Night and The Day

setup

“Time to get up Jakke! Rise and shine!” Jakke opened his eyes at the sound of his mother’s voice and looked around. Blackness. Slowly the surfaces surrounding him began to glow faintly. It was a soft, soothing glow designed specifically to ease the process of waking from longsleep. Jakke vaguely recalled programming the system to wake him with a recording of his mother calling those particular words. It was intended to bring him around quickly and yet keep him centered so he could get right to the business at hand.

He stretched his long body and, as he did, lifted himself completely off the surface he rested on. In the microgravity of deceleration, it didn’t take much to lift himself completely into the air. He looked around, gradually recalling where he was. It was a narrow tube about ten feet long and six feet wide, tapered at both ends. Presently it was featureless, except for the pale greenish glow that emanated subtly from its entire surface. It illuminated the cocoon to the point where one could see clearly but not quite make out true colors. The surface was soft to the touch, and warm. A pleasant smell like fresh cut flowers filled the air. Jakke knew the air had the additional benefit of being laced with pheromones designed to make the recovery from longsleep swift and painless.

Jakke put on his headbubble and evacuated his cockpit. He popped the hatch above where he sat and looked out at the Night. The Milky Way arched over him. To the right and left the constellations of old Earth still were visible in the blackness that surrounded him. Ahead, the two suns of Alpha Centauri burned in the ebony of space. Years before, as Kiriki Pod had approached the system, the two stars had been named for the Norse gods of wealth and fertility. After two centuries of travel, these twin jewels, yellow-white Frey and orange-tinted Freya, represented new and virtually unlimited opportunity. For Jakke, this sight was his first real glimpse of Day.

Gripping the handholds with the unconscious caution of one whose first exposure to space preceded his first memory, he moved out on to the nose of the ship. He trembled a little. Day had always been a topic from his studies, not a burning reality. As he looked out at the two stars for a moment it seemed he could feel their pull. Perched on the front of his Sundiver he suddenly felt vulnerable in a way he never had. Out among the stars, staring into the void, he was safe. Here he felt a presence.

He looked down at his arms floating absently at chest level. They glistened slightly with the reptilian texture of his spaceskin pullover. Something strange was happening to one side of them. A darkness like some disease had begun to cover the side nearest his chest. In fact there it was on his chest too. It made no sense. What could affect spaceskin like that?

Shadow! That was it. He was seeing a shadow. Something encountered so normally inside seemed totally foreign out here in space. It didn’t belong. He laughed at the rush of adrenaline and the elevated heart rate he now felt subsiding. He was scared of his own shadow! Hadn’t he heard that phrase on some of the old recordings somewhere? Suddenly it took on new meaning.

He looked around. Out there among the stars his companions were also waking from longsleep. Millions of miles away, the nearest of them was not even a glint against the inky vastness. Out there somewhere Rheama was probably already awake, preparing her ship to take on all competitors.

He climbed back into the cockpit of the Sundiver. Having finished its job as a longsleep chamber, its pseudo organic surface melted around him forming a chamber more appropriate to the mission he would now begin. Instrument panels and readouts surrounded him. To succeed in the challenge that lay ahead, he would need all the information he could absorb, and he would need to get it quickly.

Jakke put on his eyepatches and powered them. The real sky he had seen in his jaunt outside had changed to a virtual display. Information here was warped into more useful patterns. Imposed upon the deep black of space, he could now see lines of magnetic force like waving strands of golden hair undulating all around him. Streams of solar wind flowed out from the twin suns like a sparkling cloud of diamonds. The ships of his fellow pilots were visible to him now. Enlarged enormously beyond the invisible dots they would be at this range, he could see that most had reeled in their magnetic deceleration loop and begun to unfurl their sunwings.

mission descrip

Ahead of them the Centauri system was unfolding itself like a giant slalom run. Given the leisureliness with which they seemed to be approaching the first target, it was hard to believe they were traveling at nearly six million miles and hour. They would need to shed that velocity rapidly as they bore down upon the more densely packed inner system. For crossing the vast gulf between stars such velocities were only worthy of the tortoise. Once entering a system, however, the tiny scout vessels turned into hares. Centuries had been required to reach this point. Now, the most important work would be accomplished in days.

