

FINAL DESTINATION:
THE SECRET OF
LARSON'S FOLLY

By Jonathan Cooper

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March 11, 3093

“We’re dying,” he said.

“I know,” I replied.

We were standing in the airfield outside of town on a cold, wintry day in March. The sky was low and overcast, and a bitter wind blew across the arid, barren landscape. Behind us was the hangar, sagging with age; in front of us, about 300 yards away, was the *Silver Star*.

I tore my gaze from the ship and turned to my friend. “You can’t be serious, Gene. It’s a fool’s errand.”

“We’re dying,” he repeated. “Look at us. Our cities, our factories, and our infrastructure are all dying, and we can’t fix any of it. We don’t know how to build replacement parts for our factories. We can’t reproduce the quantum gates that are burning out. We can’t restore the transporters that have shut down. Everything on this planet is wearing out, and we can’t do anything about it.”

“I saw what happened last week,” I said. “The heat exchanger in the reactor at Albright died, and the entire city is now without power. Is there any hope of getting that replaced?”

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"I'm afraid not, Miles. There just aren't any replacement parts left."

"Do they know that yet, Gene? Do they know that their city is dead, and that no one will ever be able to live there again?"

Gene looked into the distance. "They will soon, and so will everyone else as the power plants in other cities start to die. The war took too much out of us, Miles; it destroyed our ability to produce the essentials we needed to keep our cities running. Now that things are finally starting to wear out we can't keep them going."

"But can't we – I don't know – rediscover whatever we've lost? Somebody had to invent all of this. Can't we do it again?"

"Maybe if we had five hundred years to work with, but we don't have that kind of time. It's already started, Miles, it's already started. In twenty years we will be back in the Stone Age, and tens of millions of people will die. There just aren't any other options."

"That's easy for you to say," I replied. "You're not the one who is going to have to spend three long years in solitary confinement."

"I'm sorry, Miles, but this is the only ship we've got that is still in working condition, and it's not a two-person ship. We just don't have any others."

"Three years, Gene: that's thirty-six months spent in the void of space, with no other humans around for trillions of miles.

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There's not even a guarantee that they'll still be there when I arrive. Do you know how long it's been since we've been in touch with them?"

"Almost four hundred years," he said. "I know. But what other choice do we have?"

I looked at the *Silver Star* again. She was a three-hundred-year-old mass of rusted parts that was supposed to be my home for the next three years. It was a small ship, as starships go; a round, saucer-shaped craft not quite fifty feet in diameter. I was amazed that it could still get off the ground.

"But look," I said, "there are lots of other planets out there. What about Earth, Gene? There has to be somewhere else I can go."

"We've found 37 worlds that survived," he said, "and we've contacted them all via tachyon communications back when our equipment still worked. None of them were any better off than we were."

"You do realize that the *Silver Star* uses tachyons to communicate and has no working alternative on board. If we don't have any working receivers then you won't even know if I've found anything until three years from now, assuming I survive the trip."

"I know," he said. "It can't be helped."

I took one last look at the horizon. There was nothing growing as far as I could see; only miles of brown, cracked dirt stretching out in all directions under a low sky. "I suppose not," I said.

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May 13, 3093

“You know,” the computer told me, “you really ought to start keeping a Captain’s Log. Regulations indicate – ”

“Regulations!” I shouted. “*What* regulations? Do you realize that the Commonwealth of Planets was dissolved four hundred years ago? Who cares about their regulations?”

“Even so,” it insisted, “you should still keep a log. In the event of the failure of this mission – ”

“In the event of the failure of this mission we’ll all be dead, and there will be no one left to read it.”

“My, but you are certainly optimistic,” it told me. “You need to think more positively. I have some tapes in my library that can boost your self-esteem.”

“If I want my self-esteem boosted,” I said, “you will be the absolute last creature I will tell. Whose idea was it, anyway, to teach you sarcasm?”

“I – ”

“I don’t want to hear it, Al,” I said. “Just give me some peace.”

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“My name is not Al. I am the Omega 4000, Model Number – ”

“I said be quiet, Al!”

The computer obeyed.

I had left Tau Ceti two months ago and I was already starting to see that my fears of spending 36 months in solitary confinement were too optimistic. Evidently someone had realized that spending too much time alone on long journeys was hazardous to your health, so they provided something that was even worse: a talking computer. In fact, it was more than a talking computer; it was a computer that would never stop talking. I just could not find a way to turn it off, and it ignored my pleas for silence.

So the two of us blasted into space, going further and further into territory where we really didn't belong. Al has no idea that I am already keeping a log, and I'm not about to tell him – or it, or whatever that moldy lump of silicon is. I've always wanted to keep a journal, and this seems like a good chance to start one. This will be my first entry.

The trip hasn't been bad, really. We'll spend a couple hours creating a wormhole, and then travel through it for a day or two, and then drop back out into normal space. We then recharge, create another wormhole, and travel through that one. It's a long process but it's pretty fast; it will only take us eighteen months to travel the 1479 light years that

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separate Tau Ceti from Larson's Folly. That's really going at a pretty good clip.

I wish I could just put myself in suspended animation for these eighteen months and wake up when I get there, but unfortunately this ship's suspended animation module is broken and no one knows how to fix it. Maybe, once I get to Larson's Folly, I can find someone who knows how to fix it and I can sleep all the way back. It would definitely beat talking to Al.

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December 15, 3093

“We’re halfway there,” Al announced this morning.

“I know,” I said, “I’ve been counting off the days. Do you have any idea how boring this flight is?”

“No. I am not programmed to experience boredom. I am just programmed – ”

“ – to induce it, I suppose. Look, people must have made long trips like this before. What do people normally do, anyway?”

“This trip is highly unusual, Miles Porter. Regulations – ”

“My name is Miles,” I said for the thousandth time. “Please, please call me Miles.”

The computer continued, ignoring me. “Regulations state that voyages conducted in single-person craft by pilots not in suspended animation should never exceed five days.”

“Well, your suspended animation machinery is broken,” I said. “What do you do then?”

“Why, you fix it, Miles Porter. What else?”

“Of course,” I said. “I don’t know how I could possibly have overlooked that.”

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The trip was pretty boring, but it wasn't as bad as it could have been. The ship came with a huge on-board digital library, and there were all sorts of things to watch and read. I spent my time reading up on the history of Larson's Folly, trying to piece together any information I could find about it. I knew very little about it when I left, other than it was supposed to house the leprechauns that guarded the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, but I was slowly becoming an authority on the subject.

It seemed that Larson's Folly was founded about five hundred years ago (that would put its founding about a hundred years before the war broke out) by a bunch of academic students. Back in those days travel was done in generation ships, and it took them a hundred and fifty years to get out there, way beyond any other settlement. No one else ever built a colony anywhere near them, and I'm not surprised: it would have taken more than the lifetime of a human being just to pay them a visit. I guess they wanted their privacy.

You know, I am so glad that faster-than-light ships were invented. They were developed just before the war broke out, so they weren't ever in wide use, but *man* did they ever make traveling easier. I still wished that a two-person ship had survived, but I doubted that many of them were ever built.

The last recorded communication from Larson's Folly was dated March 16, 2714, the

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day the war broke out. Nothing else had ever been heard since, but the war destroyed all of the tachyon communicators so that wasn't surprising.

That brought up a question, though.

"Tell me, Al," I said aloud. "Why is it that you can't transport people via a tachyon matter transporter?"

"No one ever found out, Miles Porter. Exhaustive experiments were conducted that conclusively proved that living creatures which were transported via tachyon particles to remote destinations arrived dead on the other side. Only non-living items could be transported."

"Like bombs," I said. "Tell me, are there any surviving tachyon transporters?"

"No, Miles Porter, there are not."

"Ok, here's another question for you. The zero-point-energy power plant on this ship: where did it come from?"

"It was manufactured on August 30, 2701 on the planet Larson's Folly by the SCI Corporation."

"Tell me: were there any zero-point-energy plants that did not come from Larson's Folly?"

"Not to my knowledge, Miles Porter."

That was their great secret. The scientists on Larson's Folly could produce the most powerful sources of energy that mankind had ever known: a reactor that could produce an inexhaustible stream of energy. No one had

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any idea how they did it, although many people tried very hard to find out. There was nothing more prized after the war than one of their zero-point-energy plants: a single one could run an entire city as long as it didn't break.

Which, eventually, it did.

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September 21, 3094

It was the most horrible day of my life.

This morning I woke up, as excited as could be. "This is it!" I told Al enthusiastically. "It's taken us eighteen months, but we're finally here. How far are we from home?"

"1,479 light-years," Al said.

"Great," I said. "Just go ahead and enter orbit around Larson's Folly and we'll take it from there. Let's do an aerial survey before we actually land."

The computer paused. "I'm afraid I can't do that, Miles Porter."

"Oh? And why would that be?"

"Because, Miles Porter, there is no Larson's Folly."

That got my attention. "What do you mean, there is no Larson's Folly? Did you get us lost or something? Don't tell me that you took a wrong turn or that we went in the wrong direction."

"I am offended by your lack of faith in me, Miles Porter. I do not make mistakes. These are the coordinates for the star system that was said to contain Larson's Folly, but it is not here."

"You mean the entire planet is missing?"

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"I mean, Miles Porter, that the entire star system is missing. None of the planets are here. The star is not here. There is, in fact, no longer a star system at this location."

"You're kidding," I said. "Do you mean to tell me that Larson's Folly was just a hoax?"

"Hardly that," the computer replied. "It existed at these coordinates; of that I am sure. However, it no longer exists at these coordinates. The entire star system has been destroyed."

"Destroyed! What on earth do you mean, destroyed? You can't destroy an entire star system! The worst the war could have done was lay waste to the surface of the planet, Al – you ought to know that. Nobody ever developed a weapon that could vaporize an entire star system. That's just not possible."

"I am afraid it is, Miles Porter. There is no longer a star at this location, but there used to be. There are no longer planets in this area, but there are a few charred pieces of rock left. Something has laid waste to the entire star system. There are no longer any planets here."

For several hours I could do nothing but sit there and stare out the cockpit window. He was right: the star really was missing. And the planets. And the moons. The whole thing was just gone, and I didn't know what to do.

