protocol to be executed.

Tap, tap, slide. Click. She inserted the USB drive into the computer hardware. An ancient technology, over 100 years old, but practically the holy grail in the age of holograms. One by one, every document, every copy, every last line of data, copied over to the USB drive and wiped from the laboratory system. The brilliance of administrative access allowed her to hunt down every copy her colleagues had ever made and remove them too. There was still the problem of

Ouranos, but that would be dealt with later. This would do, for now.

She grabbed the USB drive and yanked it out of the computer, heart stopping. Would it really work?

Perusing the database, she confirmed it. It was all gone. Every document, every copy, gone. Sure, there were dozens of links and references out there, but without a document to link to, they were useless. She'd done it; with her original notes, equations, and data erased, the rest of the lab would be reliant on memory alone, and in the age of holograms at the tip of your finger—an extension of one's brain, readily accessible at any moment—who needed memory?

No, surely no one could recreate it all from memory. And that meant no one else would manage to solve the final problem: gravity.

She turned the USB drive over in her palm. Destroy it, or keep it? Despite coming up with the equations, she didn't necessarily remember

them all. She could recreate them, probably, if she kept the data and her notes. Should she recreate them at all, though?

She slid the USB drive into her pocket. She didn't need to make that decision now. Now, she had exactly one thing left to do.

Run.

H. J. BARNER

PART I:

THE EARTHLING

CHAPTER 1

EGGEREST

*NORTH EMELIUS OUTPOST, ARTHUR-E STAR SYSTEM
REPUBLIC OF THE ALLIED NATIONS
PRESENT DAY: A TUESDAY EVENING IN SEPTEMBER*

“DUDE, I literally turned 30 a week ago. I’m not that old!”

“Sounds like something a grandma would say,” came Dorian’s reply.

“You do realize that Eggerest and Eridan are two years younger than me, right? If I’m grandma, what are they?”

There was a moment of pause. Then, “Mom and Dad?”

“Absolutely not,” Eggerest clucked as she completed her ascent to the upper level of the cargo ship, where her three crew members currently lounged. Eridan, sitting on the couch of the living quarters as he observed the interaction, burst out into laughter. In the background, the holographic television screen displayed reporters covering yet another ‘incident’ on Earth.

“Can we fire him already, please?” The freshly 30-year-old Zeya’s brown eyes met Eggerest’s from where she leaned against the wall with crossed arms. She wore a lavender t-shirt under gray overalls from which a wrench peaked out of her pocket. Her feathers were a light brown, and she fidgeted with a piece of rope that she liked to tie in various knots.

“Yeah, but if we fire emo boy, who’s gonna cook for us on our long voyages?” Eggerest replied.

Dorian, currently packing away groceries for their upcoming trip to St. George, nodded sagely. “Exactly. You’d think being a grandma would come along with at least some cooking abilities, but alas...”

“I hate children,” Zeya sighed.

“Zeya, wanna check in with Vic on the repairs?” Eggerest asked, taking a seat on a stool around the kitchen island.

“Excellent idea,” Zeya clucked, glaring at Dorian and walking over to the hatch to the lower level, where the docking bay doors were open to the interior of the repair shop they had presently parked in.

“You sure your bones can handle ladders these days? It might be time for us to build grandma an elevator.”

“Hilarious,” Zeya replied.

Once Zeya had departed, Eggerest turned to the ship’s electrician and de facto chef, now securing the kitchen cabinets for the upcoming flight that evening.

“Everything in order?” She asked.

“Yes ma’am,” Dorian clucked, turning around. Freckles decorated his light feathers, and he flashed a charming smile as he gave her a mock salute. The youngest crew member at 22 years old, his blond hair was styled in the carefully constructed, “casual” side sweep many youths did nowadays, following suit in some musician Eggerest had seen a lot of but couldn’t name. “We’re fully stocked for the voyage there. I might grab a few extra snacks from Cairo’s when we refuel in Newash, but otherwise, we’re set!”

“Great work,” Eggerest smiled. “Electric systems all in check?”

“Well, as much as they can be,” Dorian shrugged, leaning against the kitchen island. “The gravity regulators are still a little worn out and I’m worried something might blow on the voyage, but fixing that’s gonna cost us more than I think we can afford right now.”

She nodded, repressing a sigh. “Fair enough. Maybe when we get back, we’ll have enough funds for that.”

She wanted to believe it was actually feasible, but with fuel prices these days, she wasn’t sure they’d even be able to pay back Victoria for the repairs.

Dorian nodded. “Yeah. Just make sure to secure everything fragile or dangerous before we depart.”

Eggerest turned and walked over to the living area, where a sofa, two chairs, and a coffee table had been bolted to the steel floor. On the sofa sat her husband Eridan, a man who looked like

he'd walked straight out of a vintage 120's TV show—oversized blue sweater, black leather pants adorned with chains and studs, silver facial piercings, and bold eyeliner. Blue light shone on his pale feathers as he sketched on a clear tablet made of resin. They were all the rage these days—completely transparent so that you could see all the circuitry on the insides. Eggerest found it uncanny; she preferred the sleek elegance of traditional, *opaque* tablets.

Opposite the sofa, a reporter on the holographic TV droned on about some catastrophe on Earth; 14 dead, 19 hospitalized, dozens left scarred for life. It was practically a daily occurrence at this point—the people of Earth were so disorganized it was a wonder, Eggerest thought, that they still held autonomy over the planet.