The mission was simple. In a few months colonists from the various Clusters would be arriving in Centauri system. They would be needing a place to settle when they arrived. After much negotiation, it had been decided that the fairest way to divide up the prime locations for settlement would be to establish a system for making claims. In the final agreement it was decided each Cluster would be allowed a single Sundiver equipped with probes that would establish sovereignty over the various moons and asteroids within the system. Though ultimately the system contained far more material than they would probably ever need, the very best sites were likely to be scarce. It was the job of each Sundiver pilot to do well by his or her cluster.

Only a few hours ahead, the gas giant planet Behemoth lay in wait. Most of the planets of the system had been named for the gods of Norse mythology. Behemoth was an exception. Ten times larger than Jupiter, the Earth system giant, it was far enough out that its orbit surrounded both Centauri suns. To the Sundivers, it would perform the role of gatekeeper to the inner system. They would experience in their flyby of Behemoth the first unsimulated test of their tiny ships. In almost two centuries no one had actually flown this close to a real planet. The flyby would become the first test of the uncounted hours of sim training over the last three years. Jakke couldn’t wait to get to it.

As he looked around, the parade of Sundivers spread out across the virtual sky. All had begun the process of unwinding the long cables that connected two sunwing pods to each ship. The ships flew in a formation shaped like a series of six concentric hexagons. Superimposed on his view, an imaginary line ran through the center of the formation, past Behemoth, and straight on into the system. If they changed nothing, they would fly right through the system, passing through a point midway between the two stars ahead.

who is Rheama

Rheama was dead center in the formation, her ship drawing that imaginary line. It was a coveted position she had practiced long and hard to earn. Jakke was two rings out. If he decided to dive straight in, he would cut right through the green zone of Frey. The name “green zone” came from the idea that a world at that distance from its sun would receive about the same heat and light as old earth. Though it had been determined long ago that no such worlds existed around either of the dual suns of Alpha Centauri, a find at that distance would still be quite valuable.

As he watched the display, the sunwings of his rivals unfurled like colorful blossoms greeting the first day. Each pilot had picked a distinctive pattern and color. Many had eschewed the baseline wing shape for more fanciful designs. It didn’t matter all that much. Raw surface area was mostly what counted. Though her wingsail cables seemed somewhat long and slender, Rheama’s sails abstained from any deviation. They conformed absolutely to the best shape as determined by the simulators. Where she did allow herself fancy was in the illustration that adorned the gradually unfolding membranes. There was no mistaking the intricate black and orange patterns of the Monarch butterfly. Long exiled from the dead Earth to the greendomes of the Pod, here the Monarch would fly free once again in search of the nectar of Day.

jokes/team

A light on one of the displays came on and then a familiar voice inturrupted his thoughts.

“Jakke, you out there?” It was Mican, onetime roommate and Academy class clown.

“Right here Mican. How’d you sleep?” Jakke waited. Mican should be about 5 light minutes from him if that Calder-like splash of colors on the right was his set of wingsails.

Sure enough, about ten minutes later the response came back. “Great! But I feel like I haven’t eaten in months...Oh, my mistake. I haven’t.” He laughed loudly at his own joke. Jakke imagined Mican’s round bearded head cast back, his eyes closed, his large frame rippling with mirth.

“Sure Mican, like you were going to starve.” Jakke blanked out the long pauses in the conversation by busying himself with checking ship systems. It came as second nature to the inhabitants of the Pod, where long distances were a familiar feature of daily life.

Another ten minutes passed, then “Hey buddy, it takes a lot more to fire up the well oiled machine of this body than that scrawny beanpole thing you walk around in.”

“You two at it again?” This time it was Gia, the darkly quiet philosophical member of their corps. Jakke had been involved with her for a time early on in their training, but she had subsequently moved on to Jianna. Hearing from her now, Jakke realized he hadn’t really talked to her much in the last few training cycles.

“Gia, I like the bird on your sails, what is it?” asked Mican.

“It’s a Snow Eagle from Mannaki Cluster. I spent some time down there a few years ago. They have a huge greendome with thousands of exotic birds. I thought the white of the eagle face would show nicely in the light...maybe scare off a few of you predators.”

“Not likely if I see a nice rock for the plucking. You know the rule, touch first, you keep. Think a little birdy’s going to scare me off?” Mican shot back.