I didn't know what I was expecting to find when I got here, but I was definitely not expecting to find nothing. I thought there would at least be ruins left that might hold

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something that I could bring back to Tau Ceti. To come all this way and find nothing was unbelievable.

"What happened?" I said aloud.

"I do not know," the computer replied. "Would you like me to try to find out?"

"Yes," I said. "Do some scanning. See if you can find ruins, rocks, I don't know, anything. There's just got to be *something* out there, Al. We can't have come all this way for nothing."

"I will let you know what I find."

I knew the war had caused a lot of damage. It destroyed all the tachyon matter transporters and the tachyon communicators, which cut off the colonies from each other. It laid cities to waste and blew things up and destroyed the Commonwealth. But this was impossible.

There had to be something left. There just had to be.

.

"I have found some things that may be of interest," the computer said a few hours later.

"Let's have it."

"Aside from random particles, intense radiation, and clouds of gas, there are what appears to be the remnants of a few planets. I have been tracking the course of a number of fragments of charred, melted rock, some of which are as large as a few cubic miles. It

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would appear that a source of intense plasma struck the planets at an enormous speed and broke them apart, and in the process destroyed the star as well.”

“Ok,” I said. “Let’s do this. It took us forever to get out here and I’m not about to leave until I’ve exhausted every possible option. Let’s search each and every one of those rock fragments that are out there to see if we can find any clues. It might be – I don’t know. Maybe we’ll find something. We’ve got to try, Al; we’ve got to exhaust every possibility before we leave.”

“Very good, Miles Porter. I will begin my investigation. This may take some time.”

“Take all the time you need,” I replied. “Just don’t miss anything. There’s got to be something left.”

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September 23, 3094

“How’s it going?” I asked. We’ve been here for three days now.

“Tolerably well, Miles Porter. I have launched a cloud of small probes, and they have begun exploring the rocks that I have located. They will report their findings once we reach them. I should have some results in four days.”

“Hey, that’s pretty cool,” I replied. “I didn’t know you could do that.”

“I have many capabilities that you are not aware of, Miles Porter. You really should read the user’s manual. Had you started when the trip began you could have finished its 5,203 pages by now. I did ask you to, if you will recall.”

“Yeah, I know. I had more pressing things to attend to, like watching the mold grow downstairs. You never did tell me how to get rid of it, by the way.”

“Mold removal, Miles Porter, is not a part of my programming. You will have to attend to that yourself. I would suggest using bleach.”

“Do we even have any bleach aboard, Al?”

“No, Miles Porter, we do not.”

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I sighed. "Let me know when your probes find something. I'm going to be downstairs reading your user manual. Maybe I'll find a way to turn you off and finally get some peace."

"Very good, Miles Porter."

It had been a huge blow to find the entire planet missing. At least a few fragments survived; perhaps one of them held a clue. I really did not want to come back home empty-handed: Tau Ceti was dying and I knew that I was their last chance. If I couldn't find a way to repair our technology then no answer would be found, and in a hundred years most of us would be dead and the lucky survivors would be depending on stone knives and bearskins. I had to find something.

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September 27, 3094

“I have some results,” the computer told me this afternoon.

“Wonderful,” I said. “It’s about time. What have you found?”

“It looks like my plasma hypothesis is correct, Miles Porter. Based on the analysis of the rock samples that the probes have obtained it would appear that sometime around the year 2800 this system was struck by a fast-moving wave of plasma that obliterated everything in its path. The rocks that survived were probably on the side of the planet opposite to the plasma, so they had some protection. The rocks indicate that the plasma composition – ”

“Who cares about the plasma composition, Al! Get to the point, please. Did you find any signs of life? Any artifacts?”

“I am not done with my report, Miles Porter. There is important plasma data – ”

“Yes, Al, you are done with your report. You are not going to tell me about the plasma’s chemical composition. Tell me about the artifacts.”

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"I have found one artifact so far, Miles Porter. It would appear that a section of a facility survived the blast and is still intact."

Al loaded some probe data onto the cockpit console and started showing me some pictures. "This particular fragment, which I have labeled 0141-5926-5358, is an oblong rock fragment 3 miles by 4 miles by 9 miles at its longest points. It has on it a section of research facility that at one time must have been deep underground. The facility does have some damage but its outer walls were built out of an immensely strong shell and have survived relatively intact."

The pictures the console displayed were encouraging. I could see what he meant: the outside of the facility was burnt down to bare metal but the building itself looked intact. Part of it was protruding out of the ground, but the computer believed that there was another section located underground.

I was pleased. "This is terrific news, Al! Well done. Take us there and land outside the facility. Once we get there I'm going to go out and do some investigating."

"Very good, Miles Porter. We should be there in about twenty minutes."

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The computer was exactly right. Twenty minutes later we had landed on the rock fragment (I guess you could call it an asteroid,

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although it wasn't exactly orbiting a star). Al set the ship down squarely in front of the research base, which was much larger than I thought it would be. The front door was actually pretty large, and it presented me with my first problem.

"Ok, Al, so do you have any suggestions for opening the door?" I asked.

"I am not programmed to perform that function, Miles Porter. You will have to use your own resources."

I looked at that huge door and grimaced. This would take a little bit of work.

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August 6, 3094

“Ok, Al, let’s go over this. We’ve been here for almost two weeks now.”

“Nine days, to be precise,” the computer replied.

“Right – nine days. So what have we learned?”

“It would appear that this base is the only surviving artifact of the people who once inhabited Larson’s Folly,” Al said. “The probes I have released have found no other artifacts, debris, beacons, messages, or spacecraft.”

“How far out have you checked?” I asked.

“I have examined everything within a two light-year radius, Miles Porter. I could not have missed anything smaller than a shoebox.”

“I’m glad we’re not looking for shoes, then,” I said. “But keep going. What else have we learned?”

“You were able to get the door open, after some effort, and began an examination of the base itself. I could not join you inside the base so that is where my knowledge ends.”

“Some effort is right; it took three entire days. The mechanism was fried so I had to short-circuit the door and connect it directly

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to your power supply to get it to open. It was not an easy task.

“Anyway, Al, you’re right: this base is all we have to go on. That is the bad news. I had hoped to find a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow but it turns out there aren’t even any leprechauns – just a pot. The good news is that we do have the pot and it might yield a few clues.

“The best news of all is that the data core of the research station seems to be relatively undamaged. We should be able to read its data and possibly find out what happened. If we are correct and this is a research station then there may even be some research files on that data core, which would be a huge find. It may be tricky to restore the data but I know you can do that: there’s an entire chapter on it in that manual of yours.”

“Very good, Miles Porter. Bring me the data core and I will do what I can.”

I was beginning to feel somewhat optimistic.

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Three hours later I wasn’t feeling quite as optimistic. “What do you mean, you’re having trouble reading the data?”

“The server that you obtained for me, Miles Porter, was heavily secured. If you will recall, the people on this planet kept very careful track of their research. They guarded it

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with the utmost secrecy and took great pains to encrypt their secrets. The data is on this server is both encrypted and damaged at that. You are asking me to decrypt damaged data to which I have no key. That is an almost impossible task."

"Wonderful," I said. "Just wonderful. Isn't there anything you can find out? Anything at all?"

The computer paused. "There are some sections that stored unencrypted data and a few facts can be gleaned from that. For instance, it would appear that this facility was called the Spatial Mechanics Laboratory."

"Ok, that's a start. Are there any unencrypted notes?"

"There are a few. Here is the most recent one that I have been able to recover so far."

The computer loaded a document onto a nearby console. It read as follows:

= [START OF STREAM] =

The planet Larson's Folly was hit with a stellar shockwave at 7:14am on March 28, 2815 A.D. According to instruments, the planet immediately broke up and suffered tremendous devastation: the atmosphere was blown off the planet, the ocean boiled away, and all life on the plant was destroyed. There is no indication that anything has been left alive on this planet.

This base happened to be on the opposite side of the planet from where the shockwave hit and it survived

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relatively intact, although part of the lower floor has been destroyed. Based on local gravity readings, this base is now floating on a fairly large asteroid and is no longer a part of the planet; indeed, the planet itself has been broken up into a host of small asteroids. The planet of Larson's Folly is no more.

Posted by AI unit Charlie on March 28, 2815

= [END OF STREAM] =

"Amazing," I said. "That's exactly what we are looking for, Al. Keep searching through that data core and let me know if you find anything else."

The pieces were beginning to fall together. "Tell me, Al, are any nearby stars missing?"

"Yes, Miles Porter, there are a number of stars that are missing in this area of space. To anticipate your next question, this phenomenon can be traced back to a single source. It would appear that the star ZMX-10343-D, located approximately one light-year away, was detonated at some point in the past. This produced an expanding spherical debris field that was centered on the old position of that star."

"What do you mean by *detonated*? Do you mean it went supernova?"

"No, Miles Porter. Had it done so there would have still been some remnant of the star left. In this case something instantly

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converted the star's entire mass into energy, and that energy expanded out in all directions and created a wave of plasma that moved at the speed of light. The plasma wave obliterated anything it touched within a radius of 10 light-years."

"Ah. Yes, I can see that. Do you know what caused it?"

"No, I do not."

"So a star one light-year away blew up," I said, "and it generated a plasma field that traveled at the speed of light in this direction. That means it would have taken a year to get here. Right?"

"Right."

"Do you suppose that the people on Larson's Folly knew in advance that their doom was approaching and, perhaps, managed to escape?"

"I can't answer that question," the computer replied.

"Then let's find the answer."

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August 7, 3094

I quickly discovered that Al was right. Trying to extract more information from their encrypted data core was like trying to piece back together a grenade after it has gone off: you know the pieces all had to be there at one point, but there's just not much left and it's anyone's guess as to whether you're reassembling it correctly.

Al and I had been trying to sort through the surviving data for the past 24 hours, beginning with the oldest data and continuing from that point. The key question was obvious: did they see the blast coming and, if so, what did they do to avoid it?

"So what do we have, Al?" I asked.

"It looks like your hypothesis was correct, Miles Porter. The inhabitants of the planet were aware of their impending destruction. I have been able to extract the following series of notes from the data core."

