

Amir squinted at his ship the Omega. The sun shone off the wing, colors overlapping like an oil spill. The brightness hurt. He swallowed feeling slightly nauseous. Today was the most important day of his life. He was launching his, and the world's, first starship.

Today, the ship would embark on its first flight, and he was to pilot it. Enough pressure to turn anyone's stomach. Of course, the hangover from shots of rum, the number of which was lost to, well, the rum, would turn anyone's stomach as well.

He tried reminding himself that nobody was really watching the launch, the real big cameras would come when he landed. It didn't help any. Furrowing his brow, Amir tried to recall the highlights of the previous night, if nothing else but to distract him from the podium his advisor was speaking about him on. The podium he'd soon be called onto.

He definitely remembered speaking to the University President early on. He remembered the President shaking his hand in congratulations, telling him he was proud of him. Amir had never met the President before, but he knew his achievement was in the University's name. He wasn't allowed to market his engine. At least they threw me a pre-launch party, he thought.

More vaguely, when he further strained his memory into the hazier points of the night, he remembered chatting up a girl he'd met in an art class. He distinctly remembered saying "You know I built a spaceship?"

He groaned and pushed the rest of the night away into the part of his brain that revisited such memories and replayed them whenever he couldn't sleep.

"And here comes the principal engineer and physicist, Amir Davidson!"

Amir stepped onto a raised platform next to a man in an impeccably fitting suit, in front of a small army of cameras. The man flashed the cameras a brilliant smile and pulled Amir closer by the shoulder, "Tell us Amir, how did you discover hyperspace?"

Super-relativistic speeds, Amir thought dully. He'd told everyone so, from the undergrads helping him for credit, to the professors who'd hoped to wheedle their way into potential publications on the project, and still the media deferred to old movie words.

It wasn't really faster than the speed of light, mostly he liked calling it that for the arguments it inspired. Usually, it would be physics undergrads online saying that 'super-relativistic' made no sense, then post grads telling them it did if you understood such things. It didn't, but he hadn't published the real method he used, so the arguments were entirely based on misinformation and ego.

For Amir, the discussion threads made for good entertainment after long hours of wrestling with the math concerned with how he'd actually move almost four and a half light-years in a few minutes, and without those threads he didn't think he'd have gotten through it.

"Uhh," he blinked rapidly and squinted in the face of flashing lenses. He had not prepared for the interview. He always told himself he was better off winging things like this. He was always wrong.

"I was messing with a model one day and uh," He blinked some more and scrunched his face up further, "It kind of jumped up to the moon and made a big crater," he gestured lamely, then tried to reach up and pull on his beard. He rubbed his hand on bristles and remembered he'd let his mom convince him to shave for this.

"Wow," the man said, determinedly pretending his interviewee was not struggling to look into the cameras, "and the design of the ship was a team effort?"

Amir felt he was being teed up to talk about the team members, "Yep, Melik and I have got a good team." He nodded, feeling and looking truly miserable.

The man paused hoping Amir would elaborate. "Incredible ship you've got there," the interviewer admitted when Amir didn't, and cast a glance back that took in zero percent of the technological wonder behind him.

Sensing more specific questions were forthcoming, he gave a vague gesture toward the ship and retreated into its shade.

"Let's give it up for team Omega," he heard the man say as he reached his ship, then a smattering of polite applause.

"Ready to go," His co-pilot reported, "same as last night." Melik reached up and fiddled with the feather dangling from his earring.

Amir thought Melik had done a much better job looking good for the cameras than he had. His afro was held back by a bandana and he had trimmed his beard so that only the two corners of his chin were long so he could dangle beads there. It had a nice eccentric but put together look that Amir couldn't accomplish without help.

Amir had gone with a simple black v-neck t-shirt that showed off his silver chain on his chest and just hinted at tattoos on his upper arm. Below that he had slim fitting black pants and a pair of black shoes. All black, a nice clean look he thought.

"You ready?" Melik asked, looking out toward the crowd.

Amir followed his eyes and spotted their families grouped together in the front row. Amir put his hand up in farewell. He sighed, "Hey man, I just work here," he allowed himself a small smile.

Melik chuckled, "Alright, let's go".

The murmurs of a million questions rose from the crowd as Amir tried to give them a more winning smile than he had given before. He gave a bared-toothed grimace, then gave up and entered the ship behind Melik.

