

# Tales From Infinity

## Volume 1

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Final Destination

On the Edge of Eternity

Tom Swift and the Extrasolar Planet

Tom Swift and His Nuclear Hyperplane

# TALES FROM INFINITY

## Volume 1

by Jonathan Cooper

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First edition.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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## Introduction

WHEN I WAS in college I was assigned to write a short story for an English class I was taking. After giving it some thought I wrote *Rainfall*, which told the story of an unloved prophet that warned of a coming apocalypse. As far as I can remember that was the first short story I ever wrote. It was fun to do.

Years later, in early 2007 I started a blog and began posting short stories on it. For some reason I decided to post two new short stories a week, and for a period of several months I managed to keep up with it. Eventually, however, I decided to move on to writing novel-length stories, and I abandoned the blog and wrote *Final Destination*. And the rest is history!

This book is simply a connection of the stories that graced my blog during that hectic period. Some of them are long and others are quite small. A few of them are actually good, and a lot of them are terrible. But, for better or worse, I wrote them, and now they have been collected in a single volume.

Some of the stories, like *Plight of the Bumblebee*, were written just for fun. Others, like *The Rescue*, actually try to make a point. Sometimes the stories make sense and sometimes they cry out for an editor. But they are all a part of the mix, and I suppose there is something worthwhile in each one. (There are a couple that might make good novels.)

It is tempting to go back and re-edit these stories, but rather than do that I will just publish them as they were released on my blog. I hope you enjoy them.

**Jonathan Cooper**  
**August 19, 2009**



## Airport Encounter, Part 1: In God We Trust

I WAS SITTING in a tiny airport terminal high in the Rocky Mountains that afternoon, waiting to board a connecting flight to Los Angeles. We'd had some bad weather that day (which was to be expected, given the time of year), and all flights had been delayed for several hours. I found myself sitting in an uncomfortable chair amidst a sea of other stranded passengers, all in a similar state of irritation. Little children were running wild, stirring up chaos, and their parents were either exhausted or fit to be tied. We all just wanted to get home.

There was nothing we could do but wait out the storm, though, so I waited. The novel I had brought to read gripped me for a while, but eventually I put it down. It was just too difficult to concentrate in the terminal – the noise of my fellow travelers and overhead announcements constantly interrupted my trains of thought. This tiny whatever-its-name-was town might only have three outbound flights a day, but you would never have guessed that from the quantity of messages that blared out overhead.

I put my book back in my briefcase and looked outside. Through the dirty plate-glass window I could see the outline of our jet, ready for takeoff. It was hard to see the plane through the snowstorm that raged outside; I could see ice beginning to form on its wings. The sky was dark and brooding, and snow was piling up rapidly on the airport's single runway. I began to wonder if I would be departing today at all. Did a town this obscure even have a hotel?

A booming voice suddenly interrupted me. "Excuse me, sir, excuse me," someone said. I turned around to see who had

spoken and saw a strange-looking individual staring intently at me. The man was small – no bigger than 5 feet tall – but enormously fat, dressed in a large brown overcoat, and was as bald as he could be. He was clutching a bright green handbag of some kind (green was definitely not his color) and seemed puzzled about something.

“Excuse me,” he repeated, after he saw that he had my attention, “but is here the flight to Los Angeles?”

“What’s that?” I said. “Oh – Los Angeles – yes, this is the right gate. But the flight has been delayed. It probably won’t be leaving for several hours – or maybe several days, given the weather outside.”

“Good,” the man boomed, evidently very pleased. “I sit and rest, then. It has been a long day.” With that, he plopped into the chair beside me. After he had sat down he reached his large hand out to me. “I am Charlie. I go to Los Angeles, to see my brother.”

“Nice to meet you, Charlie. I’m a bored and irritated airline passenger, waiting for the ice age to end so that I can leave this town and get back to a place where the sun actually shines.”

“That is wonderful, so wonderful,” he said enthusiastically. “I am so happy for you.”

I shook my head.

“I am new in your country,” Charlie explained. “There is much new to me here. Your country is not like mine.”

“Where are you from?” I asked him.

“Guldovia,” Charlie replied.

“Ah. Never been there.”

“You should go sometime – it is very nice. We get much snow there.”

“Sounds – enchanting,” I said, as I stared at the snowstorm out the window. “Imagine getting to see snow again.”

“It is delightful,” Charlie enthused. “The snow – I love it. It is so beautiful! So white, and clean, and cold.”

“I’m glad it excites you, Charlie. You’re going to be seeing a lot of it in the next few hours.”

He sat there silently for a few minutes, and then he spoke to

me again. "Excuse me, excuse me, but I must ask a question."

"Ok," I said slowly. "What's on your mind?"

He opened his green handbag and ruffled through it for a few minutes. "Your country is not same as mine. There are many things – ah! – here he is." With that, he pulled a five-dollar-bill out of his purse.

"Do all men carry purses in Guldovia?" I asked him.

"These bags – are they not good?" Charlie replied, beaming. "So nice, and helpful. The colors – they are beautiful!"

"I suppose," I said slowly. Charlie seemed to be lost in a world all his own.

"So, fellow traveler," he said, "this is one of your currencies, is it not?"

"Yes," I said. "That's a \$5 bill."

"Right, that is so. But here – right there – it says words. What does it say?"

I looked at it. "Oh. It says 'In God We Trust'. All of our currency says that."

"Yes, yes. It is so, I have seen it. But – what does it mean? It is not written so on our currency."

I shrugged. "I guess it's our national motto. It's a reflection of the fact that America trusts in God."

Charlie looked puzzled. "Trust in God? How is that so?"

"Well, I guess it means – hmmm – that we believe that God exists and that God will step in and help us when we're in trouble. We believe that God is watching over us and will make sure that things go okay."

"But why?" Charlie asked.

"Oh, because that's what God does – he makes sure that the good guys always win. With God running things we don't have anything to worry about."

"So your country – they all believe in God?"

"Eh, not really," I said. "This isn't referring to any particular deity. People believe in their own gods. Some believe there are lots of them, and some people don't believe in any supreme being. Other people think that they are god."

Charlie stared at the bill intently, and thought for a few moments. “So your peoples do not all believe in God,” he said.

“That’s right. America is a very diverse country. Lots of people believe all kinds of different things. You’re free to believe anything you want here – for the most part.”

“But your peoples believe there is something,” Charlie paused a moment. “Something out there in the sky that will make sure your country has many sunny days, so that travelers are not stranded in airports and little children can have good meals to eat.”

“I guess you can put it that way,” I said.

“I think I understand,” Charlie said at last. “We have this in our country too. Only we call it another name.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. In our country this is called wishful thinking.”

“Wishful thinking!” I said, taken aback. “There’s nothing wishful about it.”

“Your peoples believe that some person you do not know will be your fairy godmother,” Charlie explained patiently. “Maybe God likes you. Maybe God does not. Maybe God wants something from you. You don’t really know. You all just hope that everything will go good like magic, like the little children who believe that Santa Claus will bring them gifts.”

“Our God isn’t anything like Santa!” I protested.

“Outside the airport is our plane, yes? One day, perhaps, spring will come and it will take us to Los Angeles. But the pilot of the plane will only help the ones that board the plane and let him do his job. All those that do not board will be left to fend for themselves.”

“There are many ways to get to Los Angeles,” I said.

“But the pilot – he will only fly those who board his plane. Those who are not on board when the plane departs – they will be left behind. But your peoples believe that God will help anyone and everyone, no matter what. Even those who do not get on the plane. Even those who do not like God. Even those who do not want God’s help. Even those who think he is not real.”

“Of course,” I said. “That’s what God does.”

“In my country – that is what we call wishful thinking,” Charlie said, as he put the bill back in his purse.



## Airport Encounter, Part 2: Love

THE AFTERNOON had given way to evening, and still the fierce winter blizzard raged outside. I was sitting in a tiny airport high in the Rocky Mountains; I had hoped to be back home in Los Angeles by now, but the storm outside had grounded all three of the day's flights. This was clearly the wrong time of year to be flying through the mountains.

My fellow passengers (who were all as eager to leave as I was) had fallen into a state of resigned dejection. There was nothing that could be done but wait until the storm died down. Maybe it would clear up by the morning and we could all head home, or perhaps it would last for several more days. We could not leave the airport and find accommodations because the storm had blocked all roads leading back to town. There was nothing we could do but wait, so we waited – and waited, and waited some more.

The only person whose spirits seemed undampened was Charlie, the strange Guldovian native that was sitting next to me. Charlie seemed quite content to wait out the storm; evidently he'd been in this sort of situation before. "All will be well in time," the balding, overweight man said in his deep booming voice as he rifled through his lime-green purse. "The snows – we have them often in my country. Waiting is what we must do now."

"I guess," I said glumly. I watched him for a while, thinking about our previous conversation. "I don't understand you," I said at last.

"That is good, that is good," Charlie said, beaming. "I am Charlie. What is your name?"

I shrugged. "You can call me Miles," I replied.

"Milo – it is a beautiful name. Many people in my country have that name."

"Miles," I said, emphasizing it again. "My name is Miles."

"What do you not understand, fellow traveler Milo?" Charlie asked.

"I just don't understand how you can say that God is not love," I replied. "What makes you think such a thing?"

Charlie looked at me, puzzled. "I do not think that, no. God is love, yes. But love – what is love?"

"You know – it's being nice to people. Helping them when they need help. Being there for them. That kind of thing."

"Yes, that is so, traveler Milo. But help – what help does the people need?"

"Oh, everyday kind of help, I guess," I said. "Stopping the storm and letting us go home would be nice, for starters."

"The storm, yes, the storm. But," Charlie paused a moment, then resumed, "the storm – it is our greatest need? What of sin?"

"Sin?" I asked, puzzled. "Sin isn't stopping me from boarding that plane outside and getting home – the snowstorm is. Sin is a bit old-fashioned, anyway. We don't really believe in sin in this country."

"But you have a debt, yes? A debt with God. That is sin – the debt that you owe. How are you going to pay it?"

"What do you mean? What right does God have to claim any part of my life?"

Charlie thought a moment. "God made you – and me – and all the peoples that are in this world. He made the ground, and the stars, and everything that is here. The one who makes things – that is who sets the rules. God set down rules– do not lie, or cheat, or steal, and always love God. These rules – you have followed them completely, yes?"

"I haven't done too bad," I replied. "Better than a lot of people. I'm good enough, I think."

"But God does not think so – God sees your debt, and it must be paid. That is what the cross was for – to pay our debt. It is

what the people needed most.”

“The cross? What’s that got to do with it?”

“Man – he did not follow God. He broke the law, and deserved to die,” Charlie said. “That was the penalty. So God sent His Son to pay our debt, so we would not receive what we deserved. That is love, Milo – to give your life for another.”

“But Charlie,” I said, “what about all those people that just don’t see things that way? They’re good people, Charlie. God is love, and is surely going to accept them.”

“God has offered Jesus to pay their debt,” Charlie replied. “If they will not let God pay it, then they must pay it themselves, and God will come to claim the debt. Those who refused Jesus will find that they cannot pay their debt and will perish. It is only just, yes? You can accept God’s love – or refuse it. It is your choice, Milo.”



## Artifacts

I WAS AT A small archaeological dig in northern England the other day when the incident occurred. A friend of mine by the name of Charles Batton had invited me out there to see what he had been doing. Archeology was his life's work, and he was always eager to share it with anyone who would give him a few minutes of their time. Personally I see nothing exciting about small, broken shards of pottery, but then, what do I know?

Charles did not know that I would be coming that day, but he still spotted me within seconds of my arrival. As soon as he saw me he ran over to me and pumped my arm enthusiastically. "I'm so glad you came!" he said. "So what do you think? Isn't this great?"