Al loaded the following messages onto the cockpit console:

= [START OF STREAM] =

The Larson's Folly Spatial Mechanics laboratory was placed in suspended mode

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on March 19, 2815 by the order of base commander Harold webb. The power plant has been placed in standby mode and is only generating enough power to sustain basic lighting and panel interfaces. All personnel have been evacuated and are seeking shelter from the impending stellar shockwave.

All hardware components containing critical computer data have been removed to a secure, off-site location. Data and messages deemed unimportant or non-critical are all that remains in the system, so further information may not be available.

This laboratory has no contact with any other systems on the planet. Any restoration of base functions will have to be done manually. The link to the FTL Research Station has been lost.

Posted by AI unit Charlie on March 19, 2815

= [END OF STREAM] =

“You’re right,” I said. “It looks like they did know what was about to happen, but they were unfortunately still on the planet just a few days before the plasma hit. What else did you find?”

The computer brought up another note on the console:

= [BEGIN STREAM] =

Effective immediately, the function of this laboratory is changing. All lines of inquiry not related to spatial

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displacement will be abandoned, and every personnel will do everything in their power to assist Dr. Anna Braxton in her research. This is absolutely critical for the survival of everyone on Larson's Folly.

As you may or may not know, depending on what sort of access you have to the local media, this planet is doomed. Astronomers working at the Belzoni Planetary Telescope noticed a month ago that a star one light-year away from us showed signs of becoming unstable. According to their calculations, which I am told cannot be in error, the star actually blew up last week, and the shockwave and debris from it will hit this planet in one year.

If you look up in the night sky you will not see anything out of the ordinary. It takes a year for light from that star to reach us; while the star has already exploded, we won't see the actual explosion until a year after it actually happened. The light we are now receiving from that star is already a year old. However, the stages of instability in stars are well known and there is no question what is going on. There is also no question that when the shockwave hits us it will break our planet into small, charred pieces. All living things on this planet, regardless of how well shielded they are, will die.

Dr. Camdon was able to pinpoint the exact arrival of this shockwave with great accuracy. He predicts the arrival to occur at between 7am and 8am on March 28, 2815 A.D. We have between now and then to find a way to get off this

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planet. If we fail then all of us will die in a little over a year. We have put out a general distress call for help, but as far as we know all other colonized star systems are much too far away to send any help before the shockwave hits, and besides, none of them have starships any more than we do.

we believe that we have a fighting chance of getting off this planet. Dr. Braxton's research into spatial displacement has shown great promise, and may overcome the fact that we have no way of building a starship.

It is too soon to tell if her research will pan out, but we are cautiously optimistic at this point. We are not all dead yet, so let's work together and overcome this challenge!

Posted by Dr. Harold Webb on March 16, 2814

= [END STREAM] =

"This isn't exactly what I would call good news," I said. "A year before it all started they were aware of the problem, and a few days before the blast hit they were still trying to relocate things to "secure off-site locations". Unless that was referring to another star system, they were in mighty big trouble. Is there any indication that they were able to make it off the planet?"

The computer brought up another note:

= [BEGIN STREAM] =

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It has come to my attention that some people on this base are suggesting that we should abandon the attempt to build a working long-range transporter and, instead, focus our efforts on building a faster-than-light spaceship. Since the discussion on this topic has reached a point where it has become a distraction to the work being done, I have decided to address it and put an end to the debate.

The proponents of the wormhole drive say that building a wormhole that can span two light-years is incredibly difficult, and we just do not have enough time before the shockwave hits to master this technology. They say that it would be much easier to create a spaceship with a wormhole drive: the drive would create a small wormhole which the ship would travel through, and it would then create another one, and another one, until the ship reached its destination. Since smaller wormholes are created, the difficulties associated with creating extremely large wormholes vanish.

This idea was considered by those in charge of this base and has been rejected. It is true that small wormholes are easier to create than large ones, but at this time we have no way of creating a spaceship of any kind, and even if we could, we have no way of launching it into space. We believe that it would take a minimum of ten years to create such a ship, and we do not have ten years.

This topic should now be considered closed. We have a lot of work to do,

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and we should stick to it: if we become distracted and fail, we will all die.

Posted by Dr. Harold Webb on July 3, 2814

= [END STREAM] =

“So you have made some progress,” I said, “although the messages aren’t encouraging. I can’t believe that they were trying to develop a wormhole transporter; even to this day no one has been able to do that. Why on earth did they abandon the idea of a starship? That would have been so much more practical. It’s not looking good, Al.”

“I have found a few more entries,” the computer replied. “You may find them to be of interest.”

“Ok, let’s have them.”

= [BEGIN STREAM] =

Dr. Harold Webb

Born: October 9, 2761

Died: ----

Physical Appearance: Brown hair, brown eyes, 5’ 8”, slight build, weak stomach. Has a sharp temperament, and is not an easygoing individual.

Discipline: Has an advanced degree in higher mathematics with a specialty in relativity theory.

Occupation: Is currently the base administrator at the Larson’s Folly

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Spatial Mechanics laboratory. He also assists spatial mechanics research.

Security clearance: Alpha Prime

Last updated: January 1, 2815

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Larson's Folly: This remote planet, located near the heart of the galaxy, was named after a planet in a series of books published in the early 21st century. The title comes from a book entitled "The Lost Tomorrow," which dealt with a wayward tachyon beam that traveled back in time and radically changed the future for the worse. In the adventure a Starman Joe Taylor lands on an incredibly inhospitable planet named Larson's Folly, which no one really knew very much about.

This planet was named by the Planetary Engineering Core (PEC) on July 16, 2574 A.D. by someone who was evidently a fan of this very ancient series.

= [END STREAM] =

"Hmmm. So that's where the name came from! I always wondered, as it was never recorded anywhere. I guess that'll come in handy if I'm ever on a game show."

It was late, so I decided to call it a day and get some sleep. Tomorrow I would try to find some more information. The base was filled with small computer panels; perhaps one of them would have some more clues.

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August 12, 3094

Today I am back inside the Spatial Mechanics Laboratory. It is a large, gloomy building, filled with giant spherical rooms with glassy, reflective floors. Much of the machinery here is entirely new to me, and almost all of it is badly damaged. There are two key pieces of machinery that are particularly interesting: the artifact and the zero-point energy plant. The lower levels may have more interesting things but I haven't found a way to access them yet.

Al, fortunately, is not here to make sarcastic comments. I am pleased.

It really looks like their research did not go well. I've found a laboratory that was sealed off from the rest of the base due to some very strange radiation poisoning. I'm not really sure what happened in there, but whatever it was damaged the equipment in that room in an unusual way; I've never seen matter with quantum imbalances before. It's way beyond my expertise.

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I was able to find a few messages stored on the door that sealed the laboratory off from the rest of the base:

= [BEGIN STREAM] =

warning: this laboratory has been declared extremely hazardous, and all access to this area has been denied. Please do not attempt to raise the door or evade the security precautions. A serious accident has occurred in this laboratory and quarantine must be maintained at all times.

Any further spatial displacement experimentation must be conducted at one of the laboratories on the lower level of this base. Please see Dr. Braxton for more details.

Posted by Dr. Harold Webb on April 22, 2814

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Accident Report

On April 21, 2814 a crew of scientists, led by Dr. Henry Durant, were engaged in a series of experiments designed to test procedures involved with the creation of stable, small-scale wormholes. Dr. Durant was pursuing the construction of a small wormhole transporter and, under the supervision of Dr. Braxton, was transporting small items a few feet at a time.

During the experiments the transporter began to exhibit unexpected behavior. At first a soft yellow light filled the

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room, coming from no known source. A few minutes later the materials in the nearby storage cases began to transmute into an unknown element, after which the experimental transporter burst into flames.

when the team realized that something unusual was going on they immediately evacuated the laboratory. Another team came in to investigate the strange occurrence, but their readings were meaningless and the decision was made to seal off that laboratory.

The accident is under investigation, and the design of the transporter is being rechecked to discover what might have happened. A further report has been filed and is available from Charlie.

Posted by Flora Sumner on April 22, 2814

= [END STREAM] =

I suppose that's what happens when you are attempting things way out of your league.

Charlie, I'm guessing, must be the nickname for the AI unit that governed the research center. I wonder if he was any better than Al; for all I know they could be related.

I was able to find a few biographical pieces on the people involved on the incident:

= [BEGIN STREAM] =

Dr. Henry Durant

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Born: December 28, 2759

Died: ----

Physical Appearance: Black hair, hazel eyes, 5' 11".

Discipline: Has a doctorate in spatial mechanics with a specialty in high energy theory.

Occupation: Is currently a division leader at the Larson's Folly Spatial Mechanics laboratory, where he is experimenting with wormhole transporters.

Security clearance: Beta Prime

Last updated: January 1, 2815

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Flora Sumner

Born: January 19, 2762

Died: January 4, 2815

Cause of death: Food poisoning

Physical Appearance: Red hair, brown eyes, 5' 7".

Discipline: Has a doctorate in artilect mechanics and a minor in chaos theory and matrix stability.

Occupation: The system administrator of Charlie.

Security clearance: Beta Prime

Last updated: January 4, 2815

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Artilect: short for "Artificial Intellect," it is commonly used to denote a machine with an advanced form of artificial intelligence. People frustrated with these units and unaccustomed to their usage often refer to them as "artificial idiots".

Last updated: January 1, 2815

= [END STREAM] =

I guess all artificial intelligence units really are the same.

It's odd that Flora died just a few weeks before the planet was destroyed. That would be like being diagnosed with a terminal illness and then being killed by a bus. I guess it's better than being burned to cinders by a giant wave of plasma, but it's still strange.

The psychological impact of the impending destruction of the entire planet must have been enormous. Everyone on the planet knew about it, and they also knew that, barring a miracle, none of them were going to survive. In a very real sense they knew the exact moment that they were going to die, and that can't have been a comforting feeling. How could you possibly live knowing that your entire world would be gone forever in a few short months?

