

# **Jack Falcon and His Quantum Singularity**



*A Jack Falcon Adventure – Volume #1*

# **Jack Falcon and His Quantum Singularity**

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# **CONTENTS**

<b>CHAPTER ONE.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>CHAPTER TWO.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>CHAPTER THREE.....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>CHAPTER FOUR.....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>CHAPTER FIVE.....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>CHAPTER SIX.....</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>CHAPTER SEVEN.....</b>	<b>93</b>



## ***CHAPTER ONE***

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“WHERE ARE THEY?” Jack Falcon asked anxiously. “Daniel should have been here an hour ago!”

His wife Irene smiled at him and shook her head. “Calm down, Jack! The *Liberty* will get here. Just be patient.”

Jack and Irene Falcon were standing just outside Star City's only spaceport, waiting for their old friend Daniel Hollins to land with some much-needed supplies. The Star City colony was mankind's first settlement outside the Solar System. It was founded four years ago when an international conglomerate known as the Barclay Group had approached Falcon Technologies, the company that Jack's grandfather had founded. For three generations the Falcons had spent their lives inventing cutting-edge technologies, and after nineteen-year-old Jack developed a way of traveling between

stars the Barclay Group decided it was time for Earth to branch out.

So Jack built the *Behemoth*, a giant starship that ferried 6,000 brave colonists from Earth to the planet Myra – a rocky, airless world that circled the star Epsilon Eridani. A year later Jack married his lifelong sweetheart Irene Goddard and the new couple moved to Myra to help the struggling colony. Together they had worked to turn mankind's only interstellar colony into a self-sustaining city.

Star City had been built at the bottom of a deep, dry canyon that was twelve miles long and two miles wide. A pair of atmosphere makers that Jack had designed had spent the past four years filling the canyon with air. Even though the rest of the planet's surface was uninhabitable, there was enough air inside the canyon to allow the colonists to go outside without a spacesuit. It would take decades for the rest of Myra to become terraformed but the Falcons were patient. To them the end result – turning a dead planet into a live one – was well worth the cost.

In front of Jack and Irene was a large, barren piece of ground that served as the



landing field. It was surrounded on three sides by the sheer walls of the canyon. At the far end of the field was the *Behemoth*. The giant starship was rarely used anymore, but occasionally the colony would need to send someone to Earth for some supplies or replacement parts. The ship was the colony's only way off the planet.

Behind them was a three-story-tall metal tower that served as the planet's only air traffic control center. The tower was also the tallest building on Myra, as the rest of the colony had been built underground. Jack would have preferred to build the spaceport underground as well but they colony's mayor had rejected that idea.

Jack glanced at his watch and sighed. "I just don't understand. What could be keeping them? We're only eleven light-years from Earth – the *Liberty* should be able to cover that distance in a matter of hours. I've done it many times myself!"

The *Liberty* was the first interplanetary spaceship that Jack had ever built. He used it to travel to the moon and, later, to tour the Solar System. When Jack invented his faster-than-light drive he decided to retrofit the *Liberty* and install it on her. Since that time

he had developed newer and faster ships, but his first one still had a special place in his heart.

“Maybe they got a late start,” Irene suggested. “Keep in mind, the two of us ordered a lot of equipment! It's taken Daniel six months to get everything you asked for. He may have discovered at the last minute that he forgot something and had to have a part flown in to the Falcon Spaceport.”

Jack shook his head. “I talked to Daniel myself just this morning. He told me that he was at Dad's spaceport and the *Liberty* was ready to go.”

“Well, worrying about it isn't going to make your starship get here any faster,” Irene pointed out. “Just think about what you'll be able to do after it arrives! We'll be able to make Xenolab I a genuine laboratory, stocked with all the latest equipment. It'll be almost as good as our lab back on Earth.”

“It *will* be nice to work with modern tools again,” Jack admitted. “We've spent years scrounging around as best we could. I would've had this equipment flown in years ago but the colony just wasn't ready for it.”

“I'm afraid that food, water, sanitation, and power are a bit more important than

gamma-ray emitters,” Irene teased. The red-headed girl looked up into the empty sky. She was about to say something but was interrupted by a voice behind her. “Hey Jack!”

The young inventor turned around and saw Karen Miller standing at the door to the control tower. Karen, a trained biologist, was the spaceport's only employee. She came by the tower once a day to see if they had any messages, and she worked there on the rare occasion when a ship was landing or taking off. Otherwise she spent her time managing the colony's hydroponics gardens.

“Got a message for you, Jack,” Karen called out. “That friend of yours wants to talk to you.”

“Finally!” Jack exclaimed. He sprinted over to the tower and ran inside. His wife shook her head and calmly followed him. When she got inside the building and climbed upstairs she saw that her husband was already talking to Daniel on one of the room's small viewscreens.

“That just doesn't make any sense,” Jack was saying. “How is that possible?”

“That's what I want to know!” Daniel replied. “There we were, cruising right along,

and then – bam! - the kronolator stopped working and we dropped back into normal space. As far as we can tell there's nothing wrong with the unit itself. I've even had your Dad check it out – in fact, he's down there now looking it over.”

“Can you turn it on?” Jack asked.

“Sure,” Daniel replied. “I can turn it on and off all day long. I just can't go any further in your direction. As soon as I tell the ship to head toward Myra the drive cuts out immediately. I can go anywhere else – I just can't head your way.”

Jack looked puzzled. “Does the sublight drive work?”

“Sure,” Daniel replied. “But keep in mind that we're still half a light-year away from you. As fast as your sublight drive is it's nowhere near faster-than-light. It would take us years to reach Myra at that speed.”

“So the kronolator works, but it won't let you travel to Myra?” Jack asked, confused.

“How is that possible?” Irene asked.

“It's not,” Jack complained. “I've never heard of anything remotely like that before! It doesn't make any sense.”

“Well, let's start at the beginning,” his wife said. “We'll figure this out. Now, you

designed the kronolator to achieve faster-than-light travel by manipulating the flow of time, correct?"

"Right," Jack replied. "There's no way to exceed a speed of 186,000 miles per second in space. So, to get around that, my kronolator alters the flow of time around the starship. Since it can control how much time is passing it can cross vast distances very quickly."

"That means the drive depends on the ability to manipulate time. Right?"

"Of course," Jack replied. "You know that! You're as familiar with the kronolator as I am."

"Then the problem is obvious," Irene said. "If there's nothing wrong with the drive itself then there must be some anomaly near Myra that is keeping the kronolator from altering the flow of time. In other words, *outer space* must be broken. It's the only logical conclusion."

"But we've made the trip from Earth to Myra many times!" Jack protested. "This has never been a problem in the past."

"Then something must have changed," Irene replied.

"She's making sense," Karen added.

“We've had a lot of strange things happen around here recently.”

Jack nodded. “Now that's true. All right. Daniel, just to be on the safe side, can you ask Dad to perform one last system-wide diagnostic? I want to be *completely* sure that this isn't some computer-related glitch. Then we can turn our attention to—”

Jack was interrupted in mid-sentence by an ear-shattering siren. He winced involuntary. Karen immediately panicked. “Not again!” she screamed. The biologist ran out of the tower at top speed.

Daniel looked confused. “What's that awful noise?”

“It's the colony's solar flare advance warning system,” he explained over the wail of the siren. “I installed it last month. I hate to do this but I've got to go. We'll finish this conversation later.”

Jack reached over and turned off the tower's equipment, and then he and his wife raced outside. In the distance they saw a silver hovercar driving away at top speed.

“Hey!” Irene shouted. “She took our hovercar! What's the matter with her?”

“She panicked,” Jack replied. “The last solar flare almost destroyed her hydroponics

garden, which would have wiped out our food supply. She's probably racing there now to make sure it's properly shielded."

"But she could have waited for us!" Irene glared angrily at the vehicle as it disappeared out of sight. "Now what are we going to do? We can't stand here, Jack – we won't survive if we're out here when that solar flare hits!"

Jack glanced back at the control tower. "It's not shielded enough to protect us," he said at last. "It's worse than useless. We've got to find a way to get underground."

The couple quickly took stock of their surroundings. The spaceport was located at the far end of the canyon, several miles from the rest of the city. When the spaceport was built people felt that it should be located as far away from the settlement as possible in order to protect the colony from space accidents. The only nearby objects were the steep rock walls of the canyon.

"I don't see any other vehicles here," Jack said.

"Of course not," Irene snapped. "*We're* the ones that drove Karen out here! I can't believe she'd do this to us. How much time do we have left?"

"The solar satellite should give us about

fifteen minutes,” Jack replied.

Irene gasped. “We can't possibly *walk* twelve miles in fifteen minutes!”

“I know,” Jack said. His mind raced, and then he had an idea. “Couldn't we ask someone in the colony to come out and rescue us?”

Irene shook her head. “I doubt it. Even if they left right now it would be hard to travel all the way out here, pick us up, and then make it back to the colony before the flare hit.”

“But we can try,” Jack argued. He turned around and raced back into the air traffic control tower. The young inventor powered up the equipment and tried hailing the main colony. Several tense minutes went by but no one answered.

“Great,” Irene said sourly. “I guess everyone's underground now.”

“Which is where they should be,” Jack pointed out. “Everyone knows what to do when a solar flare hits. This is really my fault – I should've connected this system to the colony's underground announcement system. Not doing that was a bad mistake.”

“We can discuss that later,” Irene said. “We've got to do something *now*!”



At that moment the microphone in Jack's hand suddenly surged with energy, giving him a powerful shock. Jack involuntarily dropped the microphone. *Oh no*, Jack thought to himself, *the first wave of the flare must have arrived!* He hastily reached over to turn off the tower's master power supply but he was too late! As his hand touched the switch the power converter exploded into a shower of sparks, burning Jack and sending him flying backwards. The energy surge traveled through the power lines to the tower's primary mainframe, which burst into flames!

Irene helped her dazed husband to his feet and the two raced downstairs. Jack's hand throbbed painfully but he chose to ignore it. *I'll deal with it later*, he decided. *If we don't get underground right now my hand will be the least of our problems!*

As soon as they had exited the now-smoking building Irene stopped. "I thought you said we had fifteen minutes!"