I looked around the site. My uneducated eye saw a number of neatly-dug pits, some scattered equipment, a tent, and a group of six tired and dirty college students. The sky overhead was overcast and threatening to rain – a fact that did not seem lost on the students who were carefully digging with what looked like toothbrushes. I pitied them.

"Come on – over here!" Charles said, pulling on my arm and dragging me over to the tent. "This is where we're storing all of the valuable relics that we've discovered. Wait 'till you see them!" He opened the tent flap and walked inside, and I reluctantly followed. Inside it was a long table that was covered with rows and rows of small, dirty objects – mostly pottery shards, from what I could tell. A young lady was standing next to it writing in a journal.

"Hello, Lily," Charles said, addressing the young lady. She

looked up and he introduced me to her. “I’m cataloging these artifacts,” Lily said.

“Wonderful,” I replied. “How – interesting. I’m sure you’re making some great discoveries.”

“Oh yes, absolutely,” she said. “This dig dates back to the times when the Roman occupied this part of England. We think that – ”

My mind drifted. I looked over the artifacts they had spent all summer digging up and once again thanked the Lord that I had not become an archaeologist. Then I spotted something.

“What’s this?” I said, picking up a flat, circular glass object from the table.

Charles shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know. It was probably some ritual object that was used in religious ceremonies.”

“Really! How odd. It looks like a glass lens to me.” I held it over a pottery shard and peered through it. “Hey, Charles, look at this – it enlarges things! Now that really is amazing. Were the Romans big into magnifying lenses?”

“Of course not!” he said. “Don’t be silly. It’s just a ritual object – we find them all the time. They must have served some ceremonial purpose.”

“But if I hold it over things it magnifies them,” I said. “How could it not be a magnifying lens? Isn’t that what magnifying lenses do?”

Charles sighed. “Look. Lenses were not invented until many centuries after the Roman civilization collapsed – not until the Middle Ages, in fact. The Romans did *not* have lenses. That artifact, therefore, must be nothing more than a ceremonial object.”

“So,” I said, “you’re telling me that ancient people commonly made pieces of ceremonial glass that just happened to act as a good magnifying lens, and nobody noticed that they had any other use for a thousand years?”

“You’re not listening to me!” he said. “You don’t understand. The Romans – let me say this one more time – did not have glass lenses. We know beyond question that lenses were not invented

until the Middle Ages. Since lenses were not developed until the Middle Ages the Romans couldn't possibly have had them, so that object cannot be a magnifying lens. It's as simple as that."

"Oh. But how do you know that they didn't?"

"They just didn't, and that's all there is to it. You just don't understand."

I look at the glass object in my hand and peered through it again. "I suppose not," I said.



## Belief

REVEREND BRADLEY was walking downtown early one morning, on the way to a speaking engagement, when he heard a voice calling his name. The tall, thin pastor stopped and turned around, trying to figure out who had called out to him. Few people were out this early and he spotted the man almost immediately: a young, neatly-dressed individual with scruffy red hair.

“Good morning, Silas!” the pastor said as he shook the young man's hand. “What brings you out so early on this fine and blessed morning?”

“Oh, I've got an appointment at the student loan office,” Silas replied. “Nothing too important. And you?”

“I've been invited to address the Lighthouse group at the college campus – they've asked me to come and speak to them about some issues going on in their lives. It's exciting to watch the Lord at work.”

“Yeah, whatever. Say, Reverend: why do you bother with all that, anyway?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you know. I've been to your church before – don't think I haven't! – and while that's all nice and good, I see that you keep trying to force your beliefs onto other people. You're always going around and telling people that their beliefs just aren't good enough. Why don't you just stick to your crowd and leave other people alone?”

The thin pastor thought a moment before replying. “Do you remember how we met?”

Silas grinned, shaking his head. "Of course! I'll never forget."

"What happened that morning?"

"Oh, well, you know. We were in the park that morning, and you were – where were you – sitting in the park with your family. A little girl – I forget her name – had wandered into the road, and a big truck was headed her way. I went out, grabbed her, and pulled her away just in time. You came over to make sure that everything was ok and invited me to your church."

"But why did you do it?" the pastor asked.

"What do you mean?" Silas replied.

"Why did you try to pull her out of the path of that truck?"

"If I hadn't have acted she would have been killed instantly! That truck driver didn't even see her. He didn't even try to slow down."

"But maybe she didn't believe in trucks, Silas. How could you be sure that she even knew what a truck was?"

Silas gave the pastor an odd look. "What are you talking about, man? It doesn't matter! If that truck hit her then she would have died on the spot."

"But Silas," the pastor said, "maybe she didn't see the truck coming. The truck wouldn't have harmed her if she didn't know about it. That wouldn't be fair."

"Are you crazy? The moment that truck hit her – bam! – that would have been it. There's no way she could have survived."

"I just don't know, Silas," Rev. Bradley said thoughtfully. "She may have been a student of Eastern mysticism. Perhaps she believed that the road could be shared by both her and the truck – that mutual exclusions were a Western concept. By moving her you could have robbed her of an attempt to validate her beliefs."

"You're nuts," Silas said. "Don't you know anything? If you get run over by a truck that is moving at a high rate of speed then are you dead – d e a d, dead. Right there. Whether she saw it coming or not. What she knew about trucks didn't matter a bit. I knew it would kill her, so I stepped in to save her."

"Ah," the pastor said. "I see." He turned to leave.

"Wait!" Silas said. "You didn't answer my question! Why do

you bother with all that preaching stuff?”

“I'm with you, Silas,” Rev. Bradley said. “I think it's a good idea to warn people that they are in the path of an oncoming truck – it'll kill them for sure if they don't escape.”

With that, he walked briskly down the street.



## Christmas Shopping

I WAS WALKING around an enormous department store that day, trying to find a way to escape its twisty mazes of aisles, when I spotted someone.

“Now there's an enterprising individual,” I thought. The thin young teenager was standing behind a glass jewelry counter, wearing a professional-looking blue suit and sporting a red pin. I walked up to him.

“Happy Holidays,” he replied. “How may I help you?”

“Why, that's very kind of you,” I replied. “I also hope that whatever undefined holiday you are celebrating but dare not mention is a glorious and happy one.”

“What?” he said, looking confused.

“I need some assistance,” I said crisply, as I gazed into the glass case between us.

“I'd be glad to help! Doing some last-minute holiday shopping?” he asked.

I glanced at my watch. “I've still got, what, six whole hours before Christmas,” I said. “That's plenty of time. Yes, I'm trying to find that mythical perfect Christmas present.”

“We've got lots of them here!” the teenager said. “Watches, rings, necklaces, all heavily discounted. What did you have in mind?”

I thought a moment. “I'm looking for a gift that says 'I don't actually care, but I'm pretending to because it's Christmas.'”

“You want what?” he said. He looked at me with a very odd expression on his face.

I nodded. “Of course! This, my friend, is the time of year

when we get presents for all the people we don't care about the rest of the year, in a feeble attempt to make them think they are important to us."

"It is?" he asked.

"Of course!" I replied. "Why do you think it is so hard to find gifts for people? We have no idea what people already own, or want to own, or desperately need because we don't actually know them. It's quite an art to find the perfect present when you don't even know if the receiver is still alive!"

"You know, you're right. You do need help," the teenager said.

"Which is why I'm here!" I replied. "Your services are invaluable to me. Which of your gifts say 'I care about you' in a very convincing way, but are so general that pretty much anyone would like them?"

"Gift cards," he said without hesitation. "You're looking for gift cards."

"Of course!" I said, snapping my fingers. "I'd overlooked that entirely. I've never met anyone yet that will turn down cash! How good of you to think of it." I turned to go.

"Hey – wait a minute," he said.

"You have them here?" I asked.

"No, it's not that," he said. "It's just that – you know, you could try actually caring about people, instead of buying them off with presents."

"A novel idea," I said thoughtfully. "Is that better?"

"This season – it's all about love, you know?" he replied. "God's love to man, and everything. Why not take this chance and actually show some real love to people? Like Jesus did. I think that's what it's all about."

I smiled. I knew he was an enterprising young man as soon as I laid eyes on him. Few people these days are daring enough to wear a pin that actually mentions the name of the holiday we celebrate this time of year.

"I think you're quite right, young man. A present is meaningless without a life of love behind it. Merry Christmas."

And with that, I left.



## Dragon Hunting

I DREW my sword and once again looked into the forest that was directly in front of me. Not a twig moved, and no creatures stirred. Even the wind had stopped blowing. After hours of searching I had at last found a path leading into the woods, but it was overgrown with weeds and almost impossible to see. For all I knew the path might lead a half mile and then peter out, leaving me lost in a maze of endless trees. I strained to see more, but the underbrush was so thick that I could not see further than a few hundred yards. The forest was dark, even in the daylight, and I knew it would be difficult to force my way through it. It would be even more difficult to find my prey before it found me.

The worst part of all was the danger that lurked inside it. So many people – so many friends – had died in the past two months, burned to ashes by a remorseless dragon. I knew that dragon lurked in this forest, and was just waiting to strike again. I knew what I had to do.

As I started to walk down the path that led into the forest I heard a strained voice call out behind me. “Don’t go in there – you’ll be killed, you fool!”

I stopped and turned around to see who had spoken, and spotted the gentleman who had called out. He appeared to be an older fellow – a farmer, perhaps, judging from his clothing.

“What would you have me do?” I asked. “Just leave the danger for someone else?”

“The dragon will kill you for sure if you try!” he warned. “It’s worth a man’s life just to get near that forest. I don’t know anyone who has ever entered it and returned to tell the tale.”

I knew he was right. "Someone has to try," I said. "I don't see other dragon hunters lining up to engage it in battle."

"Of course not," he said. "It's too dangerous. Men aren't as big fools as that."

"Waiting at home for the dragon to attack is equally dangerous," I said. "I would rather try to conquer him and fail than never try at all."

"Good heavens," he said, "you've gone mad. What possible good is that? If you try and fail you'll be dead, and then what good will you be? A dead man isn't worth anything to anybody."

I looked him squarely in the eye. "You tell me which is better: to march into that forest and fight the beast, possibly giving my life for my friends and family, or to do nothing and watch as I and everything I care for are destroyed by the dragon. Is it truly wiser to wait for the dragon to come and kill my family, and die knowing that I did nothing to help them?"

The farmer said nothing.

"Will you come with me?" I asked. "The forest is dark, and I do not know the way."

"I won't," he said. "It's too dangerous."

"Then I shall defeat the beast alone," I said. I turned around and resumed walking into the woods.

## Eternity's Twilight

*THE FOLLOWING is an excerpt from the memoirs of Captain George Randall, one of the many people Emperor Conrad sent out to search for the long-lost Nehemiah IV terraformation probe while the Exiles were still trapped on Arcadia. His memoirs were rediscovered in February of 2199 during the reconstruction of the galaxy.*

Imagine traveling uncounted trillions of miles through galactic space to ask an immortal the secret to his longevity, only to find him dead by the time you finally got there. It happened to me and, let me tell you, it wasn't fun.

The order to pay Jason Alton a visit was delivered on January 16, 1383 A.D. For the past six months we'd been exploring a previously uncharted section of the galaxy, looking for an ancient space probe named the *Nehemiah IV*. This probe was legendary: for the past thousand years it had been single-handedly transforming countless barren worlds into lush, green paradises complete with cities that were maintained by an army of intelligent droids. I wouldn't have believed any purely automatic machine could do such a thing if I hadn't seen the results for myself, and even then I still had a hard time with it. Those ancients really knew what they were doing, and I don't wonder that the folks at Headquarters wanted to get their hands on that elusive probe – it's really one of a kind.