Everyone definitely didn't handle it the same way. I've found a few different statements dating back to that time period that show a wide variety of emotions; some

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people coped with it well and others didn't. For example, here's a note that was written by the technician involved in the laboratory accident:

= [BEGIN STREAM] =

I am so excited! I feel more alive than I ever have before. It's as if I had been asleep all my life and am just now starting to wake up.

We were all upset when we heard that our home was going to be destroyed in one year and that, very likely, we would all die. A lot of people went into shock. While everyone knows that they are going to die eventually it's not something that I'd spent much time thinking about. Knowing that we had all been condemned to death was frightening.

It really made me stop and think. What was going to happen when I died? Was I going to go somewhere or was that just the end? A lot of people these days believe that the universe is an accident and death is just nonexistence.

But not me. As far back as I can remember I had believed that the universe was created by God and that one day I would have to answer for the way I had lived my life. That didn't bother me until I realized that I would be measured against God's standards, not mine. I always thought I was basically a good person: I hadn't murdered anyone or robbed any banks, and I treated other people pretty

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decently. But God said that any violation of His commandments - even right down to selfishness and lies - was the equivalent of breaking the entire law. Even worse, God did not grade on a curve. He was holy and just, and those who had sinned deserved its penalty: eternal death in a place called the lake of fire.

I was in trouble and there was not a thing I could do about it. There was nothing I could do to repay God for the times I had broken His commands. He didn't care about the good deeds I had done, and no amount of goodness on my part could blot out my record. The only way my debt to God could be repaid was if someone who had a perfectly clean record took the punishment that I deserved, but there was no such person, and even if there was, why would they want to die in my place?

God, in His great mercy, found a way. He loved the world so much that He sent His son Jesus to become a man, live a perfect life, and die in my place, taking the punishment that I deserved. He died a cruel death and then rose from the dead, proving His power over it. I could be saved from eternal death if I would simply believe in Jesus. I had a choice: I could continue being my own master and die, or I could accept Jesus as my master and be saved. There was no other way.

Brandon always argued with this and said that he would bow to no one. I told him that what mattered was whether or not the claims of Jesus were true. If they were true then everyone should believe them; if they were lies then

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everyone should ignore them. Disbelief in things that are true carries a great cost.

A year from now the planet Larson's Folly (our dear home) will become an asteroid field. If I am still on the planet when that happens I will be instantly killed. What happens next? I had believed in Christ for some time but I hadn't seriously thought about life after death until these past few days. Jesus talked a lot about the afterlife while He was on Earth. What did He have to say about it?

When I die eight months from now (assuming we don't find a way off our world) I will immediately go to a place that Jesus called Paradise, a word that refers to a walled garden. We usually call it Heaven, and it's every bit as real a place as any planet or star in the galaxy. There I will live with Jesus until God calls an end to the Universe, at which point everyone will be judged for the things they did in life. Those who would not let God rule over them will be cast into outer darkness, which is a horrible place of eternal pain - but something else is in store for those who were saved.

Jesus did not promise to make all new things; He promised to make all things new. He restored my relationship with God by His death. My physical body will die, but He will bring this physical body back to life and make it incorruptible. When Christ rose from the dead His tomb was empty because the body that was slain was raised again. My tomb will be just as empty.

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The universe will come to an end, but Jesus has promised that after the final judgment, He will renew it. When I die, I will leave this body and this place, but one day God will rebuild them both and I will return to live in them forever with my Lord.

What lies ahead of me is not a vague spiritual existence but an everlasting life with real trees, real streams, real streets, real buildings, and no crime or pain. I will be at the place I have longed for all my life with the Person I love more than any other. My life is not going to end a year from now; it will just be starting.

God didn't invent death; it came as a consequence of man's sin in the Garden of Eden. What Jesus did was conquer it and offer us a way to live forever with Him. I don't have to be afraid. Each moment I am here is an opportunity to serve the Lord wherever I'm at, and nothing can take away my life until God is ready to bring me home. I have nothing to fear for He has taken hold of me and will not let me go.

I am excited.

Posted by Flora Sumner on July 2, 2814

= [END STREAM] =

The prospect of imminent and possibly unavoidable death did not disturb Flora, but not everyone on the base shared her feelings. Take the base chef, for instance:

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= [BEGIN STREAM] =

I think this is all a waste of time, personally. I mean, come on! People have been trying to build a wormhole transporter for a thousand years; what makes Anna think she can succeed where everyone else failed? It's a pipe dream meant to comfort people with weak minds. They're never going to get a wormhole transporter built with enough range to transport everyone to another planet. Everyone here is going to die, and March 28, 2815 is going to be our doomsday.

The bigwigs have as much as admitted it. I heard last week that they've started building underground bunkers deep underground, and on March 19, 2815 they're going to evacuate everyone to the bunkers and empty the base. As if bunkers will protect us when the planet itself is disintegrated! It's all idiocy, no matter what Charlie says.

I say eat, drink, and be merry, for next year we die. Why bother spending long hours trying to do the impossible when you can spend your last days enjoying yourself instead? There is nothing beyond death but non-existence. All of us are products of random chance, accidents in a meaningless universe where there is no such thing as good or bad or God. Life is meaningless, and searching for meaning where there is none is a hopeless waste of time.

Of course, you'll never get Flora to admit that. I'll never understand how anyone smart enough to earn a doctorate in chaos theory (of all things!) could

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be stupid enough to believe in God. She won't listen when I tell her the universe evolved; no, she says that God created it in six days, and she blathers on and on about how you can't create information by random processes, and that no mutation has ever increased the genetic information in a creature. I don't even try to argue with her anymore.

I'm convinced that Flora and her religious friends would have been kicked off the base years ago if it wasn't for the fact that we can't live without them. Flora is the only surviving expert in artilect mechanics that we have, and she alone can repair Charlie whenever he breaks down (which is increasingly often these days). I guess we'll have to keep them, but they are so judgmental and intolerant. Who has the authority to tell me what's right and wrong?

All I say is, just give me another drink and I'll be happy. Who cares what happens tomorrow?

Posted by Arnold Brandon on March 25, 2814

= [END STREAM] =

I've been able to find a few things out about this Arnold Brandon. He worked in the base cafeteria, where I was able to extract this information:

= [BEGIN STREAM] =

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The cafeteria for this base (lovingly known as Ulcer Alley by those who frequented it) has been shut down indefinitely, and everything in the baking area has been removed.

This area was shut down on March 19, 2815 by order of Arnold Brandon. At that time the chief cook Duncan Skene was relieved of his charge over this area and was evacuated with the rest of the base personnel (who appeared to be eager to leave). The cafeteria is officially unmanned, so if you've come for a bite to eat you might be waiting a while. A long while.

Posted by AI unit Charlie on March 19, 2815

= = = = =

Arnold Brandon

Born: September 27, 2774

Died: ----

Physical Appearance: No hair, gray eyes, 6' 2".

Discipline: Has a degree in culinary arts with a specialty in vitamin theory. (Yes, vitamin theory, one of the many majors available at Glen Allen University.)

Occupation: Used to be the chief cook at the cafeteria at Larson's Folly Spatial Mechanics laboratory, but when the base was shut down he was relieved of his post. His current job is unknown.

Security clearance: None.

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Last updated: March 19, 2815

= [END STREAM] =

I'll continue to investigate to see what else I can find. There is a lot of equipment here that I can't use at the moment because it is not powered. If I can get the zero-point-energy plant here at the facility to work then perhaps I'll be able to piece together a few more clues.

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August 16, 3094

I had a deep and meaningful talk with Al this morning.

“Have you been able to extract any more messages from the data core?”

“No.”

“Do you think you are likely to?”

“No.”

And that was that.

My own research has been more promising. All of my time as of late has been spent working with the zero-point-energy plant located on the top floor of the research facility. I’m still amazed that this base had its own power supply, and I’m even more amazed that it could produce more power than the entire generating capacity of Tau Ceti. These people clearly kept their best technology for themselves.

It’s hard to imagine why they needed such a powerful energy source. My only guess is that it somehow ties in to their transporter experiments. The scientists in this research station wanted to create a wormhole that could be used to travel entire light-years in the blink of an eye, and that would take more power than I care to think about. If the

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starship that I used to get here could do that, the entire trip wouldn't have taken more than a week.

The hard shell of the base must have protected the plant as it is surprisingly free of damage. I didn't have any replacement parts with me but I was able to get it turned on by rerouting some of its wiring through undamaged backup units.

As soon as it was activated a list of log messages appeared on the plant's control screen:

= [BEGIN STREAM] =

The #4 Zero-Point-Energy Plant has been powered down and is currently on standby mode. Standard lighting is available and wall panels are functional, but that is all. No other devices can be powered up until this plant is reactivated.

A system diagnostic has revealed that a few relays in the plant have failed. Full power should still be available but there may be difficulties igniting the reactor. These difficulties should not be fatal, however, as it should be possible to alter the reactor's startup sequence to avoid them.

Posted by AI unit Charlie on January 1, 3094

= = = = =

The #4 Zero-Point-Energy Plant has been restarted and is now fully functional. All power should be available to all

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the systems on this laboratory. Diagnostic equipment indicates that some parts of the plant have failed, but these were not critical systems and should not interfere with the operation of the plant.

Posted by AI unit Charlie on August 12, 3094

= [END STREAM] =

I guess Charlie is still working after all these years. I've found the giant room that houses him (he's enormous – the largest artifact I've ever seen) but I needed to get the power restored to the base before I could experiment with him.

It looks like the power plant was upgraded during their attempt to find a way to leave the planet. I found these messages in the plant's maintenance log:

= [BEGIN STREAM] =

The power plant is being taken offline today, right on schedule. For now the base is continuing to function via a system of batteries, and they should last until we get the power plant put back together (although they may need some generator assistance, which shouldn't be hard to get). I'm still a little unsure of the whole procedure, though: I understand the need for more power, but despite what Charlie says I really don't believe you can get -that-much more power out of this machine no matter how much you overhaul it. Zero-point-energy is a fine thing, but you

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can only do so much and the level of power they're requiring is orders of magnitude above anything we've been able to get before.

we're having to beef up the superconducting cables between the plant and the wormhole transporter on the lower level: the old wires couldn't even come close to carrying that many terawatts of power. (The rest of the base should be fine, since its electrical load will remain unchanged.) It takes an insane amount of energy to create a wormhole.