"The solar particles must be traveling faster than I predicted," Jack explained. He sprinted across the landing field at top speed.

"Where are we going?" Irene shouted, as she ran close behind him.

“To the *Behemoth*,” Jack said, pointing. “She's shielded against radiation. It's our only chance!”

As Jack and Irene raced toward the enormous starship they heard a roar behind them. Jack glanced back and saw that the entire air traffic control tower was now in flames. Jack winced at the sight. *I hope the colony is ok*, he thought.

With only moments to spare the young couple finally made it to the starship's airlock. Irene ran up to the door and yanked on it. It did not move. She anxiously pressed the open button but nothing happened. “It's locked!” she screamed.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

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JACK STARED AT THE airlock in horror. “I can't believe it!” he gasped. “Who would possibly have locked it?”

“What do we do?” Irene shouted. “There's no other place to go!”

Jack looked around and an idea suddenly came to him. “Yes there is – follow me!” He sprinted toward the rear of the starship as fast as his legs could carry him.

His wife ran after him. “Where are you going? There's nothing back there!”

“The ship is lying horizontally,” Jack called back. “That means its propulsion system is exposed. At the rear of the ship are giant thrusters that are used to maneuver the ship in space. They're actually enormous tubes that lead deep inside the starship. We can crawl inside them and wait out the storm!”

The *Behemoth* was a giant starship

almost a thousand feet long. It seemed to take an agonizingly long time for them to run the length of the ship. A tremendous sense of urgency pushed them along. Jack knew that a storm of high-energy particles were streaming toward the planet at speeds approaching one-third of the speed of light. *I wish this planet had a decent magnetosphere*, Jack thought. *Then we wouldn't be as defenseless as we are now.* His hand throbbed painfully but he did his best to ignore it.

After what seemed like an eternity the young couple reached the rear of the ship. As Jack had said, the *Behemoth* had three giant conical thrusters at the back. Two of them were out of reach but the third was accessible from the ground.

Jack climbed up onto the nearest thruster and then gave his wife a hand. The two then scrambled up. The cone narrowed as it neared the body of the starship until it terminated into a long pipe. Irene's eyes widened when she saw how small it was. "Jack – that's less than three feet wide!"

"I didn't say it would be comfortable," Jack replied. He first helped Irene inside and then quickly got down on his hands and knees and scooted as far inside as he could.

The burns on his hand made it difficult to travel down the tube but he had no choice. After about forty feet the rocket tube shrank in size and they were forced to stop.

“We're not very far in,” Irene said in a nervous voice.

“This is the best we can do,” Jack replied. “We should be ok though. The particles from the solar flare can't possibly penetrate through all the shielding above us, and since they're being emitted from the sun they'll be falling out of the sky and going straight down to the ground. It'll be tough for them to travel horizontally down this tube. Our exposure should be minimal.”

The couple waited as the warning siren continued to blare. After ten anxious minutes it finally stopped making noise.

Jack relaxed. “I think that's the last of it.”

“Are you sure?” Irene asked dubiously. “Isn't it possible that the storm knocked out the sensor array?”

“I doubt it,” Jack replied. “I think if it was going to do that it would have happened a lot sooner. We were seeing equipment being fried before the bulk of the storm even hit.”

“But you're still taking a chance,” Irene

replied.

“It's a chance I'm willing to take. After all, we can't stay in here forever.”

Jack cautiously scooted backwards out of the rocket tube. He then crawled off the starship, stood up, and looked around. The air traffic control tower was a complete wreck. The metal frame still existed but the rest of it was nothing but a smoldering ruin. Other than that Jack could see no sign that a solar flare had even hit.

“Well?” Irene's voice echoed down the tube.

“It looks ok to me,” Jack replied.

“But you can't see x-rays!” Irene protested.

“Trust me,” Jack said. “The storm is over. Solar flares are intense but short – they don't go on for hours.”

Irene reluctantly climbed out of the pipe and looked around. “I'm filthy,” she complained. Dark, oily grime covered her white dress and was all over her hair. She tried rubbing the dirt off her hands but it didn't do any good.

“Sorry,” Jack apologized. “I'm afraid those tubes don't get cleaned out very often. People don't usually spend much time in

them.”

“I should hope not,” Irene retorted. “Seriously, though, Jack. You need to build some sort of radiation detector in your watch or something. We really need a better way of checking to see if the solar flare has ended. Just going outside and looking around isn't going to cut it. For that matter, the siren should have some sort of 'all-clear' signal to let us know when the danger has passed.”

Jack nodded. “I've got instruments in the lab that can tell us – in fact, I used some of them to build the early warning system – but I just wasn't planning on encountering a flare today. Come to think of it, according to the predictions put together by the weather department another flare wasn't supposed to happen for weeks!”

“I guess they don't know what they're doing,” Irene said.

Jack shook his head. “They're pretty smart people, Irene. Besides, I took a look at their model myself. It was very thorough and and it fit all the available data. No, I think there's some kind of local anomaly that's causing all this. Something is disturbing that star – and maybe keeping Daniel from bringing the *Liberty* any closer.”

“Whatever it is, we need to get to the bottom of it,” his wife said. “We can't live like this, Jack. It's one thing if we know when the flares are going to happen – then we can plan around them. But this situation is just a nightmare. It threatens the whole colony.”

“I know,” Jack replied.

“So what do we do now?” Irene asked.

“I guess we start walking. After all, we can't get inside the *Behemoth* and the tower is burnt to a crisp. We have no way to contact the colony and ask for a ride back.”

“You should have brought your pencil radio.”

“I know,” Jack said. “I just didn't think I'd need it. Things haven't exactly gone according to plan today.”

Irene interrupted him. “Speaking of things not going according to plan, I see trouble coming.” She nodded in the direction of the colony. In the distance Jack saw a bright red hovercar come flying toward them, raising a giant cloud of dust. Jack groaned when he realized who was driving the car.

The hovercar flew right up to Jack and then abruptly stopped. Even though it was flying several feet off the ground its wake



stirred up a cloud of gritty dust that quickly enveloped Jack and his wife. The couple walked out of the cloud, but not before it covered them in even more grime.

With a loud *harumph*, the car's driver got out and slammed the door behind him. Another person climbed out of the passenger side. Jack knew who they were before he even saw them – the driver was Patrick Gamino, the colony's administrator and unofficial mayor, and the passenger was Doug Garcia, the chief medical officer.

Before Jack could even say anything the mayor glared at him. “Look at you, young man! You're filthy! What insanity have you been up to this time?”

“We had to–” Jack began.

“I don't want to hear it,” the mayor snapped. “Do you realize what you've done? Why, that control tower is ruined – completely ruined! It'll take months to rebuild it! Do you think we have nothing better to do than repair things?”

“Now wait just a minute,” Irene said sharply. “The solar flare was responsible for that. Jack warned you not to build it out in the open! That's not his fault.”

“Oh yeah? Well, you two wanted to build

it in the canyon wall! What kind of dumb idea was that?"

"It would still be intact if you'd put it there," Irene retorted.

"This is still your husband's fault, young lady," the mayor snapped. "He promised us that no more flares would happen – gave us his word, even! You can see how much *that's* worth."

"No I didn't," Jack replied. "I said that, according to the evidence we had gathered, there was no indication another flare was imminent."

"Blah blah blah," the mayor sneered. "The point is, you said we'd be safe and we aren't."

"Stow it," Doug interrupted. "Jack's early warning system saved lives and you know it. If it wasn't for that warning we would have been caught totally off-guard. Thanks to Jack we didn't have any major injuries, let alone fatalities. In fact, the only property damage we suffered was thanks to your own stupidity."

"You'd better watch it," the mayor warned. "I can have you shipped back to Earth, you know."

"And I can flatten you with one hand,"

Doug shot back. He turned his back to the mayor and looked at Jack. "I'm so glad you and your wife are safe. When I found out that Karen had stranded you here I was beside myself with worry. I should have known that if anyone could survive out here it would be you two."

"Thanks," Jack replied. "Speaking of which, you didn't happen to bring along a medical kit, did you?" Jack showed him the burns on his hand, which Doug treated. When Jack's hand was medicated and bandaged Doug spoke up. "That should do it. Give it a day or two and then your hand should be as good as new. You were a lucky man – that could have been a lot worse. I just can't believe Karen left you behind."

"You're not the only one," Irene grumbled. "I am *definitely* going to have a long talk with that woman."

"I've already done that," Doug replied. "She'll think twice before she does anything that stupid again. Leaving the two of you behind – no matter how panicked she was – was just criminal."

"There's still the matter of the *Liberty*," the mayor growled. "You Falcons are supposed to be competent but I'm sure not

seeing it! Why, your ship is so dumb that it can't even get near Myra. What is the matter with you people?"

Doug turned around and looked the mayor in the eye. "If you act like a jerk one more time, Patrick, I will break both of your legs and leave your carcass here for the vultures to eat. I have absolutely had it with you today."

The mayor opened his mouth to say something but then thought the better of it. He turned toward the car but Doug grabbed him by the shoulder. "And you're not leaving until *all* of us are ready to go. Do I make myself clear?"

Patrick grumbled but said nothing.

"It's ok," Jack said. "Let him go. I've got some work to do here anyway. Before you leave, though, could you unlock the *Behemoth*? I need to let Daniel know what's going on and that starship now has the only functional FTL communication system on the planet."

Doug turned to the mayor. "You locked Jack out of his own starship?" he asked incredulously.

"I locked everyone out," the mayor replied. "I didn't want someone to steal

anything. It's not safe, leaving it unlocked."

The mayor reluctantly handed Jack the ship's electronic keycard, which Jack took.

"Keep it," Doug said. "Whatever you do, don't give it back to him. It's much safer in your hands."

The mayor shook his head. "I knew I should have left you at the colony."

"I didn't give you a choice," Doug retorted.

After Doug said goodbye to the Falcons the two men got in the car and drove off. Irene sighed. "What is the matter with him?"

"The mayor is Ed's brother," Jack explained. "He just hates me because of that whole mess with my claytronic stones."

"But that was years ago!" Irene replied. "Besides, Patrick wasn't even involved."