"Isn't it just awful?" Eridan frowned, messing with his curly brown hair in one hand as he

gazed at the screen. Video footage of polluted land and smoking rubble was narrated over by a reporter describing the details of a bombing that had taken place in downtown Earth City.

“Yeah,” Eggerest clucked, taking a seat beside him. She never understood why Eridan paid attention to the news so much when all it did was add more negativity to life.

“You ever think it’s weird how, like, we’re so far away from Earth, nobody has lived there for almost 200 years now, and yet, we still use the calendar, day and night cycle, all of it, to match *their Sun*, rather than the ones in our own respective star systems?”

“No, not really,” Eggerest blinked. “I mean... it just makes sense. We need to have some standardized method of time-keeping across the galaxy. It would be mayhem otherwise.”

The news report switched to street footage of a dusty, burnt teddy bear lying among smoldering ruins.

“Let’s switch to another channel,” she clucked quietly.

“Good idea,” Dorian chimed in from where he leaned against the island in the kitchen. “I have enough problems without having to worry about stuff happening 10 light years away.”

Taking the thin remote, Eggerest flipped through the channels. A sports game. Reporters analyzing Prime Minister Cymbeline Bennett’s speech yesterday. Some celebrity interview. A reality TV show.

“Wait, go back!” Dorian clucked, plopping down on the couch.

Eggerest flipped back to the celebrity interview. Lo and behold—the musician guy with the hairstyle Dorian and not-so-subtly

taken inspiration from. As Dorian and Eridan turned their attention to the TV, footsteps sounded from the level above.

“Eggerest? Vic wants to talk to you,” Zeya called down.

“Alright,” she called back, moving for the ladder. Before heading downstairs, she glanced back at Eridan. “*Eshgham*, the course is charted, right?”

“To Newash? Obviously,” the navigator replied. “Working on the one for St. George now!”

Exiting the ramp from the S.S. Obsidian Dawn, Eggerest blinked in the bright lights of Passarelli’s Repair Shop where Victoria, Zeya’s wife and the owner of the business, was inspecting an engine part. She was gesturing to it and discussing something with Zeya in Spanish, a language which despite 6 years of mandatory classes, Eggerest understood very

little of. In-ear automatic interpreters were so widespread nowadays that it really didn't matter.

"How's it coming along?" Eggerest asked, sliding her hands into her neon green jacket. Zeya waved to Victoria and headed back into the ship. Outside, the streets of North Emelius Outpost's lowest level were abuzz with evening festivities.

Victoria, brown hair tied back in a braid and overalls smudged with dirt and oil, looked up at Eggerest and grinned. "Great! Everything's back and running properly. Definitely do a check after you depart Newash, but you should be good to go!"

"Excellent," Eggerest clucked. "Zeya said you wanted to talk to me about something?"

Victoria looked around, then nodded. "Yes... let's take this to the back."

A potential client, then, Eggerest thought as she followed her into the shop interior, where dozens of ship parts hung from the walls and on tables. Victoria took out her keys and unlocked the door to the private quarters where she and Zeya lived together when Zeya wasn't on a job with the Obsidian Dawn. Their two German Shepherds, Churro and Cannoli, came running up to greet them, curiously sniffing Eggerest's black cargo pants.

Locking the door behind them, Victoria turned and explained. "Not cargo this time, but people. Two individuals on Newash are seeking covert passageway to St. George. It's an anthropologist researching something on Gaia-14 and her husband. But there's a catch. The husband is an Earthling. They want to maintain secrecy to avoid any trouble that might come along with someone like him traversing across the Republic. At least, that's what my source told me."

Eggerest digested this for a moment, giving Churro a scratch behind the ear. “An Earthling going all the way to St. George?”

“I know. Weird,” Victoria shrugged. “Can’t say I blame them, though. I can’t imagine the security trouble they’d run into, even if he is married to a Republic citizen.”

“I see,” Eggerest nodded, weighing the possibility. It wouldn’t be the first time they’d been hired to provide secret passageway to someone before. Those times had only been a voyage of a few days, though; St. George Space Station, on the very outskirts of ROTAN territory, was an 8-day trip from Newash. “I dunno, smuggling cargo is one thing when it’s an inanimate object. Not one but two people is a lot, though. And especially an Earthling... If we get caught, it’ll be really bad for everyone involved.”

“They’re paying 30,000 credits,” is all Victoria clucked.

Eggerest's eyebrows shot up. "You serious?"

"Yep."

With 30,000 credits, they could replace the finicky gravity regulator completely and still have plenty of credits to spare. Indeed, with fuel prices these days, Eggerest wasn't even sure if she could pay Victoria for the repairs in full...

"How much do we owe you?"

Victoria's hazel eyes met hers. "It came out to around 9,700. Look, Eggerest, don't worry about taking on a risk you're not willing to just for this, though. Pay what you can now, and you can pay the rest when you're back in town."

Eggerest sighed. She hated being in debt, especially to Victoria—business wasn't exactly booming for a spacecraft repair shop on the bottom level of North Emelius. Eggerest knew Victoria and Zeya barely got by as is.

“I appreciate it. We just have to get them to St. George though, right? Not back?”

“Correct.”

Eggerest thought about the odds for a moment.

“Tell them we’ll meet them in Newash,” she decided. “We’ll hear them out, then come to a decision as a crew if we want to take them on or not.”