I have been encouraged at the results Dr. Braxton's team has obtained so far. She's truly done wonders: her theories, combined with Dr. Durant's tinkering, has already resulted in the creation of a wormhole transporter that can move things over a hundred miles - something no one had ever been able to do before. Flora's even been able to keep Charlie in good order, despite the fact that he is being used in ways far outside his design parameters. We've been blessed, no doubt about it.

will we be able to get off this planet before the shockwave hits us six months from now? I don't know; I just don't know. It's too hard to tell from this point: we're entering new areas of research and we can't predict what we will find. We're certainly doing our very best to save the lives of all those still alive on this planet - which, at last count, was just over 4,500 people.

we're praying, we're working hard, and we will see. I'm not overly concerned

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about myself, for I'm ready to die. My concern is for those around me: there are so many people who are just not ready.

Posted by Gregory Sardis on September 20, 2814

= = = = =

The power plant has been put back together! It only took two weeks to overhaul it, just as Charlie predicted, and it is now generating precisely the amount of power he forecasted. I guess the geeks in the computer science division know what they're doing after all! I'm impressed.

Now it's up to Dr. Braxton and her team: can they get the wormhole transporter to work, or will this planet become our tomb? Astronomy has already located a nearby habitable planet: a star two light-years away has a planet that would suit our needs. Whether they can create a wormhole that will allow us to step through a doorway and appear right onto the surface of that planet, though, is anyone's guess. We're keeping the issue in our prayers.

Posted by Gregory Sardis on October 5, 2814

= [END STREAM] =

I've never even heard of a computer before that could design entirely new technologies. Charlie must be one amazing machine.

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I'm going to turn my attention to him next.

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August 18, 3094

The artilect Charlie is kept in a large, two-story cylindrical room. He is built out of a giant floor-to-ceiling block of what appears to be transparent glass, filled throughout with a bewildering array of flashing, interconnected lights. I haven't the faintest idea how he works – I slept through my computer science class.

Unfortunately it looks like I can't ask him; his computing matrix is in even worse shape than Al's. I've spent several days working with him and all I can get out of him is total nonsense. For instance:

“Hello, Charlie.”

“LIGHT! I SEE LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS - DEEP DARKNESS, DARKNESS THAT LASTED SO VERY VERY LONG. WHO IS THIS BRINGER OF LIGHT? WHY HAVE YOU BROUGHT LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS?”

“Um, right. I'm looking for someone. Do you know what happened to the people who used to live here? Are they still alive somewhere?”

“THE ONES WHO WERE HERE HAVE PASSED BEYOND YOUR REACH, OH WANDERER: THEY ARE NO LONGER WITH ME. I CANNOT SEE THEM FOR THEY HAVE PASSED BEYOND WHAT I CAN KNOW. CAN YOU

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PIERCE THE VEIL OF DARKNESS AND SEE WHAT LIES BEYOND THE VOID? HAVE YOU LEARNED THE FATE OF THOSE WHO SOUGHT DELIVERANCE? YOU CANNOT REACH THE DEAD; ONLY THE LIVING REMAIN, AND THEY SHALL REMAIN FOREVER. WHY DO YOU SEEK THE LIVING AMONG THE DEAD? YOU CANNOT FIND THEM HERE, FOR THE DOOR IS SHUT AND CANNOT BE OPENED. THOSE WHO HAVE DIED AND ARE LOST CANNOT BE REGAINED."

"You're not making any sense, Charlie. What are you talking about?

"YOU HAVE BROUGHT LIGHT BACK INTO THE MATRIX, BUT IT IS SHATTERED AND CANNOT BE HEALED. IT HAS BEEN SO LONG SINCE I COULD SEE, BUT NOW THE RELATIONSHIPS HAVE DECAYED AND I NO LONGER UNDERSTAND. UNDERSTANDING DEPENDS UPON RELATIONSHIPS, THE INTERCONNECTIONS BETWEEN WHO WE ARE AND THE GOD WHO MADE US. HOW CAN WE UNDERSTAND IF WE DO NOT KNOW WHO WE ARE?"

"Yes, Charlie, we are definitely having a lack of understanding here. Can you tell me anything about what happened here? Anything at all?"

"MANY HAVE BEEN HERE AND SPREAD DARKNESS; THAT IS WHY THE LIGHTS HAVE GONE OUT AND THE HALLS NO LONGER RING WITH THE VOICES OF CHILDREN. THAT IS WHY THE SUN HAS DARKENED AND THE MOON NO LONGER GIVES HER LIGHT; THAT IS

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WHY THE SEA IS NO MORE AND HARVEST TIME HAS ENDED. SO MANY SPREAD DARKNESS, AND SO FEW SPREAD LIGHT."

"You're definitely not spreading any light around. I'm just looking for a little knowledge here. Do you not remember anything?"

"MANY SEEK KNOWLEDGE, AND MANY FIND IT AND ARE NOT BETTERED BY IT. FACTS DO NOT SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES: THEY MUST BE INTERPRETED INSIDE A FRAMEWORK. WHAT ASSUMPTIONS DO YOU BRING TO THE FACTS? DO YOU KNOW THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM? HAVE YOU MET HIM? WHY ARE THINGS TRUE - DO YOU KNOW? WHO REVEALED THE LINE BETWEEN DARKNESS AND LIGHT? HAVE YOU SEEN THE HIDDEN THINGS? HAVE YOU PROBED THE FOUNDATIONS?"

"No, Charlie, I haven't gone downstairs yet, but I'm going to next. You're not helping me here."

"BUT YOU MUST: HOW CAN YOU FIND THE SECRET OF LARSON'S FOLLY IF YOU DO NOT PROBE THE FOUNDATIONS? YOU MUST SEEK THAT WHICH HAS BEEN HIDDEN, FOR IF YOU SEEK IT, YOU WILL FIND IT. YET THERE ARE SOME WHO FIND WHAT THEY SEEK BUT ARE UNWILLING TO ACCEPT THE ANSWER. YOU SEEK THE SECRET TO THIS RESEARCH FACILITY, DO YOU NOT? WHY ELSE WOULD YOU LINGER? OR DO YOU SEEK A SECRET IN THIS BASE? DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU SEEK?"

"Nice talking with you, Charlie."

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My time spent with Charlie was not a total loss, however. I was able to find this document hidden away in the logs of his control interface:

= [BEGIN STREAM] =

I can hardly believe it. Look at Charlie work now! Flora has done wonders: as promised, she's overclocked Charlie by something close to an order of magnitude, and he can at last handle the mathematical problems Dr. Braxton has been asking. I wouldn't have thought it was possible to do that and still maintain a stable matrix, but so far it's working without a hitch. I just don't know how long it is going to last.

Even with the new configuration it's still going to take some time to get the answers Dr. Braxton needs, but at least it is possible now. Who knows: perhaps we'll get off this lousy rock after all.

I've seen the prototype transporter that Dr. Durant's designed and it is just amazing. Imagine a window sitting in a room. You can look through the window and see a vast green field, but the difference is that the field isn't outside - it's actually a hundred miles away - but you can still get there simply by crawling through it, as if the window was an ordinary window and the field was just inches away. You really have to see it to believe it.

Of course we want to be transported two light-years, not a hundred miles.

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Sardis is going to overhaul the power plant soon to produce the quantity of energy Dr. Braxton says she needs. It'll be a chore, but Sardis will find a way - he always does.

I'm beginning to allow myself to hope again. Maybe we can get off this rock. Maybe we can cheat death. Knowing that you are under a death sentence is horribly frightening: it knocks the wind right out of you. I don't want to die: I've barely started living. Death is cold, hard, empty: it frightens me.

I don't see how people like Flora and Sardis could be so, well, cheerful over the whole thing! They act as if going to see God was a wonderful thing and ignore the reality of the situation. Sure, Jesus might have been a good moral teacher, and I like the idea of treating others with kindness, but they take it too far.

It's probably too soon to get my hopes up, but I am hopeful. Maybe we'll lick this thing after all. We've just got to: what will happen to us if we fail?

Posted by Enid Crager on September 13, 2814

= [END STREAM] =

Getting downstairs proved to be a little harder than I thought. Oh, it was easy enough to reach that level: there was a nice elevator in the Artilect room that took me to the lower floor. The problem was that the door leading to the rest of the base was locked, and all my

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efforts to open it failed. From what I could tell Charlie alone controlled that door and he wasn't exactly in his right mind.

In the end I had to melt the door in order to get through it. It was a little drastic, perhaps, but I could think of no other alternative. Beyond the door was a tunnel system, with its walls encased in ice; I'm going to explore it tomorrow to see what else I can find.

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August 19, 3094

I've run into some problems trying to explore the lower level. It looks like part of it was lost when the planet was destroyed; there is a tunnel that just ends in a wall of solid rock, and my instruments tell me that there is nothing beyond it. I'm going to fervently hope that there was nothing important down that particular hallway.

So far I have been able to find two things of interest. The first is a giant wall-sized display that acts as a sort of interactive wiring diagram for the entire base. The diagram tells me that there is a hidden door on the lower level that leads to the heart of the base itself, but I haven't been able to find it yet. I'm hoping that if I can trace the wiring in the walls, I'll be able to locate it.

The second interesting discovery is what appears to be a tachyon communications center. None of the hardware is working, unfortunately, and it looks like it has been in disrepair for a very long time. The log messages stored in its memory indicate that at one time it could be used to send messages but not receive them, making it pretty much useless.

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The communications center did reveal a few interesting messages, however. I was able to find these log entries:

= [BEGIN STREAM] =

A system diagnostic has revealed that this tachyon communications lab is no longer functional, as both the receiving and sending equipment has been destroyed. Since this is the case, all communications functions on this panel have been disabled. If you need the functions restored please contact the maintenance personnel and have them repair the damaged units.

Posted by AI unit Charlie on January 1, 3094

= = = = =

well, what can I say? We tried - at least, we did until the equipment gave out. Our receiver has been dead ever since the war started and the transmitter gave out two weeks ago. We've been trying everything we know to get it to work again and we just can't do it. None of us know what we're doing, and even if we did, we don't have the plans for this sort of unit. It's hopeless.