Anyway, we had traced that wily probe from planet to planet and eventually discovered that it had left that segment of the galaxy centuries ago for a different one. When we sent in our report to Headquarters they told us that they'd take up the search from there and that we were to direct the *Ares* to the last known home of Jason Alton - a tiny, unnamed planet ten thousand light-years away. Headquarters had evidence that he was one of the folks who had received the life-extension treatment back in the last days of the ancients, and that he could still be alive. At any rate, they wanted us to question him and see if we couldn't find out a few more details about living forever – something I wouldn't mind knowing myself.

The existence of this life-extension treatment came as a big surprise to me, so as we started on our yearlong journey I quizzed Doc Martin on it. He'd heard of it, and he sat me down and explained it to me.

“Well, Randall, it's like this. The ancients were pretty bright folks: they could handle atomics and matter/energy conversion as easy as anything, which is why they could alter planets at the drop of a hat. One of the other things they could do is build incredible, tiny machines – nanobots, we call 'em, only what they built was a lot more sophisticated than what we can do. That's to be expected; they built them for a thousand years and we've only had 'em for a couple hundred.

“Anyway, one of the things they discovered around 400 A.D. – just before the galaxy collapsed, for reasons we still haven't found – was how to take these tiny machines and put them inside a person and have them do a bit of maintenance work. The idea is that as the body aged the machines would reverse the aging process by fixing whatever was going wrong. If a sickness came along and the body couldn't repair itself, the machines would kick in and take care of it. If the body got a severe injury somehow, the machines would do what they could to put the body back together.

“Now, this technique was supposedly developed at the very end of their civilization, and only a few people ever got it – all of

whom, as far as we knew, were killed in the general collapse. After all, even the machines couldn't help you if your planet got hit with an antimatter bomb or if your sun was detonated, and you know the chaos that occurred in the fall. To be honest, Randall, I never really believed that the whole thing was real; it'd be a pretty tough thing to do, and I didn't think that even they could handle it."

"I guess we'll find out," I told him. "Supposedly this Jason fellow got the treatment, and might still be around."

Doc asked me if I knew anything about him, and I told him I didn't; Headquarters hadn't told us much – they never do. Since we had a long time until we arrived at his doorstep I asked Aaron to dig up what he could.

It took him longer than I thought to get results because Eliza, our artificer, was having a midlife crisis. It seems that when we stopped over at Perlandra Station to get some repairs done on the *Ares* before heading out again we were given the wrong parts and didn't realize it until after we were long gone. As a result Eliza just wasn't working right: her computational matrix was down and she was making about as much sense as a gibbering monkey. Aaron wasn't sure if we could get anything out of her, but Renee – our resident matrix expert – was able to piece Eliza back together again. I was mighty glad: the last thing any starship captain wants is for the electronic brain that runs the entire ship to act like a lunatic – it's very bad for morale.

Once Eliza was in good shape again Aaron got right to work. It was slow going: even though we could link into the central database at Headquarters in realtime via a tachyon beam, the database didn't have the information locally and, since their database administrator had been fired in a round of budget cuts, we had to do the best we could and ended up running the query against the central data cores of several thousand planets. Trying to search the stored information of a thousand worlds is not for the faint of heart: it took four months to get back a result. We did get it back, though, and I think it was worth it – after all, what else is there to do on long trips?

\* \* \* \* \*

Eliza told us that Jason Alton was a very wealthy man who was born in 396 A.D. – just about the time the galaxy was thrown into turmoil. He inherited his wealth from his father, who owned a major biochemical company and made his fortune through genetic repair techniques. It seems that Jason found out about this new miracle treatment through the connections he had with that company, and when he found out about it he wanted it – and he had the money and position to obtain it.

Jason saw that civilization was starting to collapse and, being a smart man, he gathered up his fortune, boarded his starship, and sailed out to a star far beyond the edge of civilization. He told the folks back home that he was going to build his own world, where he would have the replicators to build anything he wanted, the virtual reality equipment to take him anywhere he could imagine, and enough nanobots to extend his life indefinitely. He said he didn't care what happened to the galaxy or who lived or died; he was going to live forever on his own planet and indulge in his every wish.

That was the idea, anyway, and after he left nothing else was ever heard of him. He had actually been forgotten about in the general chaos of the galactic collapse until some clerk at Headquarters came across his records – it seemed that his permit for the planet he was on had expired some upteen centuries ago and the computer wanted to send him a past-due notice.

It took us every bit of a full year to get there; we didn't arrive on what we came to call Jason's Planet until January 28, 1384 A.D. – and that was with Suzy, our antimatter engineer, tweaking the engines and giving us every joule of energy she could muster. Jason sure picked a distant spot to reside; it wouldn't surprise me a bit to discover that we were the first folks to pay him a visit in a thousand years. The nearest civilized world was 58,700 trillion miles away, and not even the *Nehemiah IV* had ventured this far out; there was nothing out here but harsh suns and forbidding

worlds. In all likelihood Jason Alton was the first person to ever enter this region of the galaxy – and, I bet, there wasn't a person alive who envied his choice of neighborhood.

As we entered orbit around Jason's Planet I wondered what a man ten centuries old would be like, and we quickly discovered the answer: he would be dead. We found his base on the planet without any trouble; it was the only base on the surprisingly forbidding planet. The landing party we sent down quickly found something else: his tomb.

We weren't familiar with the language on the tombstone, but Eliza was: she discovered that (unsurprisingly) it was a dialect used a thousand years ago and quickly translated the inscription. The tombstone simply stated that Jason Alton died on April 19, 491 A.D. at the age of 95, and was placed in the tomb by one of his droids. No details concerning his death were provided, though, and that gave us a problem: why had he died?

The obvious thing to do was to exhume the body so Doc Martin could take a look at it, and we did that. We didn't discover anything, though: the body had been there for about a thousand years and there really wasn't much left of it. Doc said there was nothing to indicate how he had died, and if there were any nanobots in his bloodstream they were definitely gone by now. For all he knew the guy had simply died of old age and the whole nanobot thing was just a hoax.

I wanted to tell Headquarters what we'd found, but by this time we were way out of range: tachyon communicators only work so far, and it would take six long months of travel to be back in range. Doc Martin suggested that we just turn around and head back, and tell Headquarters that we did what we could and found him dead. I told Doc I wasn't about to turn around; it took forever to get out here, and I wasn't about to leave until I knew why Jason died. There was no way I was going to be sent back out here again to find out what happened; being cooped up in a small metal can for a year, with nothing outside but empty space and empty worlds for thousands of trillions of miles, can really get on your nerves. There was no chance I was going to leave this

planet until I knew exactly how Jason Alton had died – and that was final.

Being the Captain I normally never left the ship, but in this case I thought that the situation could use a little hands-on treatment. With this in mind I had Eliza land the *Ares* outside Jason's tomb and we all got to work. I told the crew that we weren't going to leave this place until we knew why Jason had died, and I think everyone actually believed that I meant it.

Jason's planet was not a friendly place: it was dry, barren, and dead. Really dead, in fact. There wasn't enough atmosphere around this small piece of rock to fit into a teaspoon, and if there was any life around we sure couldn't find it. Jason had obviously not terraformed it, which puzzled us until we found his virtual reality setup.

The base Jason had briefly called his home had the most sophisticated virtual reality equipment I have ever seen. It way outclassed anything we can produce today; it was the real thing from the ancients, and was obviously the best that money could buy. Eliza told us that the machinery and nanomachinery could do things that, well, just boggled my mind. If a thing could be imagined, this guy's equipment could make it happen, and make it as real to Jason as if it really *was* real – and it had the most sophisticated artificial intellect anyone had ever heard of. I had a feeling it was second only to the software that ran that *Nehemiah* space probe we'd been hunting for.

We were a bit surprised to find that the base was so small; aside from some communications equipment, life support systems, the virtual reality center, and other things like that, there wasn't much to the place. I was expecting a huge palace, but evidently Jason preferred virtual palaces to real ones. I didn't blame him: with the equipment he had, virtual reality could appear every bit as real as the real thing – although just thinking about that gave the creeps.

All five of us pitched in to find out why Jason had died, and we had a hard time of it: none of us were even remotely familiar

with the equipment we found on the base. Suzy spent her time working with the base power supply and trying to find out how it worked and if it could be started again. Renee worked with the base computer systems and tried to find out if there was a hidden part of the base we hadn't discovered. Doc Martin went over Jason's few personal effects and examined the few droids loitering around the place to see if they knew anything about Jason's last days. As for me, I worked with Aaron to keep Eliza busy analyzing the data gathered by the crew and trying to figure out if we'd missed anything.

Renee was the one who found what we'd been missing: a lot of the decorative panels on the wall were actually computer panels, and they tied into a central database core buried deep under the planet's surface. She told us that if we could get the computer started again and have Eliza translate the data in it we might be able to figure out what was going on. That sounded like a good idea to me, so I told everyone to get to work.

Three weeks went by without making any progress at all. The problem we ran into was that the base on Jason's Planet didn't have any power because the electrical generator was down, and we just could not find a way to get it started again. That generator was like nothing we had ever seen: Suzy couldn't make heads or tails out of it, and Eliza couldn't figure it out either. We didn't know if we just weren't starting it right or if it was damaged and needed to be repaired, but we did know that if it really was damaged we have no idea what was wrong.

We eventually decided to just forget about Jason's electrical generator and connect the power grid at the base to the antimatter plant on the *Ares*. That wasn't easy, though: the ancients used a bizarre set of electrical protocols and it took Eliza the better part of three days to design a converter that could translate our power into the frequencies expected by the equipment on the planet. It did the job, though: after Eliza had built the converter we installed it and the base powered right up on the first try. It was a serious drain on our power supply but we could handle it – for a while, at least.

Once Renee saw that we had a direct electrical link she began working with Aaron to create a data link between the *Ares* and Jason's Planet, so that they could directly download all the information that was left in the planet's datacore. I don't know how they did it – artifact development just isn't my field – but they did. Aaron was surprised to see that nearly all the data was still good, but Renee wasn't: she said that the ancients knew how to make things that lasted forever; the *Nehemiah IV* was a testimony to that.

Now that everything was put together, all we had to do was wait for Eliza to translate everything. It was a good feeling.

What wasn't a good feeling was finding out that, after Eliza was done, we still didn't know what had happened. We found out that Jason had established the base and used the equipment – and boy, did he ever use it. He was physically healthy; judging from the biomonitors at the base, he did not age a day from the time he got to the planet until the day he died nearly forty years later. There were no natural disasters, there were no accidents, and there were no failures in the longevity system. The only thing Doc Martin could find was that his mind had decayed: mentally, Jason had gone downhill and emotionally, Jason had become a wreck. There was no cause of death listed in the records, but as near as Doc could figure out Jason had become so mentally and emotionally unbalanced that he simply died – or possibly committed suicide.

That didn't really help me any, but Renee helped us out. "You know," she told us, "that's really about what you would expect to happen."

"Eh?" I said.

Renee explained. "Think about who he was! He spent his entire life living for himself, and didn't care in the least for anyone else. His only concern in life was to make sure he could satisfy his every last selfish whim. He was convinced that that if he just had everything he wanted he'd be happy.

"Lots of folks think that, but Jason was different: he could

*actually make it happen.* He *did* have the means to fulfill his every wish, and I bet he eventually found that the things he thought would fulfill him didn't. He thought that his personal genie here could fill the emptiness in his soul, and he found out that he was wrong.

"What Jason discovered is that he had nothing to live for: the emptiness inside him couldn't be filled by anything his machines could manufacture. The lush palaces he built pleased him for a while, but they lost their charm as he found they couldn't satisfy him. King Solomon went through the same thing: he gave in to his every desire and found them so empty that he came to hate his own life. Gardens and houses and wealth and fame cannot fill the soul: only Christ can do that.