Jack sighed. "Ed was never the same after what happened. He gave up inventing completely and retired, and died two years later. I think Patrick blames me for it. I still feel terrible about it all but I can't go back and change it."

"You don't have to deal with this," Irene said. "You have the support the colonists, you know. You could forcibly remove Patrick or have someone back home do it. For that

matter, you could leave Myra and go found your own colony somewhere else. We don't have to live here, you know."

Jack shook his head. "I'm not going to get Patrick fired. He's good at what he does, he's done a lot for the colony, and he's only hostile toward us. In fact, the only time it really gets bad is when things go wrong – like today. Most of the time he leaves us alone. If I were to have him removed it would be a selfish move purely for my own benefit. I'm just not going to do it."

"It would be for me too," Irene argued. "He hates me as much as he hates you. In fact, he might hate me even more."

"That's because – well, you know why. If I hadn't gone back to save you on that fateful day none of this would have happened. Patrick probably thinks that you're even more responsible for everything than I am, since you were the reason I acted the way I did."

"It's just not fair! You can't let this go on forever, Jack. At some point you're going to have to deal with him."

"But not today," Jack replied. "Right now we need to see if Daniel's made any progress and then we need to check into those solar flares. There really shouldn't have been one

today. Something's not right.”

Jack and Irene made their way to the bridge of the *Behemoth*. Jack turned on the ship's communication system and was able to contact the *Liberty*. He was disappointed but not surprised to find that Daniel had made no progress in getting closer to Myra.

“What should I do, skipper?” Daniel asked. “Have you come up with any brilliant flashes of insight in the past half-hour or do I need to let you sleep on this one?”

“I think we're missing something,” Jack replied. “I have a hunch that whatever's keeping you from coming here is also behind the rogue solar flares we've been experiencing. My advice is to head back to Earth. I'll do some research on my end and find out what's going on. Once I know what the anomaly is – if there is one – I'll contact you and we can put together a plan to overcome it.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Daniel said approvingly. “I'll be waiting for your signal.”

Daniel signed off and Jack powered down the equipment on the bridge. He sank down into a chair and looked at his wife. “I wish I knew what was going on,” he said.

"I can help you with that," a voice replied. A moment later a black-haired woman stepped through a doorway and onto the bridge. She was wearing an expensive gray suit and carried a black leather briefcase.

Jack looked at her in surprise. "I'm sorry, but I don't think I know you. Are you one of the colonists?"

"You may call me Eliza," the woman replied. "Officially I am not here and after I leave you will not be able to prove that you spoke to me. But I can answer your question. The people that I work for have discovered the cause of the solar flares."

Irene eyed her suspiciously. "And who might your employers be?"

"For now let's just say that they're people who want to see this colony survive," the lady replied. "For obvious reasons they believe that the two of you are the best hope for saving it."

"So the colony really is in danger," Jack replied. "The flares are getting worse and they're not going to stop."

Eliza nodded. "You are correct. If you do not act soon the entire planet will be placed in serious jeopardy. Myra itself may not



survive.”

The woman opened her briefcase and handed Jack a neatly-typed document. Jack looked at the document, puzzled, and began reading it. Irene stood behind her husband and read it over his shoulder.

“Do you know what that is?” Eliza asked.

Jack nodded as he kept studying the file. “I do. I’ve seen these before, although this is the first time I’ve seen one for this particular region of space. This is a map of local spacial anomalies.”

“And black holes,” Irene added. “I see lots of black holes. Wow! I had no idea there were so many around us. They’re everywhere!”

“This is a highly unusual area of space,” Eliza replied. “Black holes are not common in this part of the galaxy but for some reason there’s a local cluster of them. A very *active* local cluster.”

“I see that,” Jack said. “It looks like their immense gravity is leading to the creation of hundreds of tiny, unstable wormholes. Based on this data I’d say that the short-lived wormholes are temporarily linking the black holes together.”

“That’s weird!” Irene replied. “I didn’t

know they could do that.”

Jack nodded. “It's long been theorized that black holes may trigger wormholes that lead to other places in space. What I didn't realize was that there was a way to tell where the wormhole went or what was on the other side.”

“It wasn't possible until recently,” Eliza commented. “One of your own inventions made this map possible. But do you understand the significance of this?”

Jack frowned. “I see that the black holes are linking to each other. That makes sense, I guess – they would naturally try to connect to whatever was closest, and when it comes to gravitational anomalies you just can't beat a black hole.” His eyes suddenly widened. “Of course! Those black holes – they're crossing the path of the Epsilon Eridani system, aren't they?”

Eliza nodded. “Not always, of course, but occasionally. And when they collapse—”

“—the spacial disturbance upsets the star's balance,” Jack said excitedly. “That's it! That's what is causing the flares. The sun is constantly being disturbed so it's becoming unstable. The violent flares are an indication of an upcoming stellar catastrophe!”

“I bet that's what is keeping the *Liberty* at bay, too,” Irene added. “There's probably some local activity in its path that's disturbing spacetime. The time dilator just can't work under those conditions.”

Eliza nodded. “They are also a direct threat to this planet. So far no wormhole has come into contact with Myra, which is to be expected given the immensity of space and the smallness of this world. But it's only a matter of time before that happens. When it does the planet will fracture.”

Jack looked at Eliza. “So what do we do? I mean, we can't just go and turn the black holes off! And I don't think we can move them, either.”

Eliza closed her briefcase. “That is up to the two of you. You must either find a way to solve this problem, or else abandon the colony before it's destroyed. You have been warned – and that is all the help we are able to provide.”

With that, the lady walked off the bridge and out the door.

## ***CHAPTER THREE***

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“WHO WAS THAT?” Irene asked, after the mysterious lady had disappeared from the bridge.

“I have no idea, but her data looks good,” Jack commented. “This report is quite thorough and it lines up with our observations. I'd like to get an independent confirmation of these numbers but I have a feeling she's right.”

“But who is she? Where did she come from?”

“Right now I'm really not too concerned about it,” Jack replied. “Maybe she works for herself or maybe she works for some division of the Barclay Group. She might even be some kind of alien, for all I know. At the moment it doesn't really matter – our real problem is finding a way to save the colony. After we do that we can play detective and find out who she is.”

“And how do you plan on saving the colony?” Irene asked.

Jack sighed. “I think it's time for a meeting. We need to get the colony's leadership together and discuss what is going on.”

Irene groaned. “Not that! There's got to be some other way.”

“They've got to be told sometime,” Jack pointed out. “I think in this case that needs to be sooner rather than later. This really isn't something we should keep to ourselves.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Three hours later Jack found himself standing in the mayor's office. Since Patrick Gamino was the colony's official leader he had been given a luxurious office in Star City's administrative sector. As the entire city was located underground there were no buildings; instead a Falcon nuclatomizer had been used to excavate the network of tunnels and rooms that comprised the colony's various sectors. The administrative sector was actually quite small, being composed of just a handful of rooms, but the mayor had

gone out of his way to make sure that the largest one was assigned to him.

The administrative sector had been placed on the level that was just below the surface. The colony was home to more than 6,000 people and went as deep as 12 floors underground, but Gamino wanted his administration to be located as close to the surface as possible. He would never say why, but Irene suspected he wanted to be as close to the surface as possible so he could escape if something went wrong. He had no intention of “going down with the ship”.

As soon as Jack returned to the colony he arranged an emergency meeting with the mayor. Pat was very reluctant to meet with the Falcons but he eventually agreed to hear them out as long as Fenton Reynolds, the station's chief science officer, was there to evaluate their claims. As soon as Reynolds joined them Jack and his wife presented the information that Eliza had given them. They were careful to not reveal the source of their data.

“This is why we've been unable to predict the solar flares,” Jack finished. “They're not caused by the sun's normal cycle! These black holes are the source of the problem.”

“A likely story,” the mayor scoffed. “I think it's much more likely that you just don't know what you're talking about!”

“Your findings are very unusual,” Reynolds said. “I was not aware of any black holes in this vicinity. Is there a way to independently confirm these findings?”

Jack thought for a moment. “I could configure the sensors on board the *Behemoth* to scan for these types of anomalies. In fact, that's probably not a bad idea.”

“It's a waste of time,” the mayor snapped.

The science officer ignored him. “Let's suppose that we are able to reproduce your findings and let's further suppose that all of your conclusions are correct. What course of action do you suggest?”

“There's really nothing we can do,” Jack replied regretfully. “These black holes pose an imminent danger to the entire planet. We've been lucky so far but our luck is starting to give out. A single rogue wormhole could easily fracture Myra and cause this world to disintegrate! I'm afraid we have to abandon the colony.”

Reynolds' eyes grew wide. “Abandon the colony! We can't do that. Do you realize what you're saying? We've spent years building

Star City and have invested countless millions of dollars! Evacuation is just not an option – the board of directors would never approve. The Barclay Group demands a return on their investment into this colony.”

“Didn't you hear anything Jack said?” Irene asked. “If a wormhole hits this planet we're done for! How do you plan on keeping the colony together after Myra is broken into tiny little pieces?”

“I just find this impossible to believe,” Reynolds said. “After all, if these black holes really do exist then both Myra and the black holes have coexisted for countless ages! If the situation is that unstable then why wasn't Myra destroyed a long time ago? Its continued existence argues that there is no threat.”

“I don't have all the answers,” Jack confessed. “Maybe something about the situation has changed recently. Maybe something's happened to the black holes or maybe there's some other factor we don't know about. What I *do* know is that the situation is no longer stable. This planet is in incredible danger and if we don't do something soon—”

“Preposterous,” the mayor said. “Simply



preposterous! Where did you get this pack of lies, anyway?"

"You're missing the point," Irene said. "We've got to act while we still can!"

"Your solution is too extreme," Reynolds replied. "After all, the only actual danger we've seen so far are a few solar flares. Even the last one was unable to penetrate the ground and reach Star City. As long as we remain underground I believe we will be fine. I would *certainly* not support evacuation until more compelling evidence presented itself."

"You don't understand," Jack said sharply. "By the time 'more compelling evidence' presents itself we'll all be dead. You can't wait until after the planet is destroyed to evacuate!"