The ship was roughly the size of a single-wide trailer, but conical rather than rectangular. It had two wings extending from either side, flat and rounded in the front in a half-circle shape, dark and metallic, colors prisms out to catch the sun's rays for power. The ramp led them right up into the cockpit, a seat for each of them. Amir took the captain's seat.

It was darker inside, and Amir's head decompressed a bit. He took a moment to gather himself, staring at the buttons, dials, and switches in front of him. I'm exploring the Universe, he

told himself, then took a deep breath and flipped a few switches. The ship came to life with flashing lights and an electronic hum. He flipped another switch and he felt the craft lift off the ground.

“Aaaaaand... Liftoff” Amir breathed.

The craft rose rocking back and forth, a feather floating up.

“Engines” Amir continued, pushing the throttle forward and easing the joystick back. The hum crackled into a roar. They ascended and turned their attention to the heavens. The sky out of the front window went from the light blue of the horizon to a speckled black star-scape. Both boys inhaled slowly, closing their eyes. They felt the buzz of the ship as it careened into the black.

Amir’s eyes snapped open, “Route set to Alpha Centauri?” He knew they were. He set that course a long time ago. Melik gave a confirming hum. Both boys took one last behind them at the Earth, through a window installed just for this reason. After a moment taking in the pale blue dot, they returned their attention forward.

“Hyperspace.” Amir gave the order softly, then added, “As soon as you feel like.” The corner of his mouth curled into a smile as Melik pushed the dials up.

Amir flinched, and in that second, the back of his head melted down his back as his eyes rolled around the ceiling of his skull.

Then, with a sudden pop, his extremities and features returned to where they belonged. Through the front window Amir looked out through what looked like a white and grey kaleidoscope.

He could feel excitement finally begin to mount. Here it was, something nobody had ever seen before.

Something cracked to their right. Amir’s head struck the wall, and the kaleidoscope that the world had become, and the ship around him, were snuffed out like a candle.

It is in the looking back that you gain ultimate perspective, however brief. There it is, everything that matters, viewed through a window. The edges of human history shining over the blackest of black nothing, that surrounds this beacon that holds us all.

And a shiver of hope, bright and warm like sunlight on the face as it returns from behind a cloud, shines back. The infinite possibility of the cosmos reveals itself around the blue green marble as the eyes adjust.

That infinity sparks and lights anew the inextinguishable fire that warms the hearth within all, that is curiosity.

Beep beep. Beep beep. Amir’s head felt like it had split in two.

“Subject has been cleared to exit his medical bay,” came a clear metallic voice in his ear.

Consciousness started to slowly seep back through Amir’s murky brain. He tried to open his eyes. It was difficult.

When he did, he found he was lying in a white bed with a breathing apparatus strapped around his head.

I don't have white sheets, he thought. Oh well, not the first time he'd woken up in the wrong bed with a throbbing headache.

"Subject has been cleared to exit his medical bay," the voice droned in the same calm metallic voice.

A sleep apnea machine and the metallic voices were both new.

Amir swung his legs to the side of the bed and stood. He blinked as he looked around. He became very aware of the breathing apparatus strapped tightly to his face and pulled it off.

He couldn't comprehend where he was so he decided not to try. He surveyed the room slowly. Beside his bed was a computer on a desk. The computer screen showed his vitals. Gibberish.

He told himself to remember to learn what those numbers meant someday so he would stop just nodding blankly when a nurse told him his blood pressure.

Waking up in a hospital. That was a first.

The border of a drawer under the computer lit up. Amir blinked at it, then pulled it open. His clothes were there. Amir realized he was naked, so he took them and put them on. He looked around the room for another moment trying to get his brain to process things a little faster.

The sound of decompressing air made Amir jump, and a door at the far end of the room slid open. In walked a man wearing a sparkly purple one-piece suit. Amir blinked at him nonplussed, glad he had just dressed.

"Smarten up, the cameras are ready!" He boomed genially. Amir blinked again and frowned. The sparkling man looked him up and down, "Good enough, now follow me!"

Reality hadn't quite seeped in for Amir, so he did as he was told. This was the correct move, there was nothing else to be done.

They stepped out into a narrow hallway with an elevator at the end, where the well-manicured hand of Amir's guide punched something complicated into the panel. They stepped in.

As the elevator moved up, then to the side, then up again, Amir's thoughts sludged around his brain like molasses.

"Where... Uh, where are we going?" He asked.

The man bounced on his toes excitedly, his jeweled shoes glittered in the dim elevator light, "To the stage!" He exclaimed grinning.

Amir's brow furrowed above his frown and he looked around the elevator. There wasn't much to look at.