"As the dreams Jason built failed to satisfy him, he went further and further to find something that would please him – just look at what he used his machines to build – and his soul grew darker and darker. I bet he eventually realized that he was truly lost: nothing he could find could make his life worth living. There was no way he could go back to the rest of civilization, for he knew that by this time it had all been destroyed.

"Someone once said that people have a hole in them that only God can fill. We're designed to have a relationship with God, and nothing else can satisfy us the way that can. Jason tried to fill that hole with himself; it eventually pushed his sanity over the edge and he died."

Since there was nothing else to do we simply packed up and left for home. We brought with us all the information we had downloaded from Jason's datacore and Jason's remains as well, just in case the folks back home could learn something from it that we didn't. It was going to be a long journey home.



## Hiking in the Dark

IT WAS A beautiful evening. Richard and I were deep in the woods, hiking down the side of a mountain. Pine trees covered the landscape as far as the eye could see. Overhead was a clear sky filled with brilliant, shining stars. There was no moon out, which allowed for an exceptional view of the summer constellations. We were miles from civilization and had been hiking for hours.

"They're beautiful," my enormous friend said softly. I never understood how someone of his vast weight could move so quietly.

"What are?" I asked.

"The stars."

"Oh. Yeah, I suppose."

"Do you think we'll ever get to visit them?" he asked.

"I hope not," I said, while carefully stepping over a hole in the ground. It was very difficult to see anything in the dark. "The stars are incredibly hot; why, if we ever set foot on one we'd be incinerated instantly."

"But what about the planets that orbit them? Do you think we'll ever get to visit them?"

"Probably not," I said. "I doubt any working faster-than-light drives will be developed within our lifetimes, and it's a little too far to walk."

"Maybe so," he said. We walked in silence for a few minutes. Richard took the lead, and I walked behind him. We slowly worked our way down the side of the mountain. There was a stream nearby – we could hear it – but in the darkness it was hard

to make anything out. I kept tripping over things I couldn't see, but my friend, for some reason I could not understand, was not having the same problem.

"But what about after we die?" Richard asked, breaking the silence. "Do you think we'll get to visit the planets after we go to Heaven?"

"I have no idea," I said. "It's hard to say. It's certainly a possibility."

"I mean, you've got to do something up there, right? You can't just sit around all day and do nothing. I'm sure there are jobs, and things."

"I doubt you will be sitting on a cloud strumming a harp for eternity, if that is what you are getting at," I said.

"Now there's a question for you. What kind of jobs do you think people will do? Do you think there will be plumbers up there, or will I have to go back to school to get a new degree? What if they're not using pipes in Heaven – what if they have nuclear assemblers, or something?"

"Then I guess you'll have to become a baker instead," I replied, as I ran right into a small tree I hadn't seen.

"I don't really like baking," he said as he helped me off the ground. "Besides, how would I compete with people who had already been there for thousands of years? How could I ever get enough experience to get a competitive edge?"

"I'm sure you will think of something," I said. "I wouldn't worry about it. I bet there are more things to do than there are people to get them all done. I don't know anyone yet who found serving God to be boring or unexciting."

"And what about the language? I don't suppose they speak English there. How long will it take to learn the local dialect?"

I grabbed Richard as he started to slide down the side of the mountain. It took all my strength to pull his enormous bulk back from oblivion. "Maybe you'll just be born knowing it," I said, gasping for breath. "Or die knowing it. Or something. The apostle John was able to talk to people in Heaven without taking any language classes. I think that's a good sign."

Richard thought a moment. “But think about it! You can’t just spend all of eternity sitting around on the beach. You’ve got to do something! I have no idea what my options even are. How can I possibly be prepared if I don’t know what to expect? How am I going to fit into society? What if I get bored? What if I spent my whole earthly life pursuing a job that doesn’t even exist in Heaven?”

“I don’t think it will really matter,” I replied. “I mean, you’ll have all of forever to figure something out. I wouldn’t worry too much about it. It’s not like you won’t have the time.”

“But what will I do? Aren’t you worried? I mean – that’s an awful lot of time!”

I shook my head – not that anyone could see me in the dark. “I’m not worried about it. I mean, think about it, Richard. Life on earth is all about serving God – all you have to do to get through life is walk with God. Life in Heaven will be no different. Sure, the landscape might be a little different, but the essentials aren’t going to change. There may be different props but it will be the same story. You’ll be fine.”

“That’s good,” Richard replied. “I was getting a little worried.”

All of the sudden a thought hit me. “You don’t think we’re going to get out of the woods, do you?”

“Well...” he began.

“I know we’ve been lost for hours, Richard, but I’m sure we’ll find a way out. That stream is around here somewhere; we just have to find it and follow it to civilization. I’m sure we will be fine.”

“Maybe so,” he replied, “but if you’re so confident then why are you growling?”

“I’m not growling,” I said.

“Oh,” he replied. “So who is?”

We stood still for a moment and listened. We could hear the wind blowing through the trees, and in the distance we could hear a stream gently flowing through the woods. We could also hear a growling in the distance – a growling that was steadily getting

closer.

“I think it’s time to go now,” I said.

“I’m right behind you,” Richard called out.

## Monopoly

I KNEW there was a problem the minute I turned on the shower faucet and nothing came out. It only took me an hour and a half to figure out that the problem was not on my end – some thoughtful soul, unmindful of my personal hygiene, had taken the great liberty of disconnecting my water supply.

This was actually not a good day to have an unscheduled drought. I had an important meeting that afternoon that I could not afford to miss, and I could hardly show up for work in my natural, uncultivated earthiness. Being late and missing the meeting altogether wasn't an attractive option either.

I really did not want to call the water company, but short of digging a well in my backyard with my bare hands and a spoon I had no other options. So I called them, and after being told for forty-five minutes that my call was important I was, by a freak chance, connected to a real, live, human being.

“Hello, my name is Beatrice,” a pleasant voice said on the other end. “Thank you for waiting. How may I help you today?”

“Yes, my water has been turned off,” I replied. “I'd like to know why.”

“Can I have your account number, please?” Beatrice asked.

I gave it. A few minutes later the operator spoke up. “Your water has not been turned off,” she replied.

“It most certainly has! Nothing is coming out of any faucets in my entire house, and as best I can tell the pipes leading into my house are dry. Someone has definitely turned off my water.”

“Let me check something,” she replied. I heard a few keystrokes in the background, and then a stifled yawn. A few

moments later she spoke up again. "It looks like your neighbor has not paid their water bill in quite some time," she began.

"How terrible," I said. "A true travesty of justice!"

"A worker was dispatched yesterday to turn off their water," she continued.

"That seems like a good countermove," I agreed. "No payment – no service."

"From what I can tell," Beatrice continued, "it would appear that the house number in the shutoff order was miskeyed. The actual work order instructed our agent to turn off your water instead of your neighbor's."

"How wonderful! I'm sure that's going to be very effective in convincing my neighbor to start paying his bill. When can you send someone to reconnect it?"

"Oh, we can send someone out today, but you must first pay the reconnect fee."

I nearly dropped the phone. "Excuse me?"

"It's right here in the manual. 'In the event of a disconnection, the customer must pay a \$200 reconnect fee before their water may be reconnected.'" she read aloud.

"But this isn't my fault!" I protested. "I have been paying my bills! It's my barbaric neighbors that have failed to live up to their contractual obligations!"

"It's company policy, sir. There are no exceptions."

I could feel my blood pressure rising. "But I'm not at fault here! You can't charge me \$200 to fix a problem that you caused!"

"The policy has no exceptions, sir," Beatrice said coldly. "Your water has been disconnected. You must pay the fee to have it reconnected. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Who do you think you are? You can't just turn my water off just because you feel like it! I have my rights!"

"Our policy dictates that we can terminate your service at any time," she said. "The company does not need a reason. If you wish to continue your service you can call us back and pay the fee."

“And what if I'm not interested in your crummy service?”

“We are the only water provider in your area,” Beatrice replied.

“I can always dig a well,” I pointed out.

“County zoning ordinances prohibit digging wells. Doing so would deplete the water table and violate local environmental policies. Have a nice day.” And with that, I was disconnected.

The water company had me in a real bind. There was only one thing to do, and I did it: I sold my house and moved to a different state – one of freedom and tranquility, where a man is allowed to govern his own water supply in peace. As for my neighbors, well, I don't think the water company ever managed to successfully disconnect their water supply. Last I heard, the people that purchased my house were looking at property in my haven of liberty. Apparently, freedom and good hygiene can be contagious.



Oh bury me not...

*(THE TEXT on the following pages is taken from the memoirs of Captain George Randall, one of the many people the Empire sent out to search for the long-lost Nehemiah IV space probe while the Exiles were still trapped on Arcadia. His memoirs were rediscovered in February of 2199 during the reconstruction of the galaxy.)*

I saw it coming long in advance but there wasn't a thing I could do about it. It was like watching the week-long implosion of the singularity out by Rudolph's Planet back in 1379: you could see the massive neutronium structure give way and space collapse onto itself in a horrifying (and expensive) mess, but not even all the might of the Empire could stop it.

I really tried my best, though. I pleaded with Joe Carson, my first mate, to reconsider dying. I told him that he'd lose his pension if he died and that the contract he signed to become the first mate of the *Ares* didn't expire for another year, thus binding him to continue to serve for at least that long. Joe, though, wouldn't be dissuaded; he died on April 15, 1385 A.D., and despite all Doc Martin could do he remained quite dead.

Now, I know what you're thinking: everyone has to die sometime, right? Out of all the uncounted trillions of people who ever lived only two managed to avoid dying, and it was a sure bet that death was going to take old Joe one of these days. Joe Carson wasn't even upset over it; he said he'd been looking forward to going to be with Jesus for a long time, and he died in peace. Joe was definitely ready to go and firmly believed he was going to a

much better place. What he didn't understand, though, was that these new environmental regulations make dying on board a starship really problematic. Not many people follow the reams of legislation that come out of Headquarters these days, but starship captains have to and I, unfortunately, happened to be exactly that.

Doc Martin certainly hadn't been following the latest rules. When he saw how upset I was he assumed it was because I had been very fond of Joe and because he'd been such a good first mate. I told him that was all true and then I dropped my bombshell: I asked him how he planned to dispose of Joe's body, since Joe wouldn't be needing it anymore.

He scratched his head for a moment. "Well, I guess we'll just have to keep him in cold storage until we return home next year. We've got plenty of room on board and he won't be in the way."

I shook my head. "Can't do it; Headquarters forbids keeping a dead body on board a ship for more than 30 days. They say it's bad for crew morale."

Doc thought a moment. "I suppose it might be at that. Well, I guess we can bury him on Doravane, then; we'll be there in two weeks and –"

I shook my head again. "Nope. The planets out in the sector we're exploring are classified as virgin territory, unmarred by the hand of man; regulations prohibit burying someone in virgin territory – might upset the delicate balance of nature, or something."

Doc nodded. "Makes sense. Ok, then I guess we'll have to put him in a coffin and eject him into space, unless..."

"Yes, Doc, regulations prohibit launching bodies and other objects into space. They say it makes for a navigational hazard."

That got Doc to thinking. "Well, hmmm. We can't incinerate Joe; Joe wouldn't have liked it, and besides, we don't have the equipment to do that on board. I bet, though, that there's a regulation prohibiting cremating the dead on board a ship, isn't there?"

I nodded.

Doc kept thinking. "Well, we can't bury him, we can't eject

him, we can't cremate him, and we can't keep him with us. That leaves you with a bit of a problem, doesn't it?"

Doc Martin had finally grasped the situation. I had a big problem: what could I possibly do with the body of Joe?