Jakke listened in on the common band as his fellow cadets continued to unfurl their wingsails and banter about their upcoming task. The chatter could be a bit confusing at times, spread as they were across two light hours of space. Sometimes it even seemed as if someone was answering a question before being asked. It was an illusion, of course, but it made the discussions hard to follow. Soon it would cease as they dove deeper into the Centuari gravity well. It would take sharp and undistracted senses to detect the prey they sought.

research

In that regard, Jakke figured he had a leg up on the rest, even Rheama. A few months before, while laying out his course, he’d come across some valuable information. What he’d found wasn’t exactly hidden, it was just that no one seemed to be looking for it. The data was too old. No doubt everyone presummed it to be obsolete. If what he suspected was true, however, Tabuni Cluster would have one more reason to be quite happy they had chosen him as their Sundiver.

The other reason was his piloting skills. No one had ever attempted anything like the fly through the Sundivers were now engaged in. Sims had been constructed based on data from Earth system, but Alpha Centauri was another matter. In many ways they would be covering dangerously new ground. The Centauri system was a double star. The cosmic dance of the two bodies made the orderliness of Earth system seem like a slow waltz. Centauri system’s movements were more like those of a dance troupe. Though every movement could be assumed to be choreographed according to some master plan, each new moment brought surprising combinations. Had they been expecting to find an earth-like planet, they would have been naive. Caught amidst the constant jousting of the two stars, no planet could possibly remain in the green zone of either star for long.

Luckily such things were not high on the agenda of humans adapted to life in the cold Night regions between the stars. Residents of the Pod had their frame of reference formed in a society that sent explorers on eight year expeditions to find a single comet. To them, the massive asteroid belts left by such turmoil were a source of usable material beyond their wildest imaginings. Such material could be used to produce everything from habitats to greendomes. From the picture that continued to form of Centauri system, a new human Renaissance appeared on the horizon.

Rheama/T.L flashback

He noticed he hadn’t heard a peep from Rheama. This fraternization was probably beneath her. If he knew her, she was studying every mote of incoming data, sparse as it was at the moment, for a clue as to the locations of the best planetoids and asteroid fields. She had always been competitive, even when they were children.

From the age of five, Rheama had been his best friend. The economics of Pod life dictated one child per person. Some couples formed long term bonding pairs and thus siblings were not unknown, but most people held to the long Pod tradition of individual reliance, and this meant raising a single child alone.

He recalled their experiences on the Tetherloop court back when he was twelve, before she had gone away. In particular, he remembered the first time she had played on his team. She was a year younger and joined the school team after he had been on it for quite some time. He had always been good at the sport, stemming perhaps from growing up out among the Clusters where complicated zero gee maneuvers were part of life from an early age. The city kids at the learning center didn’t get as much practice.

That day, he lay on a bench in the vestibule, just outside the changing rooms of the Tetherloop court. He wondered if he would ever catch his breath again. Between the gasps, however, a smile was irrepressible. They had won! Finally, his team had won.

In his mind there were no doubts, a good piece for their success could be attributed to Rheama finally sharing the forecourt with him. For once he had someone at his side who could maneuver in zero gee as effortlessly as he could. Since she had joined the team a month before, she had quickly moved her position forward toward the center of the action. Today she had played upper center, and that had made the difference.

“Jakke? What are you laying on the ground for? They want us outside right now.”

He looked up. Rheama, stood there in her tethersuit, her gripstraps still connected.

“Oh, hi Rheam. Who wants us where?”

“The team, the coach. You know, everybody. You’re supposed to celebrate when you win silly, not just head for the showers.”

“Rheam? What’s that above your eye?”

“Huh?” She wiped her forehead above the left eyebrow, then looked at her hand. “Blood. Why?”

“What happened?”

“Nothing. Just scraped my head on the goal when I booted you the ball. You were probably too occupied with winning the game to notice.”

She must have seen the look of embarrassment creep over his face, because she smiled suddenly and pulled him to his feet. “Hey, I’m kidding. It’s all part of winning. Don’t you have any battle scars?”

Before he could answer, she had whisked him off to the reception room where most of the team had gathered. A cheer rose as they walked toward the rest of the team and the small circle of remaining spectators.

She turned to him and whispered conspiratorially. “Not a bad entrance. We make a good team, don’t we?”

“We always have,” he said, not realizing how soon that would come to an end. Within the year, her father had announced he’d gotten the rare opportunity to captain a comet catch. He wanted his daughter to come with him. Jakke had taken the announcement hard.