The man bounced in silence, looking at the doorway rather than at Amir. Amir was glad of this. There was a ding and a hiss and the doors opened, and without further explanation, the

man in purple exited through the opening doors into another hallway, this one extending to double doors.

Amir again followed. They reached the doors, the sparkling man threw them open dramatically and gestured for Amir to enter ahead of him. He did as he was told and was immediately pulled to the side and sat in a chair where someone began tugging on his hair and sprayed it with water, then tugged harder.

“What do you think?” A voice asked, and he was spun to a mirror.

He heard the muffled sound of a crowd roaring and a magnified voice swelling with the crowd. “Uh...” Completely disoriented, he hadn’t processed his appearance at all. Without waiting for a response, he was pulled from the chair and pushed to a small door nearby. He stumbled and righted himself with his hand on the door frame.

“Okay so you’ll go onto the stage from here. Walk across the stage and sit in the empty seat. Don’t look into the crowd, look over the top of it.” An earpiece was roughly fitted into his ear, “And try not to pass out.” This vaguely registered as odd advice, though admittedly he already felt like he could do with more time unconscious.

A hand pulled the door open and another pushed him in the back out onto the stage.

It was very bright. He squinted looking across the stage. There was an empty chair next to Mr. Purple Suit. He could feel the heat from the spotlights drying his wet hair as he made his way quickly to the chair.

Memory started to slosh its way to the front of Amir’s brain. Wasn’t he just on his ship in space? He sat down in the chair. And what was that flash?

“Tell us your name!” The man boomed at him.

Amir blinked again and took a moment while he heard excited chattering from the crowd, “Amir,” He replied looking at nothing in particular. The crowd went nuts. He looked down at the crowd.

He should have looked over top of it. In the front row in a chair was something that didn’t look even remotely human. His head swam slightly.

“*Don’t look at the crowd,*” the voice in his ear instructed. His head snapped up to above the crowds’ heads. The swim in his vision went away but his head felt heavy and hot.

“Amir Davidson.”

The crowd went nuts again.

“Well Amir, congratulations are in order!” The crowd volume momentarily swelled, “Congratulations! You, and the Earth, are the newest species to make interstellar contact!”

Amir just blinked at him.

“And your name, Amir Davidson,” The crowd seemed to be bouncing with energy, “Your name will go down in the list of interstellar contactors. An elite, and legendary list of the singular people who pushed their planet onto the galactic stage!”

"You mean..." Amir swiveled his head to the man. He looked like a human as Amir knew them. He turned back to the crowd.

In almost every other seat was a lifeform Amir was unfamiliar with. Tentacles, eyes on stalks, too many limbs, too few; Amir felt his heart rate increase and his head swam more violently than before.

"*Please don't...*" Came the voice in his ear again.

His head cleared enough for him to ask, "Newest planet?" A queasy stomach replaced the visual swim this time.

"Yes!" The man looked ecstatic, "You're here on the Milky Way Central Broadcasting Station, broadcasting to the entire galaxy of connected civilizations about the newest member of the connected galactic culture: The Earth!"

"Sorry, connected?" There were a lot of words there.

"Yes connected! All connected systems in the galaxy have an agreement to wait to make contact with any civilization that has not achieved interstellar contact on its own. As each civilization achieves this feat, we integrate them into the Galactic Society. Thanks to you, the Earth is now a part of the Galactic Society! Welcome, Amir of Earth!" He opened his arms to the crowd as their cheers swelled again.

"At this very moment Amir, our ships are arriving on Earth to establish our connection. And that brings us to our topic of the evening! The data is coming in now people!"

"Topic, sorry what?"

"The bets!" The crowd got considerably rowdier. "The Earth!" The man touched his ear piece pointedly, "The Earth ranks in the 66th percentile for time from written word to interstellar contact!"

The crowd quieted down in anticipation. Amir sat back and watched the man who, through gesticulation alone was putting on quite a show. Amir was sure what he was saying must be entertaining.

"38th percentile for overpopulation at time of contact. 68th percentile in environmental conservation, 21st percentile in economic distribution," he grimaced, then added, "What a shame. 5th percentile in religious interference in culture and science, my dear someone just became very rich!"

Amir's mind started to phase out the words. His head was rushing again and he looked back out into the crowd. He laid eyes on a being in the front row with tentacles, and the last thing he remembered was the crowd beginning to roar in waves like the ocean, and the man in purple's voice booming, "*He has indeed passed out, the over under on that...*"