During the next two weeks, as we plowed through space heading toward Doravane, I gave it an awful lot of thought. How could this possibly have happened to me? Here I was, exploring space, trying to find that crazy lost space probe, and my first mate thoughtlessly went and died on me. How could Headquarters have come up with such insane regulations? More importantly, how could I get out of this? It's so easy for the people back home to go around making rules; *they're* not the ones that have to follow them.

Then one day a thought hit me. Surely I wasn't the first person to ever be in this mess, right? I'm not the first captain to explore uncharted space by a long shot; other people must have died in space before, and I could just do whatever it was they did. I had Aaron, our artificer mechanic, run some requests through our not-so-bright-computer Eliza and see if he could find anything. I began to feel relieved; I was sure that things were going to be fine.

Then Aaron came back. He said he had Eliza conduct an exhaustive search through all the death certificates of all the men who had ever died while in space to find out what had happened to them. He even had her tap into the main datacore back at Headquarters to see if she'd missed anything. The end result, he said, was nothing: Joe was the first death since the regulation was passed a week ago that bodies couldn't be ejected into space. The past couldn't help me; I was the first to fall victim.

I began to collapse into despair. What was I going to do?

We encountered a pretty big surprise when we got to the planet Doravane. According to what fragmented records we could find about this ancient area of space, Doravane was supposed to be a habitable planet; it had oceans, continents, trees, an

atmosphere, the works – all courtesy of the amazing Nehemiah class of space probes, which could terraform planets as easy as splitting an atom. It still amazes me what those ancient engineers built: how could they build a series of machines that could go from planet to planet and rearrange it to make it perfectly habitable and self-sustaining? I'd seen systems where the most advanced Nehemiah probe moved planets and even altered the structure of stars to get things just right. I don't wonder the bigwigs at Headquarters wanted to get their hands on these ancient devices, or that they sent out my ship and a bunch of others to track it down – they're quite a prize. Still, I don't think they'll ever find her: she's got a pretty wily AI system and probably has ways of hiding we will never unravel. No Nehemiah probe has ever been found in anything approaching working order and I don't expect any ever will.

Anyway, up to the point when we arrived in this system we were expecting to have a good time on Doravane – maybe get some short leave, uncover a few new life forms, and so forth. We'd been cooped up on the *Ares* for about three months just trying to get here and we really needed a breather. Doravane, though, didn't cooperate: in fact, she wasn't really there.

There was simply no planet left: instead there were a bunch of rocky fragments where Doravane was supposed to be. We analyzed them and found that they were evidently all that was left of the planet. This led to more questions than answers, though: what on earth had happened to this place, and did the Nehemiah IV have anything to do with it? Had it finally lost its marbles and started destroying planets instead of rebuilding them, or were our records horribly inaccurate?

Thankfully, Aaron came through and pieced the mystery together for us. Based on readings taken of the wreckage of the planet, he had Eliza run a bunch of calculations. The upshot was that around 300 B.C. a very large starship, equipped with a fully-fueled antimatter drive, ran into the planet at a speed approximately 0.001% less than the speed of light. Maybe that ship's calculations were off or maybe they weren't aware of the

existence of Doravane, but they ran right into the planet and they hit it *hard*. The impact alone was devastating, but the explosion of the antimatter when that drive's containment field collapsed was even worse: Doravane was instantly vaporized and only these fragments were left. We asked Eliza if the probe we were after could have been the ship that collided with the planet and Eliza said no: the probe ran on something a lot more advanced than an antimatter drive and besides, it had enough sense to avoid hitting planets.

It was Doravane, though, that provided the answer to my problem. As Aaron was combing the wreckage for clues he found a little graveyard. It seems that some time after the main accident happened that destroyed the planet somebody went back and built a graveyard on one of the planet's fragments, complete with tombs, a memorial, rows upon rows of metal crosses. The memorial was written in an unknown language, but our extensive experience chasing wild geese – ancient space probes, I mean – had given us a few ideas about how to translate it. As best we could figure out, this is what was written on the memorial nearly two thousand years ago:

*This graveyard holds all that remains of the starship Olympia and those aboard it who died when it crashed into this rock. The pit this graveyard was placed in is the actual crater created by the impact. Please do not disturb the graves, the tombs, or the other artifacts that are here. However, do not forget that this graveyard merely holds the physical remains of the dead; the final resting place of these souls will be decided by God on Judgment Day. Be sober, but remember: those who were truly Alive at the time of the crash are Alive still.*

Finding the graveyard in space was a terrific stroke of luck: as soon as I saw it I knew that all of my troubles were over. Of course! There were definitely no regulations (at least yet!) against

burying the dead in graveyard; in fact, it was positively encouraged. It's true that regulations prohibited us digging up the soil and burying him there, but there were crypts in the graveyard, and we could easily place his coffin in one of those.

So, with the blessing of Headquarters, we took Joe, put him in a coffin, and transported him into that underground memorial. There we held his funeral service and laid him to rest. I was a happy man: Joe was in a graveyard safely tucked away, and no regulations were broken since no soil was disturbed. I was sure that Joe would be pleased.

In the meantime, I decided to pass a firm law on board the *Ares* that nobody – positively nobody – was allowed to die on board again without giving me at least 6 months' notice. I was *not* going to go through this again.

## Persuasion

“GIVE IT UP, Jack,” I said. “You’re wasting your time!”

“There has to be something I can do,” my friend replied.

“Not in this case,” I said. “I think he’s hopeless.”

“There is always hope,” he insisted. The two of us stared at the man that Jack had been debating with for the past half hour. While his opponent chose to remain silent, Jack was animated, as always; his thin frame made him seem twice as tall as he actually was. This time, though, I was convinced that Jack’s energy was not going to help him.

“Look,” Jack said at last. “I know my arguments are sound; I probably just need to communicate them a little better.”

I shook my head. “You’ve been communicating for the past hour, Jack, and haven’t made a bit of progress. If I were you I’d call it a day and go home. You can’t win them all.”

“It’s got to be possible,” Jack replied. “It’s got to be! I mean, we both speak the same language, right? His IQ is quite high; why, he’s got a Ph.D. in neurobiology, for crying out loud. I’ve read the scientific papers he’s written and they are clearly the product of a brilliant mind. All I need to do is change my approach – just put things in a way he can understand.”

“That’s the whole problem right there,” I said. “I just don’t think he can understand no matter what you do. It takes more to change an opinion than a good, convincing argument – a lot more, actually. Especially in this case! I don’t think you realize what you’re up against.”

“But there’s got to be a way!” Jack replied. “I refuse to believe it’s hopeless. You can’t go around thinking you’re defeated

before you even start!”

“Sometimes that's the case,” I said. “You're not God, Jack. Some things are just beyond your ability. Optimism is a waste of time if what you believe is wrong.”

“But it's all just a matter of understanding!” he replied, gesturing toward the doctor. “If I can get him to understand where I'm coming from I'm sure he will change. It's all very logical!”

“I don't think you can force understanding, Jack,” I said. “Even if you can – which I doubt – you can't force belief. People will believe whatever they want to, and in some cases no amount of reasoning will help. You don't seem to have any idea why people hold their opinions. It's rarely because of the facts, Jack.”

“I just think you're wrong,” Jack said. “You don't realize the power of my arguments!”

“We're talking about our friend here, not me,” I said. “I'm already on your side. I just don't think that you're going to have any impact on Dr. Roberts. This is one of those situations that require divine intervention, Jack. You're not up to it.”

“And why is that?” Jack asked.

“Because Dr. Roberts is dead,” I replied. “Look at him – he's a skeleton! I bet he's been dead for at least twenty years now.”

“There's always hope,” Jack insisted.

“Let me know how that turns out for you,” I said, as I turned to leave.

# Pharaoh

## CHAPTER 1

KING BRENIN III, royal steward over the valley kingdom of Ogden, was walking on his palace grounds with his teenage son, Prince Royce. The two men had entered the wooded section of the grounds and were enjoying a quiet spring afternoon. Massive sequoia trees soared high overhead, dwarfing the two figures as they strolled through the woods. An elegant brick path, lined with rare purple and gold flowers, led them away from the palace and deeper into the forest. A gentle breeze could be heard blowing through the tops of the trees, allowing an occasional ray of sunlight to penetrate through the leaves. A few birds could be heard quietly chirping in the distance.

The king looked at his son as they walked down the path toward the mountain. His son had grown into an imposing figure; at 16 years old he was already more than six feet tall, making him several inches taller than his elderly father. With deep blue eyes, black hair, and a thin build, he looked just like his mother. The king knew that his peers saw him as a grown man, but in his heart his son still felt insecure, dwarfed by the responsibilities that were in front of him. He was concerned about his father's upcoming voyage, and the king knew it.

"I will only be gone three weeks," the king said to his son in his rich, deep voice. "I am sure you will be fine in my absence."

The young prince was quiet for a moment. "It's a large kingdom, father – eighty millions live in our land. You rule the largest kingdom on the planet, and are chief of the council of

nations. You're entrusting me with an enormous responsibility, and I'm still a young man. I just don't feel ready for it."

"It is a responsibility you must grow into, my son, if you are ever to one day rule this land." The king stopped walking and looked into his son's eyes. "You have been well-trained, and you are careful and responsible. I am sure you will be fine. Besides, my counselors are going to be here to help you should an emergency arise."

"You mean you're not taking them with you?" Royce asked.

"Not this time. It is necessary to meet with the Guardians once a year, to give a report of the status of our planet and learn what is happening in the worlds beyond ours. I can make the journey alone; there is no need to involve the counselors. Besides, I know the council members dislike going, and I promised to do them a favor."

His son shook his head. "I just don't understand that. It's a great honor to go! Very few people have ever ever seen the Guardians or set foot on another planet."

"You would understand if you ever saw them, Roy. The people of this planet are simple farmers, who spend their lives growing living things and enjoying the world that the Creator has given us. Our knowledge is in agriculture and life, not in machines and science. The sight of giant men made of metal and wires is too alien for many of our race."

"I guess I can understand that, but it seems awfully strange that so many people are afraid of the very beings that guard us from hostile invaders. I don't think I would be afraid of them."

The king laughed. "We shall see! The day is soon approaching when you will be old enough to join me in my trip to their land. After I have departed this world for the next it will be you who must make the journey."

"How are you going to get to their home world, father?" Royce asked. "Are they going to come for you in one of their giant ships?"

"Not this time. They have built a door that I can use, and they have requested that I use it in the future. I have been told that if I

step through it I will be transported instantly from our world to theirs. I do not understand how it works, but I have seen such things on their own world. It makes the journey much faster than traveling by ship.”

“How strange,” his son said.

The king and his son continued to walk through the woods, talking and laughing and discussing the things that needed to be done in the king's absence. Presently they came to the end of the palace grounds, where the woods ended at the base of a large granite cliff. At the base of the cliff stood an imposing iron door with the king's insignia engraved into it.

“Open it,” the king said.

Price Royce took a set of keys out of his pocket. After finding a particular key he placed it into the lock in the iron door and turned it. The door clicked. The young prince removed the key from the door and swung it wide open, and then stepped aside so that his father could enter first. After the king walked through the son followed him and closed the door behind him.

Inside the mountain was a small elevator, carved out of the solid granite of the mountain. The two figures stepped inside it and the king pressed a button. The room began to rise.

“This is the tallest mountain in the kingdom of Ogden,” the king said. “It will take some time for the elevator to reach the top.”

“Do you know how this machine works?” his son asked.

“I do not. It was made by the Guardians at the request of my great-grandfather. It has worked flawlessly since they built it, and it is almost certain to keep working until the world ends.”