Reynolds shook his head. "I'm sorry, Jack, but I just can't support such an extreme action, especially based on such flimsy evidence. It just does not make sense."

"Enough!" the mayor shouted. "This meeting is adjourned. Now get out of here!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Dejected, Jack and Irene returned to their

small one-room apartment. When they got inside Jack sat down on the couch. His wife sat down beside him and put her arm around him.

“I just don't know what to do,” he sighed.

“Ignore them,” Irene suggested. “You knew before you set foot in that room that they weren't going to listen to you. The mayor was never going to agree to evacuate the colony no matter what you told him.”

“But this is a terrible place for a colony! I wish I'd thought to run subspace scans of the area before we built Star City but this whole situation just never occurred to me. I mean, I understand Reynolds' point. The Barclay Group really has invested a lot of money into this colony – and for that matter so has Falcon Technologies. I know evacuating it would be a huge loss and I really hate to abandon it, but it's a lot better than staying here and getting killed.”

“I agree with you, honey, but Pat has a different perspective. He probably thinks you're still out to get the Gamino family and that this is just some plot to destroy his career the way you destroyed his brother's. I doubt he would say that in front of Reynolds but he does tend to think that way.”

"I guess," Jack sighed. "But what do we do now?"

"We do what we always do – we find a way to save the day. You know what the problem is and you know that the colony isn't going to be evacuated. The real question is, how do we protect the colony from these rogue black holes?"

Jack was silent for a few minutes. He stared off into space. Irene could tell that he was deep in thought so she said nothing. Minutes ticked by. After a while Jack grabbed a pen and a notebook and began rapidly jotting down equations. Irene glanced at them but they didn't make any sense to her.

"Do you have an idea?" she asked.

"Just a minute," Jack replied. He picked up his slide rule and began running some numbers.

Irene realized her husband was engulfed in the problem so she stood up. "I'm going to fix dinner. Is there anything you'd like?"

"That's fine – thanks," Jack said absently.

Irene smiled and shook her head. *Some things never change*, she thought. She kissed him and then headed off into the kitchen.

After dinner Jack continued writing page

after page of notes, working far into the night. He then slept for a few hours and got right back to work. Just before noon he tossed his pen and notebook onto the table.

“I don't know,” he said at last. “I have an idea but I'm not sure we can do it. There are a few problems that we may not be able to overcome.”

“Tell me about it,” Irene said. “How are you going to save the colony?”

Jack paused as he tried to find a way to put his thoughts into words. “Let's say that you live in an area that has a lot of thunderstorms and you don't want lightning to strike your house. What are you going to do?”

“Put up a lightning rod,” Irene replied. She gasped. “Jack! You want to put up a *lightning rod* for wormholes?”

“Kind of. The whole problem is that these unstable wormholes are being spawned at random, just like lightning. What I want to do is give them something solid to connect to – something that is much more attractive than a random location in this star system. I can't stop the black holes from doing what they're doing, but if I can focus their attention to a location far away from Myra then that will be

just as good.”

“So how are you going to do it?” Irene asked.

“I’m going to create my own singularity,” Jack replied. “Only, unlike a black hole, this one will be tuned specifically for the purpose of creating *stable* wormholes. I’m hoping that it will attract all the activity in the area – just like a lightning rod.”

“How are you going to do that?” Irene asked. “I mean, after all, the core of a singularity is hidden behind an event horizon. You can’t really ‘tune’ something that you can’t get to.”

Jack nodded. “I know, but there may be a way around that. You see, if a singularity spins rapidly it can, in theory, become a ring-shaped object. This will create two event horizons – an outer one and an inner one. As the object spins faster the two event horizons will merge and shrink toward the singularity itself. Eventually they will be drawn *inside* it and expose the singularity to space.”

“Does that actually happen?” Irene asked dubiously.

Jack shrugged. “Well, the math works out, and if loop quantum gravity is true then they could even exist in nature. I’ll admit it’s

all pretty theoretical right now but it's our best shot at fixing this problem. If I can build a series of ring-shaped quantum singularities and tune them to create stable connections to our local black holes then that should, in theory, stabilize the area – provided this invention of mine is located far outside Epsilon Eridani. I don't dare try to build this on Myra.”

“Ok,” Irene said. “I'm following you so far. But how do you plan on building this singularity generator?”

“That's the hard part,” Jack sighed. “If we were back at Falcon Technologies on Earth I could just call up Dad and ask him to machine the parts for me. His crew could have it done in a matter of days. However, we're on Myra and laboratory equipment is extremely limited.”

“It wouldn't be if Daniel could get here,” Irene pointed out.

“But Daniel can't get here until we fix the wormhole problem. No, we're going to have to do this on our own, using whatever parts we can scrounge.”

Irene frowned. “This machine you're proposing requires a lot of energy, right?”

Jack nodded. “An *incredible* amount of

energy. In fact, it requires an order of magnitude more energy than this colony can even generate, or will be likely to generate in the future.”

“And doesn't it need to be built out there in space?”

“It does,” Jack admitted.

“Well, you know, we only have one spaceship on Myra. As it turns out, that spaceship just happens to have a really large fusion reactor, and it's also got all kinds of equipment that you could repurpose.”

“I know,” Jack said. “The *Behemoth*. Yes, it would do the job. But there's absolutely no way I could get approval to do that!”

“Maybe you could,” Irene argued. “Look. All you need is a temporary solution until you can get the *Liberty* here. Then you can build something more permanent, using supplies from Earth. Once the permanent solution is in place you can bring the *Behemoth* back to Myra. You'd only be using the colony's ship temporarily – probably for just a few months – and when you're done with it you can put it back in working order. No harm done!”

Jack nodded. “That could work. But I'd still need to get approval first, and I just don't

believe the mayor would ever approve of this. I'd probably be laughed right out of his office."

"You could always present your case to the colony," Irene suggested. "The mayor may not trust you but most of the colonists do. If you could get their support then maybe you could pressure the mayor into—"

At that moment the couple felt the ground start to rumble. Moments later the room started to shake.

"An earthquake!" Irene shouted.

Jack shook his head. "That's impossible! Myra is a geologically dead world. It doesn't have a layer of magma under the crust — that's why it has no magnetic field. Plate tectonics aren't active here and there are no fault zones."

The room started to shake even more violently. Dishes fell to the floor and books fell off of a bookshelf — and still the shaking increased. Jack realized that they were in serious danger.

"We've got to get out of here immediately," Jack shouted over the noise. "This colony wasn't designed to withstand earthquakes! If these rooms collapse—"

In the distance the couple heard an



explosion, followed by a loud siren. Then the power went out and the room became completely black. But the quaking did not stop.

## ***CHAPTER FOUR***

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“WHERE ARE THE FLASHLIGHTS?” Irene shouted over the noise of the earthquake.

Their apartment was completely dark. Over to his left Jack heard something crash to the floor. He tried to stand up but a piece of furniture collided with him and sent him sprawling. Crawling on his hands and knees he made his way across the pitch-black room to an end-table – only to find that it was gone.

“I can't find them,” Jack shouted back. “They could be anywhere.”

“Then let's get out of here!” Irene screamed.

Jack couldn't tell where his wife was – he could hear her but in the darkness it was impossible to see anything. He turned around and started crawling toward the front door. As he made his way through the debris that

cluttered the floor he felt the shaking start to die down. By the time he reached their door the earthquake had stopped.

The young inventor felt for the doorknob and then yanked the door open. He sighed with relief when he saw that the colony's emergency lighting system had kicked on, bathing the outside hallway in a dim yellow light. He turned around and saw Irene stand up behind him, a little disheveled but otherwise unharmed.

Jack walked down the hallway past his neighbors' apartments and headed for the stairwell that led up to the colony's main level. He tried to open the stairwell door but it wouldn't budge.

"Is it stuck?" Irene asked.

Jack studied the door and saw that the doorframe had partially collapsed, pinning the wooden fire door in place and causing it to buckle slightly. "I think if we had a crowbar we could open it," he said at last.

Irene nodded. "Do you know where we could get one?"

At that point an apartment door opened and a frightened woman stepped out. "Oh my goodness! What was that?" Molly exclaimed.

"We're not sure yet," Irene replied

soothingly. She walked over to the lady and put her arm around her. "Are you ok?"

"I think so," she replied uncertainly. "I don't know."

"Jack, I'm going to check on our neighbors," Irene called out. "Let me know if you find a way to open the door."

Jack nodded.

As Irene knocked on door after door Jack wandered around looking for something he could use to pry open the stairwell. Halfway down the hallway he spotted a small fire box that was mounted on the wall. Inside the metal box was a long fire hose and an axe. Jack grabbed the axe, walked over to the door, and carefully stared at it. After studying it for a minute he lifted the axe and began chopping away at the door.

It took him ten minutes to hack his way through the sturdy door and force it aside. *I really need to exercise more*, Jack thought wearily as he returned the axe to the fire station. Sweat poured off his brow and his arms ached from exertion. By that time Irene had returned. Her search of the nearby residences had turned up nine people. Some of them were cut or bruised but there were no serious injuries.

Jack stepped through the doorway into the stairwell. His heart sank when he saw the extent of the damage. Large chunks of the ceiling had given way, sending giant rocks tumbling down that crashed through the staircase. There was nothing left of the stairs but twisted girders and shattered concrete.

“What do we do now?” Molly asked.

“We climb,” Jack said quietly.

None of the apartments had rock-climbing equipment, a fact that didn't surprise Jack. He volunteered to climb up the ruined stairwell and go get help. Irene said she would stay down below with the trapped colonists.

It took Jack an hour to reach the surface. He found it difficult to find solid handholds to grab, and his arms were already tired from chopping down the door. The lack of light in the stairwell made the climb even more hazardous. It was excruciating work, and progress came very slowly.

The main level was three floors above them. When Jack finally made it there he saw that the city was in a state of complete pandemonium. The colony's main streets were filled with people that were milling

about in a state of near-panic. A few courageous souls were trying to restore order but no one was paying any attention to them. Power had still not been restored and the only available light came from the emergency lighting system.