“But Rheam, it takes six to eight years to pick up a comet! What about being a pilot? What about the colonization? Are you giving all that up?”

“Of course not. I’ll miss you Jakke. But don’t worry, I’ll be back a long time before we get to Alpha Centauri. And my father says piloting the comet tug is the best practice I can get. I’m really excited about it.”

“But Rheama, I ... I thought we were going to the finals this year. You can’t let the team down this way.”

Even now, he could still recall the way she had looked at him. He could see her face, firm but sympathetic. It betrayed a wisdom that went well beyond her eleven years. She had known that the team and finals had little to do with this conversation. She was betraying a friend, and things would never be quite the same.

Transition

Fifteen years later, it was the image of her coming to retrieve him that day that stuck with him. He remembered her long black braid draped gracefully over her shoulder. Her round face and large brown eyes looking sadly into his. But the thing he remembered most was the cut above her left eye. Somehow the blood symbolized for him what she was about. She had a certain natural toughness about her and he had always felt protected by it. Now she was going away and taking it with her. Years later the betrayal that twelve year old boy had felt was still with him.

After R. Returns

When Rheama and her father had returned from the expedition, wealthy from the sale of cometary materials, they had moved immediately to Centrix city. To Jakke, this seemed to be the point at which she had changed. Of course, he reminded himself, spending her young adulthood among a small band of comet prospectors with only sporadic electronic communication with the rest of Pod society might have had an effect as well.

Still, he did not trust city-folk. If he were to leave the slower pace of life in the cluster, to leave his beloved Night, it would not be for an overcrowded, hectic life in Centrix with its fake microsuns, it would be for the real thing. Only the real Day was as honest as the Night.

Growing up, he loved to hear the stories of the early explorers of Earth system. Living on a planet, they had been creatures of both day and night. But once they left the cradle of earth, they had moved into a world of constant Day, the real day of a real star. He had often spent the time just before sleep gazing back at the sun of old earth. It was still the brightest star in that direction, though for many decades now it had only the brilliance of an average star. In his imagination, however, it appeared as a yellow ball of molten hydrogen roiling with an untamed energy that would put any human attempt at mimicry to shame.

Jakke recalled sitting on the front stoop of his mother’s domicile, his feet hanging down toward infinity. As a child he loved to linger there until his mother called him to bed. He’d watch the stars wheel slowly overhead as the residence turned. By age ten he knew all the old constellations of his eathly heritage. He’d even made up a few of his own. He wondered sometimes why the ancients had chosen only the very brightest stars to draw their pictures in the sky. Perhaps somehow the existance of Day had hidden all but these from them. How sad it must have been to gaze out at the sky and see only a few thousand stars.

Pod cities were simultaneously the oldest and newest regions of development. On the one hand, the cores of population centers like Centrix were composed of the old asteroid ships that had once swarmed away from the mother sun of earth in search of a new home. On the other, newer constructions had been added to this jumble as the population had increased over time. The result looked more like an exploded pile of junk than an important center of Pod commerce. Forming a shifting constellation of assorted shapes, structures floated randomly around a common center. Embedded within the jumble were the brightly glowing microsuns that were the hallmark of city life. Extending the veneer of Day from their incandescent surfaces they provided a weak approximation of the life that had been abandoned long ago.

In Jakke’s opinion, the authentic Pod lifestyle existed in the Clusters. Since it’s discovery a century and a half before, spaceweed had changed Pod life enormously. Created by some unknown species of alien, the first spaceweeds had been found quite by chance. It was obvious they were not a natural form of life adapted to space right from the beginning. They were just too useful. Looking like large spinning trees, they provided shelter within their massive trunks. To create more Clusters, it was only necessary to “feed” a comet to a spaceweed Mother. Within a few years a swarm of adolescent spaceweeds would grow up alongside the Mother. Together with the remnants of the disassembled comet, they would drift through the interstellar Night like a pod of whales from old Earth. Whoever the Others -- as the spaceweed creators became known -- were, they must have been marvelous genetic engineers.