After a few more moments the room stopped moving. The elevator doors opened and the king and his son stepped outside. They were now at the top of a tall mountain. In front of them, in all directions, was the Kingdom of Ogden; they could see nearly the entire kingdom from where they stood. In all directions were green fields, small houses, quiet villages, and rivers. It was a beautiful sight. To the north they could see the royal palace, where the kings of Ogden had made their home for the past five

centuries.

“It’s beautiful,” Prince Royce said.

“It is a great gift,” the king replied. “It is our responsibility to take care of it and rule it well, so that the people of our land might live long and happy lives. We are the caretakers – the servants of the people.”

“I will miss you, father.”

“I will be back soon, son. You will be fine.”

“When do you leave?”

“Tonight,” the king replied. “I will step through the door in a few hours.”

The father and son stood on top of the mountain and watched as the sun set and the stars began to come out. One by one the night sky was lit by brilliant pinpoints of fire – first a few dozen, then hundreds, and then thousands of stars, bathing the planet in an awesome silvery light.

“The home world of the Guardians has a large moon in its night sky,” the king said quietly.

“I have seen pictures of it,” his son said. “It must be strange to have a sun in the night sky.”

“They tell me that their moon is not a sun but a world of its own. How it gives off light I do not understand. Their king has told me that they need the moon; without it their night is quite dark, for they have few stars in the sky. They live on the edge of the galaxy, far from us, where stars are few and far between.”

“It sounds like a very strange place,” Prince Royce said. “I wish I could go with you and see it.”

“You will one day,” the king replied.

As they watched, they saw a flash of light in the night sky.

“What’s that?” Prince Royce asked.

“A meteor, probably,” the king replied.

He was wrong.

## CHAPTER 2

“HAS YOUR gross incompetence given away our ship's position, Jorge?” Captain Riggs asked, glaring at his chief engineer.

All activity on the bridge of the starship *Sebrina* stopped. Captain Riggs had risen out of his captain's chair and was walking toward his chief engineer, filled with rage. The other members of the bridge stood frozen. Nadine Palmer, the ship's science officer, stood quietly at her terminal and did her best to ignore the situation. She knew better than to get involved when the Captain was angry. Roger Miles, the ship's mineral expert, gently edged out of the Captain's line of sight. The Captain had despised him for years and the last thing he wanted to do was given the Captain even more ammunition to use against him. Jamie Scott, the communications officer, stopped what she was doing and sat quietly. The four security guards and their commanding officer stood at their posts, silent and unmoving, their hands resting gently on their sidearms.

“I don't think so, sir,” Jorge replied. The short, fat man ran his hand through his thick red hair. Sweat was pouring off of him. “That is – ”

“You don't *think* so? Is there something wrong with you, Jorge?” the Captain shouted. The Captain was a large bear of a man, and he seemed to grow even larger when enraged – which happened fairly often. “When this battleship left hyperspace we let out a burst of energy bright enough to have been spotted by blind men! How could the *Sebrina* possibly have not been spotted? Do you know what would happen if our enemies found out we were here?”

“Our cloaking shields never dropped, sir,” Jorge said. “They never did. They might have seen a burst of light, but they couldn't have seen us. It's a scientific impossibility. I've fixed the cause of the light, sir; it won't happen again. Honest it won't.”

“It had better not,” the Captain said, glaring into his engineer's eyes, “or you'll suffer the same fate as your predecessor.” He stopped and turned around, looking for his science officer.

“Nadine – report!”

The starship's science officer was ready. She had been with the short-tempered Captain for many years and knew exactly what he wanted to hear. It was impossible to survive long around him without knowing how to appease him, and she was an expert at it. “The good news, Captain, is that this particular planet is almost completely uncivilized! There are no signs whatsoever of even primitive technology. The land is populated by a bunch of barbarians that spend their days plowing their land and raising pigs. If this planet is like the other agricultural worlds we've seen then it's probably divided up into warring kingdoms. They're not even capable of spotting us, much less doing something about our arrival. They're sitting ducks, sir, ripe for the taking.”

“Then luck has saved you again, Jorge!” Captain Riggs said, laughing as he returned to his chair. “You are the luckiest man I have ever seen.”

Jorge laughed nervously. “I'll be heading back to engineering, then,” he said, and hurried off the bridge.

“Then go!” the Captain said. He sat down in his chair and surveyed the bridge. “Roger – report! Make yourself useful for a change. Tell me that we didn't waste our time traveling who knows how far to this remote backwater planet.”

The middle-aged mining expert that the Captain had addressed scrutinized the computer screen at his bridge station. He always had trouble focusing on his work when the Captain was around. Roger fervently wished that the Emperor had not assigned him to the *Sebrina*; he hated field work. “Um, right. They've got a lot of heavy elements, it looks like – silver, gold, uranium, and so forth. Looks, um, like a fairly mineral-heavy planet. I don't think the natives have any use for metals, so they've left them alone. This could be what we are looking for.”

“Any chance that they actually have the rich supply of ashlite that the scouting expedition reported?” the Captain asked. “That's all we really care about – the rest of the minerals aren't worth the trouble of coming all the way out here to get them. We've got closer sources – you of all people should know that.”

“Right – of course. It's hard to tell for sure. That is, um, the geology of the planet is right for it, but that's not a substance we can detect from orbit. I'm sure it's here,” Roger hastened to add, “but we'd have to – ah – take the planet apart to find out for sure.”

The Captain grinned. “I am sure we can get the clearance to do that. Jamie! Send our beloved Emperor a message. Tell him that the *Sebrina* has found a rich source of ashlite and ask for permission to blast the surface of the planet into oblivion.”

“Yes sir,” the communications officer replied. Jamie Scott did what she was told – no more and no less. The Captain often thought of her as a living machine, which suited her just fine. “Officer Nadine,” she asked, “what is the official designation of the target?”

“I don't know what the locals call it,” the science officer replied. “We'd have to send down a landing party and ask them – they don't seem to be releasing any radio transmissions that we could monitor. Its galactic designation is ZCX-4937-III.”

Captain Riggs interrupted. “Just tell him it's some god-forsaken planet in some remote corner of the galaxy, Jamie. That's all he really cares about.”

“Yes sir,” Jamie replied. She began typing at her computer station.

“How long will it take for him to get the message?” the Captain asked.

The communications officer pressed a few buttons on her console. “Given our current location, sir, the message transmit should take approximately 18 hours.”

“Blast!” the Captain said. “We must really be out in the middle of nowhere. It'll be – what – at least two or three days before we get a response.” He mulled things over for a minute. “Barton – do we have the firepower needed to destroy that planet and crack it open?”

“Absolutely,” the ship's chief security officer replied. He had been with the Captain in many engagements and knew exactly what his ship was capable of doing. “The planet is not defended and is fairly small. Destroying it should not be a problem. I can

have this battleship charged and ready to engage in four hours. It should be an easier task than the last three we've done; the world is much smaller."

"I knew you could do it – you're a good man, Barton! Ok, crew, here is the plan. Jamie, you go ahead and send that message. While we're waiting, Barton, go ahead and prepare to launch an attack; when the Emperor's reply comes in we can engage without hesitation. We'll also need to send out some other messages to let the mining teams know that we have another planet ready for the mineral extraction process."

"I'll take care of that," Jamie promised.

"Very good," the Captain said. "In three days, then, we will commence our operations! The planet won't even know what hit it. The last thing they will ever see is fire raining down from heaven. What a sight that will be!"

### CHAPTER 3

EMPEROR WILLIAM Dennis Ritter II was in the information center on the planet Zeti Omicron 9 when the *Sebrina's* message arrived. His information center was a hive of activity: the enormous cylindrical room, a full five stories tall, was filled with hundreds of his most trusted ministers. Each minister was equipped with a bank of machines that provided them with information regarding the planet that they governed. Holographic screens provided them with realtime access to events occurring on every planet, allowing the Emperor to have the tight control over his people that he so craved. From his vantage point in the center of the room he knew everything that was happening, and he would have it no other way. He saw to it that nothing escaped his attention.

His galactic empire was by far the largest one he had yet encountered, and he had aggressively explored the depths of space since his father's unexpected (but not unwanted) early

demise. It was no easy task to govern his realm, but he did it with the same disciplined ruthlessness as his father before him, and had managed to double its size since he took the throne. No civilization he had encountered could stand before his armies.

“Report!” the Emperor demanded. “What is the situation on 1289?”

“The star is currently in the process of being stabilized,” a green-suited minister said. “The process has been going on for 82 hours so far and has another 846 hours before completion. The commander expects complete success, my lord.”

“As he should,” the Emperor said. “I will not accept the loss of that star system. He will personally guarantee that the star in that system does not go nova and he will answer to me personally if it does. See that this is made clear to him.”

“Of course, my lord,” the minister said.

“What is our ashlite situation?” the Emperor said aloud. “Have the appropriate steps been taken to ensure our continued dominance?”

“Of course, your excellency,” a red-suited minister replied. “Ashlite production is up 6.7% in the first quarter, and four new mining worlds are scheduled to come online in the next six weeks. The mining trust predicts that there will be more than enough to meet the galactic energy demand, your excellency.”

“Four!” the Emperor said, filled with rage. “Four! Who does the trust think it is, presuming on my patience? They promised me five worlds two weeks ago! Have they lost their ability to do their job?”

“The delay appears to have been caused by a problem with the planet,” the minister hastened to explain. “The ashlite was found on an inhabited world, and it is taking some time to evacuate the residents. They now predict that the planet will be fully evacuated within six months, which is well within the standard parameters, my excellency.”

“And why does the trust think that I am concerned about the standard parameters?” the Emperor shouted. “*I* am the standard! I will have my ashlite! How does the trust expect me to continue to

power my realm and govern my citizens without ashlite? I will *not* have my empire put in jeopardy because some clerk decided to follow standard parameters! Tell him that he is to begin the extraction process tomorrow – or else.”

“It shall be done,” the minister said. He hurried off to a computer console.

A clerk approached the emperor. “A transmission was received this morning from the battleship *Sebrina*, your excellency. Captain Ronald Riggs has found a new world rich in minerals and requests your orders.”

“What are the details?” the Emperor asked. “Is this world worth my time?”

“It would appear that the captain thinks that is the case. The world is a small one, the third planet in a remote star system. Four hundred million people live there, making it practically deserted by galactic standards. The planet is an agricultural world with no appreciable technology. It is undefended. Its residents do not appear to have noticed our ship in orbit.” The clerk paused for a moment. “The Captain believes that it may contain ashlite.”

“I see,” the Emperor said. “The Captain has done well not to presume on my intentions. Tell him to proceed with general order 1 – there is no need to wait to follow 'standard procedure', as some would have it. Have the minerals officer send a mining and extraction crew to the planet immediately. He is to see to it that the ashlite extraction process is – hm – not delayed.”

“It shall be done,” the clerk said.

One of the nearby ministers broke into the conversation. “Wait just a moment. We don't know anything about this planet or its allies. Might it not be wise to make some inquiries first? We don't want to move in without knowing what is going on.”

The Emperor picked a blaster off of the table and shot the governor where he sat, killing him instantly. No one said a word. “I am the supreme ruler of this galaxy,” the Emperor said quietly. “There is none who can oppose me. It is my will for that planet to be destroyed. If they think that they can withstand my power then let them try. If they do then they will face my wrath!”

## CHAPTER 4

IT WAS LATE in the evening on the Guardian's nameless home world, and King Brenin III was tired. The sun never really rose on this planet; the star it orbited was very far away – a mere pinpoint of light in the darkness – and the stars were few and far between. The planet had three large moons, but the light they provided was weak by his standards. The world was well lit during the day by artificial light sources, but the king knew that was mostly for his benefit. A world populated only by machines had little use for sunlight.