The main sector of Star City was designed to look like a regular, above-ground town center. The streets were wide enough to support two lanes of traffic (not that anyone drove hovercars underground) and the ceiling soared fifty feet above the ground. The walls of the tunnels were designed to look like modern buildings and were decorated in an open and elegant style. Restaurants and shops lined the sidewalks and live trees dotted the area.

Under normal circumstances a cleverly-hidden series of artificial lights made the area look bright and cheery. But in the darkness there was little to be seen but deep shadows, damaged storefronts, and frightened people. The yellow emergency lights made everything appear unusual and strange.

Jack walked up to a nearby colonist, who was holding a megaphone. It was clear that he had been trying unsuccessfully to restore order. "What's going on, Morgan?" Jack

asked. Morgan worked in the colony's manufacturing sector.

Morgan sighed. "It's just a mess, Jack. Where's the mayor? Where are our leaders? We've got panic here!"

"Is anyone checking the power plant?" Jack asked. "Those emergency lights aren't going to last forever. When they go out we're going to be in big trouble."

"I have no idea," Morgan replied. "As I said, nobody knows anything and I can't reach anyone. The communication lines are down." He handed Jack the megaphone. "Maybe they'll listen to you."

Jack grabbed the megaphone and got everyone's attention. He told the crowd not to panic, that everything was under control, and that he needed their help. Using Morgan as a team leader he quickly took a poll to see who was present and what skills they had. After he knew who was in the area he divided them into separate teams.

Morgan led a team to the lower apartment levels to see if they could rescue anyone else who might be trapped. Jack warned them that the stairwell was a mess, so the team left to find some search-and-rescue equipment. Jack made sure that they had people in their squad

with medical training.

Jack sent another team into the administrative and office district to look for survivors there. He then led a third team to the power plant, to see what he could do to bring it back online.

\* \* \* \* \*

Four hours later Jack finally stopped to take a break. The power plant had been badly damaged in the earthquake and it took a lot of ingenuity to bring the geothermal units back online. When Star City's electrical grid came back to life everyone cheered.

"I'm afraid we're not done here," Jack warned Virgil Keyes, the power plant's lead operator. "There's still a lot of damage and we're only running at 30% capacity. That's barely enough to run the nuclatomizers! A lot of the city will have to remain in the dark until those other units get repaired."

"But we can take it from here," Virgil replied. "Now that manufacturing has power again Morgan can start making replacement parts for us. In another couple weeks we should have all the damage repaired. In the meantime we can use rolling blackouts to



distribute power to the residential section. It won't be pleasant but we'll survive."

At that point Jack's wife walked into the floor of the power plant. She smiled when she saw Jack. "Looks like you've been busy!"

"Well, we got the power back on, at least," Jack said wearily. "That's a step in the right direction. How are things outside?"

"I'm afraid there's a lot of damage. After Morgan rescued us we were able to dig Reynolds out of his apartment – it turns out he was trapped – and he put together some teams that did a high-level damage survey. A lot of things were destroyed. It's going to take months to fix everything."

"Was anyone hurt?" Jack asked.

Irene nodded. "We haven't found any casualties so far but there are a lot of missing people. The search and rescue operation is still ongoing, though, so hopefully we'll be able to locate everyone soon. There are a lot of injuries – broken bones, concussions, you name it. Doug has his hands full. He needs all the help he can get."

Jack nodded. "Where's the mayor?"

"He was found trapped in his office. By the way, he wants us to take the *Behemoth* out into space and find out what just

happened. He's hoping you can use its instruments to pinpoint the cause of the earthquake.”

Jack frowned. “I'm not sure that's possible. We don't have any seismic instruments here on Myra. The earthquake was bad but without instrumentation there's no way to find out exactly how bad it was or where the epicenter was located. The *Behemoth* does have sensors but I'm sure they were off at the time of the incident.”

“Still, you might be able to find *something*,” Irene argued. “And something is better than nothing. It's worth a look, anyway.”

Jack and his wife made their way through the colony to the surface of Myra. Jack was relieved to see that the canyon had suffered little damage. There were rockslides but nothing had collapsed.

Jack and Irene got into their hovercar and Jack drove it to the spaceport. The unpaved road was strewn with boulders so Jack used the car's ground-effect hover ability to fly a good twenty feet off the surface. It took them ten minutes to reach the spaceport. They parked the car beside the *Behemoth*.

“It looks like she's undamaged,” Irene said. “That's a good sign.”

The couple entered the starship and walked up to the bridge. It took the giant ship a half-hour to warm up, engage its engines, lift off the planet, and enter into a stable orbit. After they were in place Jack began scanning the surface. Over time a series of readings appeared on the ship's forward viewscreen. At first there was nothing conclusive but then the picture changed.

Jack gasped. “Do you see that?”

Irene nodded. “Just wait until the mayor sees it,” she said.

“I knew this was going to happen,” Jack replied.

\* \* \* \* \*

Early the next morning the Falcons presented their findings in the council's debating chamber. The small room was packed. All of the colony's top officials were there and every seat in the audience area was taken. Even more people were crowding around, standing wherever there was space. Jack had managed to get the city's communication system back online and a live

video of his report was being broadcast to the entire colony.

Using a projector, Jack displayed a series of photographs that he had taken from orbit. The images showed a titanic chasm that now scarred the planet's surface – the aftermath of the earthquake they had experienced the day before. “That canyon is six hundred miles long and more than a hundred miles deep,” Jack replied. “If this planet were geologically active it would be deep enough to penetrate the crust. *That's* how bad the earthquake actually was.”

“How far is it from the colony?” Reynolds asked.

“It's on the opposite side of the planet,” Jack said. “All we felt were the outer edges of the quake itself, which was *tremendously* weakened by the time the shocks reached us. If the earthquake had struck any closer to the colony it would have completely destroyed it. We got really lucky. I can't even begin to estimate what it would have measured on the Richter scale!”

“But earthquakes can't happen on Myra!” the mayor protested. “You said it yourself – this world is geologically dead. What could possibly have caused an earthquake at all,

much less one of that magnitude?”

“I have an answer for that,” Jack replied. He switched slides. “These are readouts that we obtained from sensors on board the *Behemoth*. As you can see, a serious spacial anomaly spontaneously formed and just happened to barely graze Myra. The anomaly only existed for a few seconds, but during its short life it warped local space and damaged the crust of our planet. This led to a titanic release of energy, which created the chasm that I showed you.”

Irene spoke up. “If the anomaly had appeared in the planet's interior it might have torn the world in half. This whole situation could have ended very differently.”

“Is this likely to happen again?” Reynolds asked.

“Yes, it is,” Jack said. He moved to the next slide, which showed more numbers. “I was able to trace the anomaly to a local cluster of wormholes. From what I can tell they appear to be destabilizing this area. There is no reason to believe that this was a one-time event.”

“So what can we do about it?” Doug Garcia asked. “Is there any way to stop this? I mean, you're Jack Falcon, after all. If

anyone can fix this it's you."

"There's a possibility that we can stabilize the situation," Jack said reluctantly. "I've drawn up plans for an invention that *might* solve the problem. However, I think it would be much safer to evacuate the planet. My invention is untested and may not work. I can't offer any guarantees."

"Nonsense!" the mayor replied. "Abandoning the colony is not an option. The whole reason we came out here was to colonize the stars, and that means overcoming any problems that outer space might throw our way. I'm not going to turn around and go home just because we've had a bad scare. Besides, the truth is that there's no safe place in this whole star system, right?"

Jack nodded. "That's correct. The other three planets in this star system are no safer than this one."

"Evacuation still sounds like a good idea to me," Doug said. "Couldn't we at least evacuate until Jack fixes the problem and *then* come back?"

"We can't evacuate," the mayor said flatly. "All of these anomalies are messing up subspace and keeping Jack's kronolator from working. Sure, we could round everyone up

and load them into the *Behemoth*, but without a faster-than-light drive it would take a thousand years to get back to Earth. We are all trapped here until Jack fixes the problem.”

“Is that true?” Reynolds asked. Gasps were heard around the room.

Jack nodded, surprised. “I hadn't thought about it before but yes, he's right. That's why the *Liberty* wasn't able to land – its drive failed when it neared Epsilon Eridani. I guess we can't evacuate after all.”

“So it looks like our lives are in your hands, then,” Doug replied. “We're counting on you.”

Jack let out a deep breath. “Ok. Irene and I have a plan but there's a catch. In order to build my quantum singularity I'm going to have to take the *Behemoth* into space and cannibalize its parts. The singularity can't be located anywhere near Myra and unfortunately she's the only ship we have.”

“Do whatever you have to do,” the mayor replied. “I don't care what it takes and I don't need to hear the details – we wouldn't understand them anyway. Just go out and get it done. We don't have a lot of time here, Falcon.”

“He's right,” Doug replied. “We're all

behind you on this. If there's anything we can do to help just let us know.”

A chill went through Jack as he scanned the room and saw the anxious looks on everyone's face. Even the mayor was too frightened to be hostile. *They really are counting on me*, he thought. *The question is, do we have enough time to fix this problem or will another wormhole strike before the singularity is operational?*



## ***CHAPTER FIVE***

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THE *BEHEMOTH* LEFT Myra late that afternoon. With the mayor's permission Jack stocked the starship with eight weeks' worth of supplies. He hoped that the mission would be over much sooner than that, but once they got into deep space and dismantled the ship's engines they would have no way to get back home. They would have to stay there until they finished their mission.

Jack didn't like the idea of taking a one-way trip but there was nothing that could be done about it. There just weren't any other starships on Myra and the black holes made it impossible for any ships from Earth to reach them. He would just have to make it work.

As soon as the starship had cleared Myra's atmosphere and was out in space, Irene plotted a course to the intersect point while Jack contacted Falcon Enterprises on

Earth. After a few minutes he was able to reach his friend Daniel Hollins.

“So have you fixed the problem yet?” Daniel asked, as soon as he appeared on the viewscreen.

Jack shook his head. “Not yet, but I'm working on it.” He briefly explained their plan.

“I knew you'd come up with something,” Daniel replied approvingly. “I'm sure you'll have no trouble getting it to work. I just have one question, though – if you're going to dismantle your ship then how are you going to get back to Myra?”