Life in the Clusters was quite different from that in the city. For one thing, spaceweed Mothers shied away from the light taking their families of stalklings with them. Though the wealthier Clusters could probably afford the luxury of a microsun or two, the exercise became pointless when, after a few weeks, the majority of the local housing had taken it upon itself to leave the neighborhood. Residents of those towns that insisted on separating themselves from the Night were continuously forced to prune the dragsails from their itinerant habitats to keep them from moving away. It was either that or settle for life in expensively constructed artificial habitats, an option only available to those without great wealth in the densely populated cities.

So life in the Pod tended to develop in two directions. The cities, with their swarms of citizens involved in industry, academics, or cultural pursuits, bustled constantly under the light of an ersatz Day. The clusters, like the herds of spaceweed that formed their core, glided silently throughout the Night. The bulk of food production occurred in hydroponic gardens tucked within the cavernous interiors of the larger spaceweeds. Those of modest means could also find a home there. After all, whoever the Others were, they had designed spaceweeds to supply almost every need. Humans were forced to finesse the situation a bit to provide for their alien biology. Nonetheless, the testament to human dependence on these alien beasts of burden was the fact that a century and a half after the discovery of spaceweed, three quarters of the Pod’s population now lived in the Clusters.

The two cultures were often suspicious of each other, though the rivalries rarely broke out into violence. Still, Jakke hated to see Rheama move from her home in Tabuni Cluster. And yet, if she hadn’t, he knew deep down that if she hadn’t gone off to Centrix city, she would by representing Tabuni Cluster rather than he. She was a hot shot pilot, and though he was good, she had always had the edge.

Behemoth approach/accident

As the massive striped orb of Behemoth grew before him, Jakke chose a few good candidates for colonization from among its closest moons. He sent off a some of his probes. In short order he detected flashes of light from the impacting probes. Throughout the system of moons, probes from the passing fleet of Sundivers found their marks and destroyed themselves against the frozen rocky surfaces. The impacts served two purposes, to establish each Cluster’s claim, and to report back the likely compostion of raw materials that would be available at each site. In reality he doubted that anyone would settle this far out, at least in the early years. The Behemoth claims were more of a test. Soon the real contest would begin.

As he worked, Jakke noticed Jarak of Raitan Cluster seemed to be pulling out of formation. He appeared to be trying a new strategy already. Rather than enter the competition to claim any of Behemoth’s moons for his cluster, he appeared to have something else in mind. What could he be up to?

He could ask Jarak himself, but by now he was so far away, the answer would be long in coming. Besides, he might not want to talk about what he was doing, though that seemed silly, since Jakke was beyond the point of challenging his claim in any way. Still, the information might be useful later on.

Jakke frowned slightly. There was one obvious person to ask who might know what Jarak was up to. He sighed and punched open a channel.

“Rheama, come in Rheama...any idea what your buddy Jarak is up to?”

A few minutes later Rheama’s face and shoulders appeared before him. This was going to be a personal call, not just a quick shout back.

“Jakke, I’m surprised at you. I actually thought you might try something similar. He’s headed for Behemoth’s trojan asteroids. You’ve got to give him credit for originality.”

Her tone made him almost regret asking, but it was a clever idea. No one had really been expected to break formation until the time came to decide between the two suns. By targeting the trojans he would likely have them all to himself.

That settled, Jakke returned to his work. If he was going to pull off the maneuver he anticipated, he’d need a little time to prepare. Suddenly he saw a larger than normal flash coming from the direction of the trojans. What the hell was that? A few minutes later it became obvious.

A cacophony of different voices began to descend on him from across the common band. “Shit!...did you hear...I was just talking to him...Jarak!...but how???...just disappe...Janna, how did you...Jarak! ...”

He switched off the channel and sat silently for a moment. Then he re-established the private connection to Rheama. This was not the time for pettiness.

“Hey Rheam. I’m sorry. He was a friend of yours, wasn’t he? I don’t quite get it. What happened?”

“Jakke?” He could see that she was visibly shaken. Perhaps he had been more than just a friend. “I...I guess he just hit something. I mean I don’t get it. The sims indicated the odds of something like this happening were astronomically remote. Do you suppose he had a malfunction in his deflection system?”

“No...I mean it’s possible, but it didn’t look that way...I just think it might be we may trust our sims a little too much. Sure, they’re based on the best data we could put together, but sometimes Academy didn’t seem to realize that stuff has limits. Out in the boonies where I’m from we never had the sims. We just had to be careful. I always felt Academy too often took a high tech city approach to things.”