The king was sitting outdoors, on a bench under an oak tree. The tree, like the bench, was made of metal. It was a nice imitation of a tree, but it was not the real thing, and the king already missed the life and greenery of his kingdom. Everything on this planet was made of metal and wires and little glowing lights that blinked in the darkness. It was a strange and bizarre sight; despite his son's optimism, it was easy to see why so few people wanted to come here. He wondered how things had gotten to this point and where the metal men had come from; no one knew their history, and no one had the nerve to ask. They treated him with great kindness and respect, but they were tall and imposing, and did not seem the type to invite random questions.

Brenin had spent all day in the chambers of the Guardians, giving a report of events on his world. Although he only saw them during his yearly visits to their planet, the Guardians took great care of him and his people. Ever since his great-great-grandfather had saved the Guardians from destruction they had watched over his world with great care, providing security and anything else that was necessary – which was very little, given the great fear that his people had for the giant metal men. The Guardians never seemed to tire or get old; the king spoke with the same ones that his father had spoken with, and his father and grandfather before them.

As he sat under the tree and rested, a machine came up to him

– the one they called Gaven. He was the chief ruler of the Guardians, and the oldest one of them all. At twenty feet tall he was not the largest, but somehow he seemed to be the most imposing, even though his vaguely humanoid build never suggested a hint of emotion. Gaven had told the king how old he was, but Brenin could not understand periods of time that long. The Guardians were far mightier than he was; he knew he must seem like a child to them.

“Brenin,” the giant Guardian said. He paused. It was hard to read expressions on faces of metal, but the king could almost see a look of great compassion and sadness on his face. “I am sorry.”

“What is it?” the king asked. “Is something wrong?”

“Article 6, Section 11 has been invoked,” Gaven said.

The king was greatly astonished. “Are you serious?” he asked.

Gaven slowly nodded his head. “It has been confirmed. There can be no doubt.”

“It is difficult to believe,” the king replied. “No one has been foolish enough to attack a protected world in the past nine hundred years. Even the more aggressive and violent races of the stars know better than to attack a Guardian-protected world; to do so invites certain destruction. Surely no one could possibly think that they could defeat your people, Gaven.”

“The article has been invoked,” Gaven replied. “It is not a mistake.”

“Who are these madmen? Has someone finally decided to test your patience?”

“It is a new race,” the giant metal man replied. “We have not encountered them before. They live very far from here. We did not know that anyone lived in that part of the galaxy. The universe is a large place, Brenin; there is still much we have not explored. Even we can only visit a limited number of star systems in a single millenia.”

The king shook his head. “They are fools, Gaven. They can't possibly have known much about your race to defy you so openly. Which world did they attack?”

“Yours,” Gaven replied.

The king's heart sank as a great fear gripped him. “What have they done?” he whispered.

“They have utterly annihilated your world,” Gaven replied. “Two days ago the battleship *Sebrina* unleashed its energy weapons on your planet. It was entirely unprovoked: your people did not even know that the ship was in orbit. The captain of that ship did not stop until the planet's atmosphere was completely destroyed and the crust of the planet was laid bare. Every living thing on the planet has died, and it is no longer habitable. There is nothing left.”

Brenin was at a complete loss for words. A sea of emotions raged inside him – shock, anger, fear, and horror, all mingled together. He could not speak. “No one – no one survived?” he asked weakly. “What of my son?”

“He is dead, along with everyone else,” Gaven said. “The battleship was sent by order of Emperor William Dennis Ritter II, the ruler of the Ritter Empire. He wanted to mine your planet's minerals, so he destroyed it to make it easier for his machines. All of your people have died.”

The king was in such shock that he could not even cry. All he could think about was his son, and his people, and his world. He never imagined that he could lose them like that. There was nothing he could say.

“How could this happen?” he asked. “How could you let this happen?”

“It is our fault, Brenin. Their battleship was protected using a type of cloaking device that we had not previously encountered. Our detectors did not notice its presence until it had destroyed your world, and by that time it was too late. We have already taken steps to ensure that such a device does not fool us in the future, but that will not recover your world.”

“My son, my son,” the king cried out in agony. “What have they done to him? What have they done to my son?”

“This attack is a clear violation of Article 6, Section 11,” Gaven said. “We are preparing our response. The Ritter empire is

large, and it will take us some time to gather together a sufficient force. Operations will commence in three weeks. We will utterly vanquish them, and do to them what they did to you.”

“Wait,” the king said.

The giant metal man waited. No one said a word for a long time.

“My people are dead,” the king said at last.

“Yes,” Gaven replied.

“Can you bring them back?”

Gaven shook his head. “Only God can bring men back from the dead.”

“Then they are gone. Nothing else can be done for them.”

“Justice must be done,” Gaven replied.

“Let me talk to them first, Gaven. Perhaps they will turn over the ones responsible for the murder of my people, so that their whole race will not perish. Would you accept that?”

“We would, Brenin, although mercy is not required in the agreement. You do not have to offer them this chance.”

The king was silent for a while. “I cannot bring save the lives of my own people, but perhaps I can save the lives of others. It may be that the Emperor did not realize what he was doing and would be willing to hand over the murderers to spare his own race. If I confront him, perhaps he will repent and save his people.”

“I will transport you there and see that you arrive safely,” Gaven replied. “I will prepare a ship. When it is ready I will come back for you.”

As the metal man walked off the king buried his face in his hands. “My son, my son,” he said, weeping. “What have they done to you, my son?”

## CHAPTER 5

A WEEK had passed, and Emperor Ritter II was greatly unhappy.

“What part of my orders did you not understand?” he demanded to the minister that was standing before him. The information center grew quiet as the emperor vented his rage. “I said that I wanted five new ashlite planets brought on this quarter, and you have only delivered four. Where is that fifth planet?”

“It would appear that the team in charge of preparing that planet has disregarded your orders, your excellency,” the frightened man replied. “He has refused to – ah – begin mining operations until the planet has been evacuated.”

“Then dispatch a battleship to persuade him,” the emperor shouted. “See to it that he is replaced with someone more obedient to my wishes! I will not have him defy me. Make an example out of him – or else I will make an example out of you.”

A communications officer ran up to him. “You have received an urgent incoming transmission,” he said. “It’s from an unknown race.”

“Where was this transmission from?” the Emperor demanded. “Who dares take it upon themselves to contact me?”

“It came from beyond our borders, your excellency,” the communications officer said. “It is from someone named King Brenin III, who claims to have a grievance against you. He says that you destroyed his world, and he demands that justice be done.”

“Destroyed his world?” the Emperor asked. “What world was that?”

“I believe it is ZCX-4937-III,” the officer replied. “It is the one that you ordered destroyed last week. You hoped to find ashlite there.”

“I remember now,” the Emperor said. “I believe they did find ashlite there. The captain behind that operation was competent, and did his job with great skill and speed – something that seems to be lacking in other men.”

“Of course, your excellency,” the officer replied.

“So this person claims to have jurisdiction over that planet, does he? And just how did he make that bold and irresponsible claim?”

"We received the transmission through the regular subspace channels," the officer said.

"And just how did this man make use of them? I was told that planet was populated by a pre-spaceflight race. How could stone-age savages possibly be contacting us?"

"That is the report returned to us by the battleship *Sebrina*," the communications officer said. "The captain was obviously mistaken."

"It doesn't really matter," the emperor said, dismissing it with a wave of his hand. "Obviously this planet was part of a larger kingdom; maybe it was an agricultural planet in a larger empire. That means that there are more worlds out there that are ripe for conquest! Tell this Brenin person that I will meet with him and grant him safe passage through my realm."

"Very good, your excellency," the communications officer said.

Four hours later King Brenin III materialized inside the Emperor's council room. The king materialized in the heart of the emperor's information center, but he did not notice any of the splendor and technology of the room. All he noticed was the man who was obviously the emperor, seating on his throne and looking at him with great contempt.

"What have you done to my son?" the king asked quietly.

"Your son?" the Emperor said.

"I left him in charge of my world when I left," the king explained, his voice filled with sorrow. "What have you done to him?"

"If he was on that planet then I had him burned alive, along with all the other worthless peasants on your backwater world. They were in my way."

The king looked at him in shock. "How could you do such a thing? How could you brutally murder 400 million people?"

"Like this," the Emperor said. He picked a blaster off the table and fired at the king. The bolt of energy briefly glowed as it struck an energy field surrounding the king, and then faded away. Puzzled, the emperor fired again, this time holding down the

trigger. The energy splashed harmlessly off of the king.

"Your weapons cannot harm me," the king replied. "I have come to discuss the terms of your surrender."

"If this blaster can't harm you then I'll find a weapon that can!" the emperor shouted. "You will not defy me!"

"You're not listening to me," the king said. "Your empire is in great danger. Do you have any idea what you are facing?"

"Get out of here!" the emperor raged.

The room suddenly went dark, as every light was snuffed out and every machine lost power. A dim light streamed in through the glass canopy ceiling, providing a vague light that was little better than darkness. Through the darkness the Emperor suddenly saw a figure appear behind King Brenin – a massive figure, vaguely humanoid.

Before the Emperor could say anything the figure stretched out a giant metal hand and grabbed the Emperor right off of his throne. The hand, firmly wrapped around the Emperor's body, pulled him to within inches of its face, where burning red eyes stared directly into the Emperor's face. The Emperor could now see that the figure was a giant machine of some sort, completely unlike anything he had ever seen before. For the first time in his life the Emperor felt a twinge of fear.

"You have destroyed King Brenin's world," a metal voice said. The voice was even and flat, but the Emperor could feel the rage and power that was behind it. "That is an act of war. You will immediately turn over all those responsible for this atrocity to our tribunal so that justice may be done to them. If you do then we will spare your kingdom and leave it alone."

"And if I don't, you worthless lump of tin?" the Emperor said.

"Then we will utterly annihilate every moon, planet, and star within your dominion. There will be not so much as an atom left to suggest that your kingdom ever existed. We will completely destroy everything you possess."

"Over my dead body," the Emperor shouted. "Get out of here!"

The giant metal hand let go, allowing the Emperor to fall hard

to the floor. King Brenin and the giant disappeared, leaving the Emperor groaning in the darkness.

“Someone get the lights back on!” he screamed.

## CHAPTER 6

THREE WEEKS had gone by. It had taken two weeks to restore his information center; whatever the giant metal man had done had completely destroyed all of the equipment in that entire room. While the room was being rebuilt King Brenin had tried to contact them again but the Emperor would not return his messages; he said that he would not be intimidated by ignorant peasants. Once the room was back in operation it had taken a week to resolve all of the disturbances that had arisen in his absence, but he had at last settled everything.

The Emperor was sound asleep when the commanding officer over his armed forces woke him up. “Excuse me, your excellency,” he said after the Emperor had risen from bed. “We have a situation.”

“I don't like getting up this early,” he grumbled as he followed the commander down the hallway. “Who do you think you are, anyway?”

“Your worlds are being attacked,” the commander replied. “Someone is waging war against you.”

“Then fight them!” the Emperor said. “You don't need to involve me. Just destroy them all! You know what to do – we've been through this many times before. Have you become senile in your old age?”

The commander shook his head as the two men walked into the information center. Early as it was, the information center was already a hive of activity. Sirens were going off and ministers were running around, trying to contain the massive damage that was being done to the planets that they administered. “There are too many of them, your excellency. They have surrounded us and

are attacking our star systems from all sides with overwhelming numbers, using technology far in advance of our own. We are being slaughtered before them. Our defenses are crumbling.”

At this the Emperor looked more interested. He ascended onto his throne and sat down. After he was seated he pushed some buttons on the throne and brought up a holographic battle matrix. He studied it intently. As he watched, three stars disappeared.

“Hey!” he said. “What’s going on? Why did we lose communications with that sector?”