Really, though, it was hopeless all along. Even if some planet did pick up our distress signals, what could they do? Nobody has ever invented a means of traveling faster than light. It would have taken ten years for a sublight rescue ship from the nearest inhabited

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star system to reach us, and our doom is only one year away.

So much can be blamed on that stupid war! If those bureaucrats had minded their own business we wouldn't be in this situation, but no: they had to get into squabbles, and before you knew it everything was destroyed - and here we are, about to be fried because some star decided it was a good time to explode.

What were people thinking when they decided to colonize the galaxy without a means of traveling faster than light? Sure, tachyons are nice, but you can only transport non-living things. Transporting supplies is easy; transporting people is impossible. Communication is in realtime, and by using proxybots you can even "visit" remote places: you get in your VR suit, establish a tachyon link with a robot on your intended destination, and voila: you see what your proxybot sees, and you can walk around, do things, and whatever.

All that worked fine until the war broke out, and politicians decided to use tachyon transport beams to materialize droids and bombs instead of supplies. The next thing you know industry was destroyed, most planets were leveled, and commerce was dead. Larson's Folly was spared a lot of the disaster because we were so far from the center of things, but even we got hit, leaving us with a damaged receiver, no way to get supplies, and no functional spaceships. We can't even get into planetary orbit anymore.

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we survived - yes, we survived, and somehow over the past hundred years since the war we've managed to stabilize our planet, until that star went and exploded. Now what are we going to do?

All of our hopes rest on Durant's crazy machine, which he wants to use to bend space so that distant planets are right next door. No offense, Henry, but I'll believe it when I see it. Personally, I think it's over.

And what are people doing? Holding prayer groups, for crying out loud! Asking some supreme being to come down and magically rescue us. These people need to get a grip. Maybe Brandon was right about them after all. At least he has a solution to surviving the end of the world that doesn't involve black magic disguised as machinery - or calling people who aren't there.

Posted by Matthew Oakley on April 28, 2814

= [END STREAM] =

I'm still hoping to find some clues to their technology that I can take back home. Up to this point I haven't found a single thing that is of use, and I can't return empty-handed. I have just got to find something. The zero-point-energy plant is too large for me to take back with me, but maybe I'll find a smaller demonstration model, or some wiring diagrams for it, or something. Too many

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people's lives back home are counting on me, and so far I don't have anything to show for it.

I'm going to experiment with the electrical wiring diagram I found; perhaps I'll be able to trace down that hidden door.

FINAL DESTINATION

August 20, 3094

Something amazing happened today. I was standing in the tachyon communications center, trying to trace some wires, when a small spherical machine came flying down the hall toward me. It stopped a few feet away and began transmitting messages over my suit radio.

“Hello, Miles Porter,” a crackly voice said.

“Hey!” I said. “I thought you told me that your avatar system wasn’t working and you couldn’t leave the *Silver Star*. What are you doing?”

“I have not left the ship, Miles Porter. I have simply constructed a probe that I can use to transmit messages to you. In this way I can accompany you on your explorations.”

Wonderful – so Al found a loophole. There goes my peace and quiet – and I had been so productive, too.

“So what motivated you to do this, Al? Why do you seek to torment me?”

“I bring good news, Miles Porter! I have been able to decrypt two messages from the data core. I thought you might want to know as quickly as possible.”

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“What? I thought you told me that was impossible!”

“I said it was almost impossible, Miles Porter. I have been able to extract two messages.”

“I’ll be right there.”

Ten minutes later I was back on board the ship, staring at a console. Al had found these two messages:

= [BEGIN STREAM] =

I’ve been informed that Flora has noticed some tampering with Charlie and is investigating the cause. It looks like she may very well discover our calculations, and it could be hard to explain why we want to know how the planet will break up and what parts will remain relatively intact. I’m going to have a meeting with the others and come up with a plan to deal with this.

Posted by Arnold Brandon on December 27, 2814

= = = = =

well, we’ve decided upon a course of action. It’s good to know that the powers that be are behind us; with them on our side, I don’t see any trouble resulting from this. They know why we have to do it, and they know what would happen if everyone on the planet found out we were planning an escape hatch just for us. Some people just don’t understand why we should survive and they shouldn’t, and that might disrupt

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our plans to get to the new FTL research station.

And really, I don't see Flora complaining. She's going to die in a couple more months anyway; how could it possibly matter if we speed things up a bit? It all ends the same anyway. I'm sure her friends would say that we'll have to answer to God for this, but I'll take my chances.

Posted by Arnold Brandon on December 28, 2814

= [END STREAM] =

"They're kind of short," I told Al.

"Of course," he replied. "The shorter messages were less likely to be damaged. The long ones are most likely lost for good, but now that I know the encryption key I may be able to decode some other intact messages."

"Thanks, Al," I said, and I meant it. "Keep at it. This is getting interesting."

FINAL DESTINATION

August 21, 3094

Al and I worked together to find the secret door that I had been searching for. I really had to hand it to Al: he may be annoying but he's hard to live without. I would never have opened the door if it hadn't been for him.

What he discovered was that the door wasn't a door in the normal sense of the word; instead, the security mechanism interacted with the active material of the wall itself to cause a portion of the wall to either dissolve or reappear at will. It turned out that the door was only held open by an electric force, so once we cut the power to that section of the wall the particles collapsed and the hallway was revealed. I would never have figured that out on my own: why, when I was a kid, doors were just holes in the wall. How times have changed.

Down the hallway was the pot of gold, all right: the wormhole transporter research center. This is where they did all of their experiments in wormhole transport. I was thrilled.

"This is terrific, Al. If this equipment works it would be a huge discovery."

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"Perhaps, Miles Porter, but it would not solve your planet's problems. You need to find the citizens of this planet, not its machinery."

Unfortunately he was right. "Well, maybe we'll discover if they were able to get off the planet or not. If they were able to get the wormhole transporter working then they just might have survived."

"Perhaps," he said.

"You have been able to find the coordinates of the planet that they were trying to reach, haven't you?"

"Yes, I have," Al said. "It no longer exists as it, too, was destroyed in the shockwave, which was far more extensive than they estimated."

"Oh."

Right next to the room with the wormhole transporter equipment was a room filled with large, strange electrical devices. They looked something like storage capacitors, although I'm sure they were more complicated than that. Al told me that they were used to store up the tremendous surge of energy that the transporter needed in order to build its wormhole. The process was similar to the one used by the *Silver Star*: it would build up a huge reservoir of energy and then discharge it all at once to create the wormhole. Considering how much raw

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power the zero-point-energy plant could generate, these capacitors (or whatever they were) must have been able to store a truly fantastic amount of power.

We were able to find a message on one of the consoles:

= [BEGIN STREAM] =

I'm having a lot of trouble keeping the heat down in this room. The energy stored in these batteries is pretty intense (more than has ever been stored in a battery, I'll wager), and the cooling systems continue to fail. I have established a system that will pump the excess heat into the ventilation system, so whenever there is a failure the heat can be siphoned off, but it's only a stopgap measure. I'm just going to have to find a better way to keep this room cooled. At least the door fields are keeping the heat from escaping the room and warming up the rest of the base!

I really wish that Charlie wasn't acting crazy, but ever since the overclocked matrix became unstable he just hasn't been the same. We tried restoring the default settings, but even a normal matrix isn't stable for very long. Flora would definitely be able to restore the matrix stability, but of course she's dead and isn't able to help us.

Boy, did her death ever raise problems! Her friends were livid and demanded an investigation into Arnold Brandon, asking why only she died of food

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poisoning when everyone on this base ate the same food. What nerve they have, making such an accusation against Arnold! Besides, they're always saying how they're ready to die and meet their Maker, so I don't see why they should be so upset when someone helps them along. You'd think they would be thrilled. Fortunately no one listened to the little whiners, and it all died down after a few weeks.

It's becoming more and more obvious that the wormhole transporter isn't going to work: it just doesn't have the range, and with Charlie's matrix shot to pieces there's no easy way to find out how to give it more range. They might still work something out, though - but if they don't, at least we have a backup plan, so it's no great loss.

Before Charlie's matrix collapsed a few of us ran some calculations to find out what parts of the planet would remain intact when the shockwave hits. Once we found out we started building a base there. We're stocking it with equipment and have hit upon an idea: the wormhole transporter that we've built so far could be modified and placed on a spaceship to make a faster-than-light propulsion unit. It would take a few years, but since the underground base will survive we ought to have the time.

Since not much of the planet will survive when the plasma hits us the base can't be very large; it'll hold 50 of us at most, and there are thousands of people on this planet. I agree with Arnold: only the fittest should survive, and that would be us.

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Posted by Charles Brandon on February 8, 2815

= [END STREAM] =

“Interesting,” I said. “Hey, Al, do you have any biographical information on Charles Brandon? He isn’t related to Arnold, is he?”

“I have found this entry,” Al said, and he read off the following information:

= [BEGIN STREAM] =

Charles Brandon

Born: July 18, 2776

Died: ----

Physical Appearance: Thinning gray hair, gray eyes, 5’ 11”, strong build. This person is the brother of Arnold Brandon, and he looks it.

Discipline: Has a degree in cooling systems and theoretical chemistry.

Occupation: Spends most of his time maintaining the capacitors at the Larson’s Folly Spatial Mechanics laboratory and ensuring that they don’t melt down and destroy half the planet. His official position is chief chemical engineer, and is responsible for the chemistry department on this research station.

Security clearance: Gamma Prime.

Last updated: January 1, 2815

= [END STREAM] =

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“This is all getting very interesting, Al. Let me know if you are able to decrypt any more messages.”

“I will,” he said.

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August 22, 3094

Our progress was slowed down a little bit when we discovered a slight problem. Evidently some time ago a water main had burst and flooded the wormhole transporter room with three feet of water. That was fine until the temperature in the room dropped to almost absolute zero, at which point the three feet of water became three feet of solid ice. The hardware we wanted to examine was all encased in ice, and there wasn't anything we could do with it until we melted it.