“Jakke, don’t you realize someone just died? I don’t think this is the time to bring up your complaints about Academy’s way of doing things.”

He had realized that sounded wrong as it came out. Being from the city, he sould have anticipated she would be more protective of Academy’s method.

“Yes, I do. And I don’t want to see another, like you, for instance. Just be careful, okay?”

“Look, you fly your ship, and I’ll fly mine. You know you don’t have any way of knowing it wasn’t a malfunction.” She cut the channel at that point.

Well, that could have gone better. He thought about what he’d said. It could have been more tactful in light of what had just occurred, but he’d seen the way she was maneuvering. She seemed experienced at this. And that was impossible. No one had ever done what they were doing. Sure, she had more piloting time under her belt than he probably ever would, but piloting a Sundiver was different. She had to have been practicing exactly what she was going to do for months. And that meant thousands of hours in a sim.

Then he caught himself. Why was he agrivating himself? It was her life to throw away if she wished. She was supposed to be his greatest rival. Well, rival, yes. But he also realized he’d been feeling something he hadn’t felt in a long time. The image of a twelve year old girl holding a Tetherloop ball, gripstraps trailing behind her as she walked toward him came to his mind again. Above her eye left a tiny smear of blood could be seen.

decision to go to F or F

Hours later, as they crossed the orbit of Woden, the innermost of the gas giant planets to orbit both stars. The time of decision had come. For the most part, the settlers would want to move into the area of the system where heat an light were plentiful. For Alpha Centauri, there were two such places, one around each of the component stars. The Sundivers would now have to choose a home.

Jakke chose Freya. More specifically, he set himself on a path that would bring him near Loki, a gas giant he suspected most of the others would overlook. It’s orbit put it on the boundry between the domains of the two suns setting it on a markedly unstable path. It tended to wander chaotically between the too systems like a drunken cue ball. With any luck, no one would suspect the secret it harbored.

Yet, if his suspicions paid off, this would be his legacy to Tabuni Cluster. If not, the choice of Freya would still be a reasonable one. From the long range reports he was getting, Freya seemed to have a number of large asteroids with relatively circular orbits in the green zone.

He looked to see what Rheama was doing. Too soon to tell. As he watched another ship made a maneuver that set it on course for Freya. It was Mican. Jakke smiled for two reasons. He liked Mican and would be glad to have him as a neighbor. Jakke was also a much better pilot. Mican would do well for his Cluster, but he wasn’t likely to take anything Jakke really wanted.

Suddenly Rheama angled toward Frey. She had decided on a sun to call home. The maneuver seemed a bit abrupt. He had been sure she was choosing Freya. But given her flashy piloting to date, it also seemed typical. Jakke sighed, one less person to guess his little secret. Still, he felt a strange empty feeling. As much as their rivalry had degenerated into bitterness over the last few years, he would miss seeing her around. He suspected that until the settlement was in full swing, tourism between the Frey and Freya systems would be sparse.

The time to act had finally come. He touched a panel and a special probe he’d had designed specially for this purpose shot off into the darkness.

Suddenly he saw a flash on the asteroid’s surface. That wasn’t possible. There had not been enough time.

“What the hell...”

Then Rheama’s voice came over the link. “Got it!”

A hollow feeling began to spread across his chest. She couldn’t have.

“Jakke? Sorry, Jak. I know you’re going to be disappointed by this, but we figured that one out awhile ago. At first the negotiators from Centrix wanted the whole Loki system designated as theirs before this contest even got off the ground. Then, when they saw how important it seemed to Tabuni to prevent pre-flight annexations they figured a procedural fight wasn’t something they could win. They got suspicious just the same. This seemed to be the only way. You’ve got to admit I gave you a fair shot at it.”

“Rheama! How could you?” Jakke slammed his fist into the side of the ship. He was angry, but he had to appreciate the work that had gone into finding them out. He counted his breaths for a few minutes, trying to get past this setback and focus on the road ahead. He couldn’t let her get to him.

He cut the link and tried to occupy himself with picking up a few well placed asteroids in the green zone. If what Rheama said reflected the sentiment in Centrix, he’d better watch out for some other tricks.

Suddenly, he got an idea. If Centrix was going to claim the water world, he would claim Loki’s trojans. If Tabuni Cluster couldn’t settle the water world, at least they could be it’s neighbors. Being it’s closest trading partner might not be a bad consolation prize.