“That's where I need you,” Jack explained. “As soon as we finish this project we're going to need a ride home. Do you think you could come and rescue us? I know you can't enter this area right now, but once my invention is activated it should quiet things down and allow the kronolator on the *Liberty* to work again. In theory.”

“Sure thing,” Daniel replied. “When do you want us to be there?”

Jack thought for a moment. “Well, at sublight speeds it will take us four days to exit Epsilon Eridani and get the ship into position. Then it'll take us some more time to

get everything set up and tested...”

“I’ll just plan on being in that general area four days from now,” Daniel said. “That way if you’re done early you won’t have to wait around for me to get my bags packed.”

Jack laughed. “You may have to wait a while, buddy! This whole process could easily take weeks. After all, I’ve never built a quantum singularity before.”

“Not a problem!” Daniel replied. “That’ll give me plenty of time to get caught up on my champion ping-pong skills.”

“You installed a ping-pong table on the *Liberty*?” Jack asked, surprised.

“It was your sister’s idea,” Daniel explained. “We just took out the foosball table and rearranged the rec room a bit. It works great! Let me tell you, your sister is really good at it too.”

“Sandy was always better at that than me,” Jack admitted. “She’s just a lot more athletic than I am. Personally, I’m more the couch-potato type. As a kid she would be outside doing things while I dreamed up new labor-saving devices.”

“It’s a dirty job but someone’s gotta do it,” Daniel quipped. “Is there anything special you want me to bring?”

"A matter transporter would be nice," Jack replied. "I've always wanted one of those."

Daniel laughed. "Sure thing, boss. Just let me know when you've invented it and I'll ship it right over."

"I'll get back with you in a few months," Jack said. "Maybe after I get this wormhole project finished I can look into it."

"Are you serious? Do you really think it's possible?"

"It might be," Jack said slowly. "One thing this whole episode has made me realize is how fragile Star City's link with Earth actually is. It would be nice to have an alternate way of traveling between Earth and Myra. Right now all I have are ideas but I'll let you know if anything comes of them."

"Sounds good," Daniel agreed.

Jack gave him the coordinates that the *Behemoth* would be waiting at and then signed off. "So how's it going?" he asked his wife.

"We're all set," she replied. "As you predicted, it'll take about 4 days to travel the twelve billion miles to the intersect point."

Jack nodded. "I just hope it works. After all, once we get there and take everything

apart we're not going to have the option of moving the ship again. We've got one shot at getting this right."

His wife nodded. "I think the location is a good one, especially when you consider the location of the black holes. It's close enough to attract their attention while being far enough from the colony to keep it out of danger. I'm more concerned about what happens *after* we get everything working."

"What do you mean?" Jack asked.

"Well, think about it. The colony is only going to be safe as long as your quantum singularity is running. That means that it will have to keep running *forever*. Someone's going to have to maintain it. This isn't like a lightning rod where you can just set it up and forget about it."

"I admit there is some maintenance here but it's no different from our undersea cities," Jack pointed out. "The only way the Aquapolis can survive is if people continually maintain the undersea domes. It's just part of the cost of having a city at the bottom of the ocean. Likewise, Star City will just have to commit resources to maintaining this new piece of machinery. It's either that or move the colony, and I sure don't see them

moving.”

“That's true,” Irene agreed. “But this is going to have to be reliable, Jack. You're going to have to add all kinds of failsafes.”

“I'm already on it,” Jack replied. “After the *Behemoth* is in place and the quantum singularity is operational I'm going to have a small space station built out here. I'm sure we can design something that is easy to maintain and largely automated. All of that comes later, though. Right now we've got our hands full with other problems.”

“So where do we begin?” Irene asked.

“Let's start by dismantling the ship's kronolator – we're going to need its parts. We'll also need parts from the sublight engines, but we can't tear that down while we're using it. Same goes with the fusion reactor – it'll need modification but we can't do that until the ship is in position. So the kronolator is the place to start.”

“Will we need to dismantle anything else?” Irene asked. “Food processing, maybe, or perhaps the sensor arrays?”

“We probably will but I haven't gotten that far yet. I've brought the blueprints for the singularity machine and the schematics for the *Behemoth*. It's going to take me a few

days to get everything together. If you could go ahead and start taking apart the kronolator that will give me time to finish my designs and figure out what else we'll need to take apart."

"I can do that. What do you want me to do with the parts, though? Where do you want me to put them?"

"Let's build the quantum singularity in Storage Bay 12," Jack said. "It's a large, tall room right next to the fusion reactor at the rear of the ship. Plus it's empty, so we don't have to move anything."

Irene stood up. "I'll get started, then!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Over the next four days Irene spent long hours taking apart the kronolator and carrying its many components into the storage bay. Meanwhile, Jack finished the design of his quantum singularity generator. The principles of the machine were similar to other inventions he'd built in the past; it reminded him of his early experiments with faster-than-light travel.

His biggest concern was stability. The ship's fusion reactor would be able to supply

the necessary power to create the singularity, and once it was formed the energy from the incoming wormholes would be enough to sustain it. What worried him was what would happen when dozens of wormholes began interacting with his artificial singularity. Would it remain stable or would the stresses tear it apart? And what would happen to the ship when all of this was going on?

The worst part was that he didn't have years to spend experimenting. He just had to try something and hope that it worked the first time. He didn't like working blind but they didn't have the luxury of time.

By the time the *Behemoth* reached the intersect point Jack had finished his blueprints and Irene had dismantled the kronolator. Jack completed his work in time to help his wife carry the last pieces of the kronolator into the storage bay.

"That machine has a lot more parts than I remembered," Irene remarked, as they surveyed the mass of components that littered the floor.

"Altering the flow of time is complicated!" Jack said. "I'm surprised it can be done at all."

"Technically, altering the flow of time is



easy,” Irene replied. “After all, time slows down as you start going faster. All you really have to do to modify the speed of time is step on your car's accelerator.”

Jack grinned. “That's true – only that's not going to help you get to the stars. Even at the speed of light it would still take 11 years to reach Epsilon Eridani and another 11 years to get home. Sure, for those on board it would only take a split second since time doesn't pass when you're traveling at the speed of light, but that doesn't change the fact that by the time you got back to Earth everyone else would be 22 years older! That's where the magic of the kronolator comes in.”

“So what do we do now?” Irene asked.

“We take apart the ship's sublight drive,” Jack said.

“And by 'we', you mean 'me'.”

Jack grinned. “Hey – if you don't want to do that you can always stay here instead and use these parts to build a quantum singularity generator! You do have Ph. D. in nuclear engineering, after all. It's entirely up to you.”

Irene shook her head. “I'll leave that mess to you, dear. Just hand me a wrench and I'll be on my way.”

Over the following week the singularity generator gradually took shape. Jack constructed a fifteen-feet-wide torus on the floor of the storage bay. Rising up out of the torus were four pillars that were each forty feet tall and three feet in diameter.

“The quantum singularity should form in the center of the pillars,” Jack explained. “I’m hoping to use high-energy collisions to create a submicroscopic black hole, and then use gravity to manipulate the black hole into position.”

“But what about the event horizon?” Irene asked. “Don’t you need to somehow get it out of the way?”

Jack nodded. “That’s the next step. If I can spin the black hole rapidly enough it should morph into a ring-shaped singularity. Then if I keep spinning it faster, the outer and inner event horizons should merge and leave me with direct access to an object with infinite mass. That will give me something I can work with.”

“But how are you going to get the other black holes to interact with it?” Irene asked.

“That should happen automatically. You

see, right now the black holes in this area of space don't really have anything else to interact with so they just link to each other. By putting this object at the intersect point between them I'm hoping they'll connect to us instead of themselves. At least, that's the plan."

"So we could have achieved the same results by moving one of the black holes to this point in space," Irene replied.

Jack laughed. "Sure, I suppose. Only I have no idea how to move a black hole."

"But if you *could* figure it out that would solve our maintenance problem," Irene pointed out. "It would be a permanent solution."

"I'll let you invent that," Jack replied, smiling. "Let me know when you've worked out a way to move stars around."

"I'll do that," Irene said.

\* \* \* \* \*

As work on the invention progressed Jack kept in touch with Star City. So far there had been no further earthquakes but the planet was being bombarded with solar flares almost on a daily basis. None of them had

been as severe as the one that had nearly killed him and his wife, but the mere fact that the colony had been hit six times in the past week concerned him. Epsilon Eridani was growing increasingly unstable and their time was running out.

Jack also sent a copy of his blueprints to his father Leon, who was on board the *Liberty*. Besides being a famous inventor his father had also played a role in designing Earth's largest particle accelerator, so he was somewhat familiar with what Jack was trying to do. Leon looked over the plans and gave him a number of helpful suggestions regarding the initial creation of the singularity.

By the time Irene finally finished dismantling the *Behemoth's* massive sublight engines, Jack had most of his singularity generator assembled. The two of them then switched roles – Irene added the finishing touches to the generator while Jack shut down the ship's fusion reactor and laid down new power cables. The storage bay already had wiring that connected it to the reactor, but the connections didn't have enough capacity to handle the singularity generator's immense load. So Jack spent two days

ripping wiring out of the ship's walls and laying down massive amounts of power cabling.

"I wish I had some superconducting fiber," Jack remarked, as he soldered the final connections between his invention and the reactor.

"Doesn't the fusion tokamak have some?" Irene asked. She had completed the machine's assembly earlier that day and was watching her husband lay down the new power cables.

"Sure it does, but I can't take that apart. We need it to run at full capacity. The problem is that it's the only source of superconducting material in the entire ship and I don't have a way to manufacture more. I'm just going to have to do without it."

"Why do you need it?" Irene asked.

"Well, here's the problem. Before we can start attracting the attention of black holes we have to have a singularity to work with. In order to create a singularity we're going to need a particle accelerator – which is what that torus-shaped thing is at the bottom of the generator. Dad has used accelerators to create black holes before so I'm pretty sure this will work. The thing is, particle accelerators use

incredibly powerful electromagnetic fields to accelerate particles. Those magnetic fields are usually generated by superconducting magnets, but since we don't have any of those we're going to have to go to Plan B."