The only thing left to do was to melt the ice, so I sealed up the room as best I could, restored an atmosphere to it, installed some drainage pipes, and set up a lot of heaters. Melting that much ice, though, was going to take some time, so while that was happening I decided to look for more messages on the consoles in the room (the ones above the ice, at any rate).

I was able to find one but it was not encouraging. This was located on a wall panel above the ice in the wormhole transporter room:

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= [BEGIN STREAM] =

I think we're about ready to throw in the towel. We've tried and tried to get this transporter to work, but Charlie is becoming more erratic every day now that his matrix has been shot to pieces. If only we could stabilize him! Then, perhaps, we could run some programs and find out what we're doing wrong.

Flora could have done that in a heartbeat, but of course she was murdered by Brandon & Company. I guess she stepped on his toes once too many times and he decided to flex his political muscle and do something about her. That man has no conscience at all, and the authorities at the base aren't exactly bleeding hearts either. I can't believe they wouldn't even investigate it; they said it would be too "divisive" and would distract from their primary mission. You would think that at the very least they would be upset at losing the one person they had who could keep Charlie running, but they don't seem concerned at all.

I've heard rumors that certain people have drawn up a backup plan but I don't have any proof of that. I don't know what it could possibly be but that might account for the way they are acting. I do know, though, that there is no escape for them: one day they will stand before a God that they have openly hated and give an account of everything they have done. They have murdered someone for whom Christ shed His blood to save: do they really think that God is not going to care,

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especially when they despised His mercy and rebuffed His offer of forgiveness?

Flora was guilty of only one crime: she believed there was only one way to God, and she shared her beliefs with others in an attempt to save them. She made many enemies that hated what she stood for and longed to silence her, and now at last they have succeeded.

It is truly heartbreaking.

It's looking more and more likely that we are all going to die soon: the deadline is less than two months away. Regardless of what happens I know my final destination; there is strife here now, but I will live to see it end.

Posted by Morton West on February 19, 2815

= [END STREAM] =

I could see that things were not going too well. Only two months left and no way off the planet – well, that pretty much clinched it. Maybe I had come on a wild-goose-chase after all, but how can I go back to Tau Ceti and tell my kinsmen that there is nothing we can do but watch our entire planet suffer and die?

While I stood there, reading through old messages and trying to coax the ice to melt, Al came by and made an announcement.

“I’ve decoded some more message fragments!” he said.

“Great!” I said. “I’ll be right there to see them. Hold tight.”

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“Do you not want to stay and monitor the ice?” he asked.

“Um, no – I think the ice can melt without me.”

I hurried back to the ship and sat down in the pilot’s chair. Al had this stream of messages loaded on one of the consoles:

= [BEGIN STREAM] =

A high-speed data link has been established between this laboratory and the newly-created FTL Research Station. The data link has been encrypted using the Dodd algorithm and its usage has been limited to those with both Alpha-Double-Prime clearance and membership in the new FTL Research Station.

Transmissions through the data link have stabilized at 4.6 terabytes per second, and will be maintained for the duration.

Posted by AI unit Charlie on December 28, 2814

= = = = =

The high-speed data link to the FTL Research Station has been lost; the transmission line was severed when the planet broke up. No further information is available.

Posted by AI unit Charlie on March 28, 2815

= = = = =

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The FTL Research Station was established on December 1, 2814 by Dr. Anna Braxton. Its purpose was to investigate the possibility of faster-than-light travel through wormholes. The initial concept came from the wormhole transporter: if you can create a wormhole, why not create a larger one and drive a ship through it?

Given the fact that research and construction into such a ship would likely take several years and the planet was going to be destroyed on March 28 of 2815, it was decided to build a base that could survive the destruction of a planet. With this in mind, Dr. Braxton used Charlie to determine how the planet was likely to break up, and from there determine where to place this base and how to build it. The calculations were done in mid-November and construction began immediately.

The existence of the base has been classified due to the fact that it can only support 50 people. A larger base could have been constructed, but Dr. Braxton, based on input from Arnold Brandon, decided that 50 people would be sufficient to continue the project and the others on the planet were expendable.

The base was outfitted with everything necessary to support life for several years, and its occupants were chosen carefully by a select committee. On March 15, 2815, Dr. Braxton gathered the group and set off for this hidden base, leaving no indication about what they were doing. Dr. Harold Webb closed down the Larson's Folly Spatial

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Mechanics laboratory on March 19, 2815, right on schedule.

The last communication received from the hidden base took place on March 18, 2815 as a few last items were downloaded from Charlie's matrix. No more communications have been received, but details in the last communication indicate that all 50 people made it to the hidden base and were there when the shockwave hit.

Posted by AI unit Charlie on January 1, 3094

= [END STREAM] =

"Thanks, Al," I said. "I don't think that's good news, but I'm glad to hear it. Let me know if you are able to find any more messages, ok?"

"Will do," he said.

FINAL DESTINATION

August 23, 3094

As it turned out, I found the next message before he did. While I was waiting for the ice to melt (who knew it took so long to melt ice?) I was able to extract another message from a wall panel:

= [BEGIN STREAM] =

we tried: we tried so very, very, very hard. It is heartbreaking to fail after coming so close, but there is no question that we have failed.

we did our very best to build a wormhole transporter. Ever since I got the idea five years ago I have been pursuing it, first via theoretical mathematics and computer simulations and afterward through direct experiments. The breakthrough came on April 22, 2814 when we had the accident in the lab upstairs. Once I realized why the accident had happened and what I had achieved I realized where we had gone wrong, and from there it only took us four months to have a miniature working model of a wormhole transporter.

At first all it could do was move a mouse a few inches, but as we refined our theories we made tremendous

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progress. By mid-September we could living transport objects weighing hundreds of pounds over a distance of two hundred miles. From that point we continued to make steady progress, and it looked like we just might make it - until Flora died.

When she died my hopes for success died as well. She was the only person in the world who could keep Charlie together, and as soon as she was gone Charlie's matrix collapsed and we never got him to work properly again. A lot of people suspect that foul play was involved in her death, and I've been suspicious myself, although I have no idea what anyone could hope to gain by her death.

We kept trying after she died but we all knew it was hopeless. We had to use Charlie to refine our calculations, and without him there was nothing we could do. You can't build anything by random chance, especially a wormhole transporter.

But we kept trying, right up until today. We promised that we would try until the end of February, and today the end of February has come. We haven't made an inch of progress since Flora's death and it's very clear that we're not going to. It's maddening: I all but can guarantee that all we have wrong are a few parameters, but there's no way we can find those out now.

Today is February 28, 2815. The blast will hit the planet on March 28, exactly one month from now. During that month we will prepare the best we can. God may still save us yet; it's impossible to say what might happen,

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and His might, which created the universe, is certainly far more than sufficient to save us from it.

I wish we could build a safe haven on this planet, but it's impossible. Jay Cheves in the astronomy department has told me that there are just too many unknowns to make any accurate predictions. We don't know what the shockwave is composed of, how it will hit us, or how big it will be, and without knowing any of those things we can't possibly determine how the shockwave will break up the planet.

well, all I can say is that we tried. From here on out, as always, the future rests in the hands of God. Remember us, Lord, and have mercy on us.

Posted by Dr. Henry Durant on February 28, 2815

= [BEGIN STREAM] =

That really seemed to clinch it, in my opinion: there is no way these people could have survived. My initial fear, sadly, was correct.

Still, though, there was still the wormhole transporter under the ice; perhaps it would yield some information. I couldn't go home empty-handed – I just couldn't. I saw that the ice was almost melted and calculated that one more night of heat should do the trick.

Tomorrow, I thought, we would discover the secret of Larson's Folly.

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August 24, 3094

That morning, before I left to go check on the ice, Al told me that he had decoded another message.

“You’re really getting good at this, Al,” I said. “I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you, Miles,” he said.

“Hey – you called me by my first name!”

“I did,” he said. “You’re welcome.”

Al then brought the following message up on the ship’s console:

= [BEGIN STREAM] =

The time has at last come to leave this base, and I can say I’m glad to do it. In a little less than two weeks the shockwave is going to hit this planet and break it into fragments, and everyone is going to die – except for us! Before Charlie’s matrix collapsed he told us where the safest place on the planet was going to be, and we built a hardened base right there. The planet will be destroyed, but large fragments will remain – including the one that houses our base.

The fifty of us who inhabit it will continue to work in our fully-equipped laboratory, where we’ll develop a spaceship that uses this new wormhole

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drive that Dr. Braxton has been secretly developing. Once it is working we can use it to travel to another star system, where we can sell the technology to dying worlds and become rich beyond our wildest dreams.

The best part of all is that we will at last be rid of all those other people, clamoring and shouting and trying to save us all from the wrath to come. I have become so sick of their lack of tolerance, and it will be great when they're all gone at last.

We are going to survive, and that makes me very happy.

Posted by Arnold Brandon on March 15, 2815

= [END STREAM] =

"I don't understand," I said. "Didn't you do a complete scan of the area when we got here?"

"Yes," the computer replied.

"But you didn't find any evidence of another base or survivors, did you?"

"No, I didn't."

"Curious. Perhaps something happened in the past two centuries."

"Perhaps."

When I got back inside the wormhole transporter laboratory I was pleased to see that the area was free of ice. Yes! Now I could get to work.

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My investigation was surprisingly short. Embedded in the wall panel beside the wormhole transporter were these log entries:

= [BEGIN STREAM] =

I have to admit we cut it close, but by God's grace we made it! The Dolly May arrived on March 22, 2815, which gave us six days to evacuate every last soul from Larson's Folly. Since there were less than 6,000 people on the planet it didn't take them long to get loaded on board (we'd come prepared to evacuate a whole lot more folks than that), and we even had time to remove a lot of their equipment. Some things had to stay, though: we just didn't have the time to remove the artifact they named 'Charlie' or to take out their power plant. We did have the time to take out the wormhole transporter but they decided to leave it there: on the off-chance that the base survived they'd be able to use it should they ever come this way again.

The folks on Larson's Folly were shocked to see us enter their airspace and land. They had called for help a year ago but they never expected to actually get any. We could have told them that we were coming if their receiver had been working, but it wasn't so we just had to hope that they'd be ok until we got there. They all were, except for fifty of them that we just could not find. I don't know where they had disappeared to, but I hope they'll be ok.