After a few minutes he had plotted the necessary course and set off in that direction. Licking his wounds from the humiliation of having lost his biggest prize, he tried to console himself with the considerable claims he had made. Most of the other Sundivers had not fared as well.

Then he checked on Rheama’s position. If she was headed for Frey, she was taking an awfully odd path. He made a few calculations and quickly realized the truth. He thought again of the scar on her forehead. Half a system was not good enough. Realizing Jakke had the better angle on the trojans, she was going to try something even the sims couldn’t have anticipated.

Jakke felt his stomach knot. He was scared for her. That didn’t make sense. This was his big chance. Most likely the maneuver would fail and she would go spinning out toward the outer reaches of the system. She would be rescued a few years later having given up any opportunity to make any green zone claims. Or she might succeed. Then she’d have it all, the water world, the trojans, and a good portion of the green zone. Knowing Rheama, that’s what she’d want.

Or she could die. He felt sick. This wasn’t about rivalry or politics anymore.

“Rheama! Don’t do it!” He screamed into the sensor, violating any number of courtesy protocols.

“Rheama, look, I’ll pass it up. This is stupid. It’s just not worth the risk. You don’t need to beat me on this one. It’s yours.” Part of him couldn’t believe he was saying it. But he knew how he felt.

Then he noticed the time. She would initiate the maneuver in ten minutes. She was eleven light minutes away. All he could do was stare as the drama unfolded before him.

Twenty-two minutes. Rheama’s face appeared before him.

“Jakke. I didn’t know you cared.” A bright smile stretched across her face. “Don’t worry, I practiced this a thousand times just in case something like this should happen. You want me to win fair and square don’t you?”

Jakke watched as the sails of Rheama’s ship glowed red, then yellow, then white. The beautiful patterns of the Monarch faded to nothingness as the sails shed the energy from the deceleration.

He found himself holding his breath. In fifteen minutes the critical part would be over. He’d better breathe. Not only would he need the oxygen, he could focus on it and not on the fate of something beyond his control.

Ten minutes. He realized that for Rheama the results were already known. Only to him did the image linger.

The ship tilted as it pulled in close to the orange sun. In a minute he would lose her behind it. Then he noticed something odd. One wingsail seemed a bit further out than the other. Was this another trick? Was it an optical illusion? He touched the panel. In a moment what he thought he saw had been confirmed. Rheama’s port sail had somehow drifted backwards.

He didn’t have time to see any more because at that moment she passed out of his view behind Freya. A moment later she emerged. It was immediately obvious what had happened. The port wing was nowhere to be seen. Rheama’s ship had been dealt with like a moth that flies too close to a flame. One wing had snapped off entirely.

Jakke smiled. At least she was through and alive. She wouldn’t be completing her little maneuver with nothing to steer by.

“Rheama. Come in Rheama.” They had pulled closer now. It should only take her a few minutes to answer.

After a number of attempts and far too much time she replied. “Jakke? What happened? The suns don’t look right.”

She looked dazed. She *had* blacked out.

Before he could answer, she said, “I’ve lost a sail. Shit. I guess you win. Damn. I wanted to be around to greet the settlers. I guess I’m headed to the outback for a few years.”

She looked down toward where her waist faded to nothingness in his view. No doubt she was checking the instruments.

“Fuck!” She looked up at what he could only assume was the reciprocal projection of his face in front of her. “I never thought of that...”

Jakke felt a shot of adrenaline hit him. What was wrong? He didn’t wait for her elaboration. Taking some readings it was soon obvious to him what had frightened her. She confirmed it moments later.

“Jakke, the remaining sail...it’s steering me into Frey. Without the second wing I can’t maneuver. Or maybe I should say I can only maneuver one way, right down the throat of hellfire and damnation. Any suggestions.”

“Drop the sail.”

“Oh, good idea. And I suppose I should put out my hands to slow me down?”

Jakke realized immediately the flaw in his suggestion. Without the second braking maneuver she was still going far too fast. She not only wouldn’t be recovered for years, she would never be recovered. But if she continued to brake as she was she would be setting herself on a trajectory that passed closer and closer to Frey. Pretty soon she would be passing so close her ship would heat beyond any ability for it to cool itself. She wouldn’t hit the star, but it wouldn’t matter.

“Do it! It’s your only chance.”