"What's Plan B?"

Jack sighed. "Do without them, I'm afraid. It won't be nearly as efficient. I just hope the fusion reactor can handle the load. The power draw is going to be pretty significant."

Irene nodded. "I'm sure it will be fine. But let's say that all of this works and you get your singularity trapped in there. What happens then? Will we be able to stand in here and look at it?"

"Definitely not! This room is going to be bathed in all sorts of unhealthy radiation and high-energy particles. After we turn it on we'll need to leave the room and control the experiment from the power plant's control center."

"How will we know if it's working?" Irene asked.

"We'll be able to tell that from the readings the generator will relay to us. Plus, the colony should see a definite change – the solar flares should stop and no more

earthquakes should happen.”

“Then we can just call Daniel and have him come rescue us,” Irene finished.

“Right!” Jack agreed. “Then we go home.”

\* \* \* \* \*

After Jack finished running the power cables he and his wife performed a thorough system diagnostic. They checked the wiring, the machinery, and the design itself. When they had done everything they could do Jack looked at his wife. “Are we ready to turn it on?”

“I think that's the next step,” she replied. “It's either that or go home, and since we've dismantled the engines I don't think we can go home.”

After initializing the singularity generator the couple left the storage bay, secured the door behind them, and walked to the power plant. Jack sat down in front of a control panel and his wife stood behind him. He nervously cleared his throat, looked around, and powered up the fusion reactor. Once it had reached its peak capacity he switched on his quantum singularity generator.

Jack watched anxiously as the generator's miniature particle accelerator came to life. It quickly put a tremendous load on the fusion reactor, pushing it to its limits. Jack dialed back the accelerator and allowed the stored energy level to build. The particles it was accelerating quickly built up speed and increased in mass. Then, just as his father had predicted, the mass changed and became a singularity.

The young inventor carefully moved the singularity into the gravitational well that he had prepared for it. *This is it*, he thought. *Can the singularity be altered or will this machine fail?*

Jack began applying gravitational pressure to the singularity, causing it to rotate at an increasing speed. Ever so slowly the singularity began to morph into a ring – the first step of the process.

All at once the numbers on the screen changed. The whole ship shook as if something had struck it. Then it shook again.

“What's happening?” Irene asked.

“I don't know,” Jack replied anxiously. “It's not drawing power from the reactor anymore but yet its energy level keeps increasing! I'm losing control of the



singularity.”

“What could be causing it?”

Jack studied the numbers. The *Behemoth* shook again, and this time groaned ominously. All at once he realized what had happened. “It's the other black holes!” he gasped. “They're starting to connect to the quantum singularity!”

“Isn't that *supposed* to happen?” Irene asked.

“Yes, but it's happening too soon! Our singularity isn't stable yet – I haven't been able to hide the event horizon and get it properly tuned. Since it's not stable the incoming connections are collapsing!”

“Of course they are! We should have seen this coming. Of *course* they would start interacting with it as soon as it existed. But what do we do now?”

“I don't know,” Jack replied anxiously. “But we've got to do something – and fast! If we can't finish creating the quantum singularity soon then this whole ship is going to be torn apart. It wasn't built for this! If the planet Myra just barely survived interacting with an unstable wormhole, can you imagine would happen to the *Behemoth*?”

## ***CHAPTER SIX***

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AS THEY STARED AT THE control screen in dismay, something forcefully collided with the ship. The *Behemoth* shook violently, knocking them onto the floor. A horrible grinding noise filled the room. The lights flickered and the emergency sirens sounded.

Jack struggled to his feet and ran over to the computer system that controlled the fusion reactor. He paled. “We’ve got a hull breach!” he cried out. “This ship is losing its structural integrity.”

“Where’s the damage?” Irene asked. She sprang up and walked over to her husband. In the distance they could hear a shrieking noise, as giant sheets of metal were torn apart by titanic forces.

“Near the front,” Jack replied. He brought a schematic of the ship up on the screen and showed her. Six large areas were lit up in red. “I’m sealing those sections off

now.”

“But that's where the bridge is!” Irene exclaimed. “How are we going to control the ship if we can't get to the bridge?”

“There are spacesuits in the lockers down the hall,” Jack pointed out. “All we have to do is—”

At that point another tremendous blow struck the ship. This time Jack was thrown across the room and slammed into the wall. The ship rolled and tossed. As he struggled to find something to grab he heard a deep *crunch*. More sirens wailed. The next thing he knew he was floating in the air.

“The gravity grid is down!” he exclaimed.

“You've got to turn your generator off!” Irene shouted. She tried to make her way through the air to the control console.

“Don't touch it!” Jack shouted back. “It's too late to turn it off! If we shut it down now we'd lose containment and there's no telling what might happen. We've got to let it finish the process!”

Jack managed to grab onto a pipe that was extruding from the wall, and he used it to climb back over to the control panel. Not having gravity was unnerving.

“Did you seal the door to this room?” Irene asked, as she floated over to her husband.

“The computer sealed it automatically. That actually saved our lives.”

“More hull breaches?”

“Worse,” he said. He brought up a diagram of the ship. “The last impact tore the ship in half. Most of the ship is – well, gone now. This area is one of the only places that's still intact.”

“What about life support?”

“It's been trashed,” Jack replied. “There's no chance we can repair it – not when most of its components are drifting out in space. Gravity is down, life support is down, communications is down, propulsion is down – everything is down, actually. We still have power but that's about it.”

“So all we have left is the air in this room?” Irene asked.

Jack nodded.

“How long is that going to last?”

“I don't know,” Jack said. “Four hours? Maybe six? And that's assuming we don't have any hull breaches in this area.”

Irene was quiet. “So what do we do?” she asked quietly.

“We finish the job. It's not over yet, dear. We still have a fighting chance! If we can get the quantum singularity stabilized then space will calm down and things will go back to normal. Then Daniel can come and rescue us.”

“Unless we're destroyed first.”

“One thing at a time!” Jack replied. “We're still alive and that's something. It's not time to panic just yet.”

Jack changed the screen to focus on his quantum singularity generator. He stared at it, frowning. “Well, it still has power but it's not making much progress toward becoming a ring. I'm having trouble getting the black hole to spin.”

“Is there something you can do about it?” Irene asked.

Jack sighed. “Getting a black hole to rotate isn't an easy thing. After all, you can't just go in and push it! I thought I had that problem solved but my solution isn't working. Let me try a few things. I have to get it spinning so I can hide the event horizons. There's got to be some way to do this.”

Jack stared at the control panel for a long time. Occasionally he would change some

settings in an attempt to gain more control over his singularity. Nothing he did seemed to make any difference.

“Would it help if you could get back into the storage bay?” Irene asked.

“Not really. I'm realizing now that I should have designed this equipment a little differently, but in order to fix it I'd have to shut everything down. That's something I just can't do. No, if I'm going to fix this problem I'll have to do it right here.”

“Let's say that you don't solve it,” Irene replied. “Suppose that the singularity never stabilizes and that keeps the *Liberty* from rescuing us. We then run out of air and suffocate. What happens next?”

“I guess Dad will have to think of something,” Jack replied. “He has the plans for my quantum singularity device. Maybe he could build one on Earth and move it to some place nearby. That might solve the problem. It wouldn't be as good as having one located right here but it might work well enough to allow him to evacuate the colony.”

“That's not what I mean,” Irene said. “What I'm wondering is what will happen *to us* if we die?”

“You want to know what?” Jack asked,

puzzled. He tapped some numbers into a keypad and pressed Enter. "I don't understand your question."

"There's a good chance we're not going to survive this, Jack. What's going to happen to us if we die? Are we just going to be dead? Do we just not exist anymore – is that it? Or is there something else after this life?"

"Oh," Jack replied. "I don't know. I've never really thought about it, actually. That's not a scientific question."

"What do you mean, it's not scientific?"

"Science deals with things that are testable and repeatable," Jack explained. "You can't apply the scientific process to the afterlife. Sure, we can form a hypothesis, but there's no way to run a test and observe the results. As far as we can tell when people die their life ends."

"But what if there's more? What if something else happens that we just can't see?"

"As I said, that's not really something science can help you with." Jack changed some more settings on his control panel and submitted them.

"You're awfully calm about all this!" Irene said.

"This isn't the first time I've stared death in the face," Jack replied. "Besides, I still have several hours to solve the problem. It's not time to panic yet."

"But don't you care? Haven't you ever wondered what happens after you die? Do you think you're going to live forever?"

"Honestly, I try not to think about it. I mean, whatever's going to happen will happen and there's not much I can do about it. Dwelling on it just seems morbid."

"But you're just *assuming* there's nothing you can do about it," Irene replied. "How long do you think you'll live?"

"Hopefully for at least a few more hours," Jack said.

"And after you die, how long are you going to be dead?"

Jack paused. "Forever, I guess."

"So if you're only alive for a short while and then you're dead *forever*, doesn't it make sense to spend some time *finding out* what's going to happen instead of just hoping that everything will work out? I mean, as far as we know death is pretty permanent. You can't go back and fix things if you don't like the way it turned out."

"I never heard you talk like this before,"



Jack commented.

"I've never faced death before," Irene replied.

"Sure you have! What about that time in the hyperplane?"

"That was different. There I was actually doing things – I had to fly those replacement parts all the way around the world. I had a lot on my mind. Here I'm just waiting for our air to run out."

"I still don't think I can help you," Jack replied. "I mean, what you're asking is essentially a religious question and there are all kinds of different religions out there. How could you possibly tell if there's any truth in them or not?"

"They can't *all* be true," Irene replied.

"Why not?" Jack asked.

"Because they contradict each other! The law of non-contradiction says that two mutually exclusive viewpoints cannot be true at the same time. They might all be wrong but they can't all be right."

"But how could you ever tell the difference between them?" Jack asked. "Are you going to examine the claims of each one and then apply some sort of scientific test? How could you possibly test something of a

religious nature? You can't take claims of an afterlife and perform experiments around it! On top of that, you've only got a few hours and as far as I know we don't have access to a library of religious materials.”