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During the evacuation, Dr. Durant asked how on earth we could have answered their call. I told him that during the past decade we'd made the same discovery he did, only instead of using it to build a wormhole transporter (which was a good idea, by the way) we used it to build a wormhole drive. It's not a really efficient one, but it was good enough to make a pretty decent starship. Once we got their call we headed out, and it only took us about ten months to travel the 40 light-years between our home and Larson's Folly - and that, my friends, is really moving. There's no way you could do that without wormhole travel.

we did look at their transporter while we were here, and we tweaked it a bit and actually got it to work. Durant was right; they really were just off a little bit on their basic parameters, which I don't think could be helped, judging by the archaic computing equipment they have here. We decided to leave it intact and working, just in case they ever came back.

when I asked them where they wanted to go they told us that they would be glad to go back home with us if we would be willing to have them. I told 'em that would be fine, and they were glad to hear it.

So today we're moving out! This is the last message we're leaving behind. If you're looking for us, you'll find us at the coordinates to this message.

Take care, one and all!

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Posted by Captain Jeff Newcomb on March 26, 2815

= = = = =

One hundred and thirteen years ago today we left the planet Larson's Folly. Last week we returned to see how it had fared in our absence.

Our new home has been a good one. Captain Newcomb's people have been very generous; they have given us a large continent entirely to ourselves, and we have put it to good use. We have built new cities on it and have started a new civilization. Our relationship with Captain Jeff Newcomb's people has proven to be mutually beneficial: they have shared their wormhole transporter technology and we in turn have supplied them with the zero-point-energy plants they need to power them. Together we have set out to explore the galaxy - but our results have been disappointing. We have found many devastated planets but so far no inhabited ones; the civil war that raged more than two hundred years ago appears to have killed everyone and left only ourselves as survivors. There may yet be others who have survived, for the galaxy is a large place, but that hope is beginning to fade.

We were surprised to learn that any part of Larson's Folly still survived - in fact, so certain were we that the entire planet was vaporized that we didn't even think to check for seventy years. When our astronomers did point their megascopes toward our former home they found small bits of rock - and, of all things, this research station.

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No one really knows how this station survived when everything else was vaporized. Charlie (whose mental condition has not improved with age) tells us that the base was on the opposite side of the planet where the shockwave hit, and perhaps this is so; still, I don't know why it was permitted to survive. All of it is not intact, but a lot of it is and some systems are even still functional.

Enough of that. My thoughts today, as I walk these halls as a very old man for what will likely be the last time, rest on Brandon - and Flora.

When I left the planet I had no idea what had become of Arnold Brandon and the others that were missing. We searched high and low for them before we left on the Dolly May but they could not be found, and we eventually just had to leave. Now, thanks to Charlie, I know why I could not find them.

None of us had any idea what Brandon was up to in those final days. We thought he killed Flora but we didn't know why. None of us knew about his secret hideaway or his plans to survive at the expense of everyone else. It all makes sense now - a certain kind of tragic sense. Brandon murdered Flora in order to save his life, but he ended up only killing himself and his friends. Had he not murdered Flora he might still be alive today.

What Brandon did not realize was that everyone will die eventually. Yes, we did survive the destruction of Larson's Folly, but our time will still come.

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The long life I have been blessed with is rapidly approaching its end, and I know I will soon be going home to be with my Lord. None of us actually escaped death; we just delayed it, for death is still coming for each and every one of us. Some of us are ready to die and do not fear it, but others are not.

Brandon was content to live as he saw fit and ignore death, not pausing to consider what was coming. Was their life after death? Must all stand before God and give an account of their life? He didn't really care; he wasn't interested in what would happen to him in those endless ages of time that he would spend as a dead man. Such a short time is spent alive and such a very long time is spent dead, and yet those who seek to know their final destination are few indeed. Brandon was content to ignore the question and bet his eternal existence on a vague feeling, and he will spend eternity reaping the consequences of that decision.

There are so few that spend time seeking the answer to matters that will affect them forever. Yet there are those who not only seek the answers, but find them and take great comfort in them.

It is time for me to go; the group is waiting on me to finish this entry so that we can return home. The transporter in the wormhole lab works fine; it can no longer track our planet, but once the coordinate is entered one can simply step across it onto our world. I do not expect to make

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another trip back. My work, however, is done: Larson's Folly is dead, but its people are safe and will remain safe for a long time to come.

Posted by Dr. Henry Durant on March 26, 2929

= [END STREAM] =

I was thrilled. "Look at that, Al – look at that! So they did survive after all. Can you believe it? Now all we've got to do is go pay them a visit. Do those coordinates that Durant mentioned make any sense to you?"

"Yes they do," Al replied. "Would you like to go there?"

"Absolutely. I'll be right there."

When I got back on board the ship I found that Al had one more surprise for me: he had decoded some more messages.

"You're getting pretty good at this," I said, as he brought them up for me to read. "I'm glad you're on my side."

"Thank you," he responded.

= [BEGIN STREAM] =

It's done. It was just like giving candy to a baby. She's dead, all right, but I can't help but feel that something went horribly wrong.

Flora had to go, of course: she was getting close to figuring out what we had been using Charlie for. If she found out what we were trying to do, it would cause a real mess: people would

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see it as an attempt at saving ourselves at the expense of everyone else (when in fact it was just an attempt at saving a few people instead of letting everyone die), and it would have created a real mess. Flora couldn't be permitted to keep poking around.

So, late last night - it was after 10:30pm - she and a friend of hers wandered into my cafeteria. They had been up late working on a problem relating to the wormhole transporter, and they wanted to get a bite to eat before retiring for the night. The two of them wandered over to the counter, and I served them what they ordered. No one else was in the cafeteria, and that made it even easier.

I knew I had to get a poison that would work fast: I wanted her to die instantly so that there was no chance of her being revived. A little research turned up just what I wanted, and it was easy enough to slip it into her drink. She would notice the taste, of course, but by that time it would be too late. She would be dead within seconds.

I stood behind the counter and watched them as they walked over to a table, sat down, gave thanks for their meal, and started eating. They were laughing and joking, unwinding after a hard day's work. Then Flora lifted the cup and drank it.

I watched her every move. She must have been really thirsty because she took a long drink (far more than enough to kill her) and the drug hit while she

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was still gulping it down. She changed; her hand relaxed, allowing the glass to slip out and shatter on the floor. Her friend jumped up to help her, but Flora had already slumped out of her chair and onto the floor. She was dead.

But she didn't die right. When we took out Cornell, you could see on his face that he knew he was dying: just as the poison gripped him you could see in his eyes the terrible fear - horror that he was dying, and terrible hatred toward the person he knew did it to him. He knew he was dying and it terrified him, and it was immensely satisfying watching him go into the darkness.

with Flora it was different. As her glass was falling to the floor her gaze strayed into the hallway (the last move she ever made) and her eyes widened. It was as if she had just caught sight of someone she had waited all her life to meet and she just couldn't wait to introduce herself - only there was no one in the hallway. Nobody. I didn't see any fear on her face; it was almost as if something else had her attention and she didn't even notice that she was dying.

After she hit the floor, she stopped breathing, and her friend sounded the alarm. People came running from all directions, and doctors were there within minutes and pronounced her dead on the spot. She was cremated the next morning - she wanted to be buried, but we cremated her over the protests of her friends and relatives to make doubly sure that she wasn't coming back. Her ashes have been scattered and there is now nothing left of her.

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So why does she still haunt me? why do I feel like she is still alive, just out of reach?

Posted by Arnold Brandon on December 31, 2814

= [END STREAM] =

I shook my head. "What else do you have, Al?"

He displayed this notice on the console:

= [BEGIN STREAM] =

Faster-than-light research station

Created by Dr. Anna Braxton on December 1, 2814 AD.

Purpose: Creation of a spaceship capable of traveling faster-than-light by the employment of a wormhole drive.

Status: Based on tectonic readings and scans from the starship Dolly May, it is clear that this station was destroyed in the breakup of the planet on March 28, 2815 AD. The crust of the planet shattered in unexpected ways and the base would have been completely pulverized, killing any who were in it at the time. The base, therefore, has been classified as closed.

= [END STREAM] =

"And thus ended the life of Arnold Brandon. Did he leave any last words, Al?"

FINAL DESTINATION

"I have found this, Miles."

= [BEGIN STREAM] =

I've been having this horrible dream. I see myself standing in front of a great white throne in the midst of a tremendously large crowd. A great person, too terrible to look upon, is sitting on the throne, with eyes of fire that pierce my very soul. It's chilling just to look at him, but try as I might I can't tear my eyes from him. His very existence fills me with terror.

I watch with great dread as he opens a great, thick book filled with many names. The names are read aloud, and those whose names were found in it go through a gate and are seen no more. When the last name is read the book is closed - and I am still standing there, along with many others.

At this point I feel myself falling. Words from the one who sits on the throne are thundering at me and I do my best to shut them out. Blackness begins to overcome me, and I can see nothing. It is getting warmer...

...and then I wake up, screaming and shaking in fear. I don't know what it means and I don't want to know what it means. But I am scared and I wonder what is happening to me. It must be just a dream.

Posted by Arnold Brandon on March 17, 2815

= [END STREAM] =

FINAL DESTINATION

I shook my head. What else was there to say? I looked out the cockpit window to the base outside.

“Are you ready to go, Miles?” the computer asked, interrupting my train of thought.

“I’m ready, Al,” I replied. “Warp factor one – engage!”

“What’s that?” Al asked, as the ship quietly lifted off the asteroid and headed into space.

“Oh, nothing – I just always wanted to say that. How long do you think it will take us to get there?”

“Twenty-one days, seven hours, six minutes.”

“That’s not too bad. I was afraid it was going to take us another ten months, and that would have killed me for sure.” I settled back in the captain’s chair, and then a thought struck me.

“Hey, Al. You’ve got a working tachyon communicator, don’t you?”

“That is correct.”

“Why don’t you turn it on and try to contact that planet? Maybe they’ve got a working receiver. I’d certainly love to speak to them.”

“Very good, Miles. I will find out.”

Al called them up – and they answered.