“I beg to differ. It’s more like a choice of hells. Either I burn up and get it over with, or I use up my supplies and freeze slowly out in the depths of the Oort cloud. I’d rather get it over with.”

“But...”

“Look, I’m sorry for all the bad stuff that’s passed between us over the past few years. You know I still remember the time when we were 12...”

“Fine. Tell me later. Drop the damn sail...I’ll catch you!”

For once Rheama looked stunned. “What do you mean Jakke?”

“I mean I’ll catch you damn it! You’re not the only one who’s looked into Sundivers you know.”

“No. Absolutely not. You’ll lose everything. You can’t catch me at this velocity and ever get back yourself. Besides, I don’t recommend the maneuver. They need to tweak the simulation a bit I think.”

“Ha Ha. Look, I don’t need to push it to the limit like you did. I’m not trying to slow down that much. I just...”

“Besides Jakke, it’s already too late.”

He looked at the readings. She would already pass too close. He slumped back into his seat like an old man weary of life. Unexpectedly a tear welled up in his left eye. He swallowed hard.

Then a thought occurred to him. He didn’t have much time. He couldn’t wait the time lag for her reply, he had to convince her now.

“Rheama. Please. Drop your sail now. Don’t think about it. I know you trust me. I have an idea. At this point, if I’m wrong it won’t matter anyway. I’m going to follow through on this regardless, so you’d better damn well do what I say. Do it now!”

He waited, holding his breath. A few minutes later the sail broke away and accelerated rapidly outward from Frey, no longer constrained by the inertia of a mass thousands of times heavier. The tiny ship plied onward toward its date with the star.

“Okay, yes I trust you. I always have, you know. But what the hell are you thinking. If you just have some romantic idea of joining me in hell I’m going to find some way to kill you before the sun gets you.”

“Calm down. I have no intention of dying - or of watching you die. But I do have a strange request. In about ten minutes you’re going to need to get out of your ship.”

“You *are* crazy!”

“Listen, I only have a few minutes before I start braking heavily. I need to tell you this before I black out.” He could already feel the g forces building beyond the comfort level as his ship traced a path toward Frey. He would come close, but not so close as Rheama would. If all went well he would match speed and position with her on the other side of the arc.

“Rheama, I need you to get out of you ship and stay behind it as you pass by the sun. Your ship is going to melt, but as long as you don’t touch it, it should block all the sunlight. Of course that kind of heat isn’t going to do pretty things to your ship.”

“She was a beauty, wasn’t she?”

He was starting to feel the skin creep back on his face as the acceleration increased. He took off the eyepatches. He only had a few seconds more. “Yes she was, Rheam. Now remember...”

“Jakke, what if she burns through?” He could no longer speak to answer. Besides, he thought, the answer was obvious.

When Jakke came to, the twin suns of Alpha Centauri were receding behind him. He tried to collect his thoughts on what had just happened. Something about Rheama...he had told her he’d meet her...

He put the eyepatches back on. In front of him seemingly close enough to touch, a melted hulk of metal obscured a small patch of stars. It flipped end over end aimlessly having lost any ability to control itself. Next to it a smaller figure floated. It also rotated aimlessly as if dead. Rheama.

“Rheama!” No answer. Jakke pulled the headbubble over him and pressed the control to pop the hatch.

“Rheama!”

“Jakke?”

“Oh, my god, Rheama! Why didn’t you answer?”

“Jakke? What...oh...I just dropped my metabolism a bit, that’s all. You didn’t tell me how long you’d be...I’m sorry, am I babbling? You shouldn’t wake someone up from that that fast you know. Are you okay?”

“Of course I’m okay silly. You’re the one who made a date with a star.”

“Oh yeah.” There was a long pause. She still sounded vaguely sleepy or drugged. “Were you jealous?”

“Very. Look. It’s going to be a little tight around here for awhile. I’ve plotted a maneuver to link us up with a cluster of Oort miners in about three months. Meantime we’ve got the ship and the exercise bubble. I hope you like sleeping under the stars.”

“Yeah. You know, I think I’ve had my fill of the Day.” She said it with just enough emphasis that he could hear the capital ‘D.’

He looked at her face through the headbubble. He realized he hadn’t seen it for real in over two years. In a way he hadn’t looked at it this closely since they were teenagers. It still was beautiful.

“Rheam, did I ever tell you why I love the Night?”