“I don't know,” Irene said. “Death is just so *permanent*, Jack. Maybe there's no way to know. Maybe you just die and that's it. But maybe – maybe there's something more. What I do know is that I want to find out. If we get out of this I'm going to find some answers. Somehow.”

“You could try appealing to whatever deities you think may exist,” Jack said. “Maybe if you asked they could send some spirits to guide you into enlightenment.”

Irene frowned. “You're mocking me.”

“Only partially,” Jack replied. He tapped some more numbers into the console and then turned to his wife. “Look. I don't have any answers. Maybe there are no divine beings out there and we're alone in the universe. Or maybe you're right and there is some sort of ultimate life form – or forms, I guess. But if they do exist, asking them to reveal themselves to you doesn't seem like a bad idea. Sure, they might ignore you, but they might not. It's worth a try and right now

that's all you've got.”

“It's something to think about,” Irene said at last. “I guess you're right. If there *is* truth out there that's beyond anything science can discover, the only way to find out about it would be through some kind of divine revelation. I guess praying really is all I can do for now. The next step is up to them.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Several hours went by. The air began to grow noticeably stale but Irene said nothing. She was deep in thought. Occasionally she glanced over at her husband, who was engrossed in the problem at hand. If he noticed that they were running out of oxygen he didn't comment on it.

At last Jack finally spoke up. “I think we're getting somewhere.”

“Oh?” Irene asked. She floated over to him and started at the screen. “What am I seeing?”

Jack pointed to some numbers. “Do you see that? That means the singularity has formed a ring! The event horizons have started to recede. Now all I need to do is keep adding more speed to the singularity. I think

we're getting close!”

Just then a tremor shook the room. “What's going to happen as you get close to success?” Irene asked.

“Wormhole activity will increase dramatically,” Jack replied.

“Are we going to survive that?”

“It depends on how long this takes. Once it reaches a point of stability everything will be fine – or at least, it *should* be fine. The problem is going to be getting it there. If this finishes quickly then we should be ok. If not...”

As the numbers on the screen climbed Irene heard the noise of metal groaning. She looked at Jack nervously. “Do you think—”

All at once the room was violently slammed to one side! Jack and Irene were both caught off-guard. They crashed into the ceiling and lost consciousness.

Warning sirens came on and the lights flickered and went out. An urgent message appeared on the control panel but it went unheeded. The room became utterly silent.

## ***CHAPTER SEVEN***

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JACK FALCON SLOWLY regained consciousness. When he opened his eyes he saw that he was lying in the sickbay on board the *Liberty*. Irene was sitting in a chair next to his hospital bed and Daniel was standing behind her. His father Leon was sitting on the other side of the bed.

“What happened?” Jack asked. “How did I get here?”

“It was actually your father's doing,” Daniel explained. “He wrote a computer program that automatically tried to activate the ship's kronolator every five minutes. We were just standing around, talking, and then all of the sudden *pow* – the ship started moving! A few minutes later we were right there at the intersect point. We were expecting to find the *Behemoth* waiting for us and were pretty surprised to find that nothing was left of her but a bunch of scrap

metal. I gotta tell you, boss, you're awfully hard on spaceships. I don't know how you even survived."

Leon spoke up. "The only portion of the ship that was left intact was the engineering section, where the fusion reactor and your quantum singularity generator was located. Had you been in any other level of the ship you would not have survived."

"I know," Jack said. "We were lucky."

"The tricky part was getting you off the ship," Daniel continued. "The two of you were sealed inside that room and were just about to run out of air. We thought about just blasting through the security door but there was no airlock. Breaching the door would've sucked all the air right out of the room and killed you both. So we had to construct a makeshift airlock before we could rescue you."

"I still don't understand," Jack said. "I never got a chance to finish tuning the singularity. How could it possibly have worked?"

"I finished it," Irene explained. "When that final wave hit us we were both knocked out, but I regained consciousness a few minutes later. You remained unconscious so I

finished the job. I'm glad the *Liberty* arrived when it did – by the time I was done we had pretty much run out of air and had no way to call for help. If they hadn't come to the rescue we wouldn't have made it.”

“We were really fortunate,” Jack repeated. “This could have turned out very differently.”

“I think we were blessed,” Irene replied. “Someone was watching out for us.”

“So you're still going to pursue this whole religion thing?” Jack asked.

“Are you kidding? Jack, *we survived*. I've been given a chance to find some answers and that's exactly what I'm going to do.”

“But how are you going to do that? I mean—”

“I'll just start at the beginning,” Irene replied. “I've always heard that all religions are the same but I've never actually studied any of them. I think it's time I started looking into their actual teachings. Maybe I'll find something – or maybe I'll be guided to the answer.”

“Or you might turn up nothing,” Jack replied.

“The only way to find out is to try,” Irene said.

\* \* \* \* \*

It took Jack several more days to recover from his injuries. During that time the *Liberty* stayed at the intersect point and her crew attempted to salvage whatever they could of the *Behemoth*. Jack had his father contact Star City and let them know that their mission was a success. He also had a long talk with his dad about replacing the *Behemoth* and constructing a permanent home for his singularity generator. Leon promised to get started on the new projects immediately and said that he would try to deliver both of them by the end of the year. In the meantime Falcon Technologies would loan the colony another starship that it could use until the *Behemoth II* was completed.

When Jack had finally recovered and felt like getting up again Daniel flew the *Liberty* on to Myra. When the ship touched down at the spaceport a large group of colonists were there to greet them. Jack was surprised to see that the air traffic control tower had been rebuilt.

“Well, we had to do something while we were waiting on our two heroes to finish their



mission,” Doug Garcia replied, smiling. “Seriously, though, we are so glad to have you back! I knew you'd be able to finish the job. The colony is in your debt.”

“Are you out of your mind?” the mayor snapped. “That wasn't a success! Jack's incompetence single-handedly destroyed our starship – an investment of hundreds of millions of dollars!”

“That ship was fully insured,” Leon replied. “Falcon Technologies has filed a claim with the insurance company and is already working on building a suitable replacement. Besides, if my son had not taken the *Behemoth* and risked his life to save you then all of you would be dead right now. You are lucky to have him here.”

“Oh, I didn't see you there,” the subdued mayor replied. “Of course, you're quite right. Your son is a valuable asset to the team. My apologies.”

After greeting their friends the colonists banded together to help unload the *Liberty* and carry the new supplies to Exolab I, the research laboratory that the Falcons had founded. With everyone's help it didn't take long to get everything moved in, unpacked, and set up.

“Well there you go, son,” Leon replied. “This laboratory now rivals the one you have back home. You should find everything you need to meet any challenge that might come your way.”

“I’m sure I will,” Jack said gratefully. “Thanks, Dad.”

“How long will you be staying with us?” Irene asked.

“I’m afraid I’ve got to get back to Earth,” Leon said apologetically. “I hate leaving so soon but I need to begin work on the *Behemoth II*. I also need to build that space station that Star City needs to stabilize the area. But I should be back later this year.”

Jack turned to Daniel. “What about you?”

“Oh, I’ll be hanging around for a while,” Daniel replied. “After all, someone’s got to keep you two out of trouble! I turned my back on you for just a minute and the next thing I knew the whole colony was in danger.”

Jack grinned. “We’re glad to have you back. In fact, we’ve even got your old room waiting for you.”

“That’s right!” Irene said brightly. “The one right next to the waste treatment disposal plant.”

“Oh joy,” Daniel groaned. “I'd kind of hoped that room had been destroyed in the earthquake.”

Leon spoke up. “The *Beagle* will be arriving in a few hours. You can keep it until I deliver your new starship. I'm afraid it's not as large as the *Behemoth* but it should be able to handle anything short of evacuating the entire colony.”

“Thanks,” Jack replied.

\* \* \* \* \*

That evening Jack and Irene were in their apartment. They were talking about the day's events when they were interrupted by a knock on the door.

Jack got up and answered the door. In the hallway he saw a tall lady with black hair, who was wearing an expensive gray suit. “Eliza!” he said, surprised.

Irene got up off the couch and walked over to her husband. “What are you doing here?” she asked.

“May I come in?” Eliza asked.

“Uh, sure,” Jack said. He stepped aside. Eliza walked into their apartment and closed the door behind her.

“My employer wanted me to thank you for a job well-done,” she said. “Your solution to the wormhole problem will require maintenance but was creative. I salute you. You have saved the colony – for the moment.”

“For the moment?” Jack asked

“Think about it. Epsilon Eridani had been stable for a long time, Jack, but right when the colony was on the verge of becoming self-sufficient this problem came up. If you hadn't created your invention the whole planet would have been destroyed. Doesn't that seem a little...*convenient*?”

Jack frowned. “What are you saying?”

“You need to have your father send a military ship to protect your singularity device,” Eliza said. “You will also need to make sure your replacement space station is well-armed. The ASP Alliance is going to come after it.”

“Who's coming after it?” Jack said, surprised.

“Shadows and darkness from your deepest nightmares,” Eliza replied. “You will find out soon enough. Your matter compressor is going to anger them, Jack. Don't be surprised when they come after

you.”

“Now wait a minute,” Irene replied. “How could you possibly know about his compressor?”

“It's my job to know things,” Eliza said. “I'm only going to tell you this once: you need to prepare for war. Because war is coming, whether you like it or not.”

“I don't make weapons,” Jack replied. “I don't even arm my starships! That's just not something we Falcons do. We're a peaceful technology company.”

“Then you and all your friends are going to die,” Eliza said matter-of-factly. She then opened their apartment door, stepped into the hallway, and closed the door behind her.

Irene turned to her husband. “What are we going to do?” she asked.

“I have no idea,” Jack said. “It sounds like I need to get in touch with my dad. Maybe he'll know who this Eliza person is. She may be on to something or she may just be out of her mind. I've certainly never heard of any 'ASP Alliance'.”

“She knew about the black holes long before we did,” Irene pointed out.

Jack sighed. “I know. But that was something I could verify myself – and I did,

using the *Behemoth*. This is just an empty threat with nothing behind it.”

“I just have a bad feeling about it,” Irene said.

Irene would soon find out that she was right. In a few months Jack would find himself caught up in his next adventure, *Jack Falcon and His Matter Compressor*.