The commander looked concerned. He pushed some buttons on a different console and looked at some readings. After a few minutes he spoke up again. “We didn’t lose communications, sir,” he said.

“Then what happened?”

“The stars – well, they’re simply gone.”

“What do you mean, gone?” the Emperor asked.

“I mean it has been destroyed,” the commander said. “It appears to be a tactic that these invaders are using. They are assaulting our defense shields with overwhelming force, and once they are inside they are detonating the star. Their goal appears to completely annihilate us – every star, every planet, every ship. They are leaving nothing alive.”

The Emperor’s eyes got wide. He watched the matrix with growing concern. “See if you can raise them,” he said. “This outrage must stop! Who do they think they are, anyway?”

The communications officer worked for a few minutes, trying to raise them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Far out in space, a metal droid approached Gaven. “The Emperor is trying to reach us,” it said.

Gaven thought for a few moments. “Let me talk to him,” he said. “While we are talking, lock onto his signal and see if we can use it to break through his defenses. In order to talk to us he must penetrate his own shields; we should be able to use that hole to

reach him.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“They are responding,” the communications officer said. “Onscreen.”

The Emperor looked at the holographic screen and was immediately taken aback as he recognized the figure on the other side. “So you are responsible for this outrage!” he shouted. “I told you to get out of my empire!”

“What do you want?” Gaven said.

“Who do you think you are, attacking my realm?” the Emperor said. “I demand that you evacuate your forces immediately! How dare you attack me?”

Gaven stared directly at him with his red, fiery eyes. “We have already been through this, Emperor. Your attack on the planet you labeled ZCX-4937-III was in violation of Article 6, Section 11 of the protected worlds treaty. Violation of that section of the treaty is punishable by the complete annihilation of the aggressor in the conflict. We discussed this three weeks ago when I explained to you what had happened and what must be done to satisfy the demands of justice.”

“I’ve never heard of your stupid treaty,” the Emperor replied, “and I certainly didn’t agree to be bound by its terms.”

“The treaty was between us and the citizens of that world,” Gaven said. “Any attack on a protected world is interpreted as an attack against us, and is dealt with as such.”

“But that’s ridiculous,” the Emperor said. “I had no idea there was any such treaty.”

“Of course not,” Gaven said. “Instead of talking to the citizens of that world you simply murdered them all. You gave no one a chance to tell you. In the past nine centuries no one has ever violated Article 6, Section 11 – the consequences are too severe. The protection is so complete that it is not even necessary to send warships to guard the planets in question. You are the first race to ever walk into our territory and annihilate an entire planet without

even talking to them.”

“But that's inhuman!” the Emperor said. “You can't treat us that way!”

“If you wanted mercy, Emperor, you would not have tried to murder the man who came to offer it to you. If you wanted mercy you would not have rejected our attempts to offer it to you. Even now you still refuse. It is judgment day, Emperor, and we are coming for you.”

As Gaven closed the channel the Emperor heard a sound behind him. He whirled around and saw Gaven materialize behind him. His face turned white. “Wait!” he screamed.

It was the last sound he ever made.



# Plight of the Bumblebee

## CHAPTER 1

JUNE 13, 2153 began as a peaceful day for Richard Starlight. On that fateful afternoon the CEO of Starlight Enterprise found himself in his office making the final preparations for an expedition to Europa. Starlight Enterprise had been interested in returning to Jupiter's watery moon ever since Starmen Zip Foster, Joe Taylor, and Mark Seaton made the trip there that had so nearly cost them their lives. In another four months those same Starmen would be making a return visit, and Richard still had a lot of arrangements to make before they could leave.

Over the past few months Richard's life had seen great changes. Ever since his battle with Ban Zhou Men on the plains of Mars he had been trying to refocus the energies of his company to reflect a new and dangerous world. No longer was Earth safe; now there was a rapacious alien threat lurking on the horizon – a threat that Richard knew would soon be more than just hypothetical. What he did not know was what could be done about it.

Richard reclined in his chair and looked out over his office. Starlight Tower was located forty miles north of Amundsen City, where it had stood for almost twenty years as the tallest building on the Moon. His private office was on the 121<sup>st</sup> floor and could only be reached by two private express elevators. The beauty of the lunar landscape was always fresh and new to him; through his office's treated glass walls he could see the cratered gray landscape stretch for miles into the distance. His red parakeet – a

marvel of genetic engineering – chirped quietly on its stand behind his chair. *I do my best thinking up here*, he thought. *Now -*

The phone rang. Richard saw that it was an urgent call on his private line and quickly pressed a button on his desk. The image of a harried individual was projected into the air over his desk.

“Richard!” the individual shouted. “It’s terrible! You must *do* something!”

Richard smiled. He immediately recognized the caller as his long-time friend Alfred Nelson, the easily excitable director of the L5 space station. He had met him as a child when his father Thomas Starlight was supervising the construction of the station, and he had kept in touch with him ever since. *He had to be in his 70’s by now*, he thought, *and yet he hasn’t changed a bit*.

“It’s good to see you,” Richard said warmly. “What seems to be the trouble?”

“I can’t – no, I just can’t explain it over the phone,” he said urgently, “it’s too important. The safety of the entire Solar System is at stake! I need your best Starmen here immediately. We don’t have much time!”

Richard was a little surprised. His friend had a tendency to become agitated but this was exceptional. “I’ll send one of my top people right over,” he promised. “Can you give me any idea what is going on? If there is something seriously wrong - ”

“Oh, yes, there *is*,” Mr. Nelson repeated. “There most certainly is, and – well – no, I just can’t say anything. But please – you must hurry!” And at that, Mr. Nelson severed the connection.

Richard folded his hands together and thought for a moment. Mr. Nelson had a long history of over-dramatizing small concerns, but he knew that he would never have called if there wasn’t something actually wrong. The L5 space station that he managed was the largest one in the entire Solar System and did make a tempting target. Given the recent incursion that the Starmen had battled a few months ago he did not dare ignore the message. The question was, which of his Starmen were currently available for an immediate trip into Earth orbit?

He decided to contact David Foster. Zip was currently on the Moon, enjoying some well-earned time off by visiting his parents at their home on the outskirts of Amundsen City. Richard was in luck as Zip answered his compad almost immediately.

"I need you to make an emergency trip to L5 for me," Richard said after pleasantries had been exchanged. "I just received an urgent call from a very animated Alfred Nelson, who requested immediate assistance. Are Mark and Joe with you?"

"Yes they are," Zip replied, "and we can leave right away. What seems to be the trouble?"

"I don't really know. Alfred refused to talk to me over the phone. He claimed that all of mankind was in danger and that it had to be discussed in person. I haven't heard any other reports of trouble but I don't think we can take any chances."

"We'll come prepared for anything, then. What's the fastest way to get there?"

"Probably by shuttle, Zip. I'll call the Amundsen City spaceport and have our personnel there prepare one for you."

"We're heading out the door right now. I'll let you know what's going on as soon as I can. Zip out."

## CHAPTER 2

DAVID FOSTER, Mark Seaton, and Joe Taylor had been enjoying a late-afternoon meal in an obscure restaurant in Amundsen City when Richard called. They had spent the day discussing their upcoming mission to Europa, and were just finishing dinner when Zip answered his compad. After Zip hung up he briefed his friends on what had happened.

"It sounds urgent," Joe said, "and I don't have any of my equipment with me."

"I'm sure that Richard will have everything prepared for us by the time we get to the spaceport," Mark said, as he paid for their meal. "I just wonder what's going on."

“We’ll soon find out,” Zip said. The three of them walked out of the restaurant and began hurrying down the sidewalk. Joe was heading for their car when Zip stopped him.

“There’s too much traffic to drive,” he said. “The subway would be much faster than trying to fight rush-hour traffic.”

The three Starmen rushed over to the nearest subway stop, where they boarded an underground high-speed monorail. They had to change trains twice, but within twenty minutes they were at the spaceport.

“I wish we could take the *Star Ranger*,” Zip said wistfully as they began jogging through the spaceport terminals. The Starlight Enterprise section of the spaceport was almost within sight.

“I’m sure we can, Zip, if Richard doesn’t mind our waiting for – oh, another ten years,” Joe replied. “After all, there were probably a few parts to our ship that they were able to salvage. Doorknobs, for instance.”

“To be honest I’m surprised they decided to fix her at all,” Mark replied. “There really wasn’t a lot left of her after Zip fought off the Ban Zhou Men’s attack – especially after you reversed the thrust in mid-air, Zip, and clipped off the tail of the attacker - ”

“ – thus neatly grounding the attacking ship without damaging it,” Zip replied, fondly remembering the incident. “I really didn’t think she had it in her. When they get done with the repairs, though, she’ll be a new ship, and the fastest one in space at that! The antimatter drive alone give us more power than even the *Spud Peeler* did.”

“Which was another fine craft that got obliterated in the line of duty,” Joe said. “Maybe we’re not just reading the owner’s manual closely enough.”

By this time the three Starmen had reached the Starlight Enterprise wing of the spaceport, where a uniformed SE officer was ready and waiting.

“Starman Zip Foster?” she asked uncertainly.

“Yes, ma’am,” Zip said, stepping forward to shake her hand. “I’m sorry,” he said, eyeing the jeans and T-shirts that the three of

them were wearing, “we were out, and didn’t have time to stop and change into our red uniforms. We were hoping – ”

“Right this way,” she said, turning around and walking down a hallway. “The craft is here, in Hangar 9. It is fueled and ready to go. Your departure time is in five minutes. Please be ready for takeoff.” With that, she turned around and walked off down the hall.

The three Starmen entered the hangar, boarded the ship, and prepared for takeoff. Joe sat in the pilot’s seat and the other two Starmen took up seats directly behind him. The craft was a small, sleek passenger shuttle that was designed to transport up to four people to and from any location in the Earth-Moon system within a few hours.

“The *Red Tiger*,” Joe said aloud. “I’ve never flown this craft before, but she looks pretty fast. You just don’t see too many shuttles with antimatter drives – the technology is just too new.”

“How fast?” Zip asked. Joe was silent for a few minutes as he opened the hangar door, taxied the shuttle out onto the runway, and prepared for takeoff.

“Oh, we’ll probably be there in about an hour or so.”

The takeoff went very smoothly and before ten minutes had passed the craft had left the moon and was streaking through space on a course to L5. After making sure that everything was operating normally Joe set the craft on auto-pilot and settled back into the pilot’s chair.

“I wonder what’s going on, anyway?” Joe asked. “I’ve never heard of anything going wrong at L5 before.”

“Why don’t you call them up and ask?” Mark replied, motioning toward the ship’s communicator. “I’m sure that Alfred Nelson would love to know that we are en-route.”

“Good idea,” Joe said approvingly. He was able to contact the station and speak directly to the station director, letting them know that they would be there in about 45 minutes. The director curtly acknowledged Joe’s message and then abruptly signed off.

“Um.” Joe said. “Well, I guess we’ll find out when we get there.”

\* \* \* \*

Forty minutes later the ship was within visual range of the giant L5 space station. Mark had seen it many times before but it never failed to fill him with awe. The station was the most massive structure in space; it was home to 30,000 people and bustled with the activity of countless spaceships going about their business all hours of the day and night. L5, so named because it was located at LaGrange Point 5, was composed of two giant wheels, each connected to the other by means of a cylinder that ran between the middle of the two wheels. The station did not spin but instead used an artificial gravity grid to provide Earth-like gravity to its residents. Mark reflected that it must be nearly fifty years old, but Alfred Nelson was still its director. That was a long time to spend running a space station, he thought.

As the *Red Tiger* approached the station Joe contacted it once more and requested permission to dock. "Look at all those ships!" Joe enthused. "Now *there* is some variety for you."

"No kidding," Zip said. "Is that an *Ares*-class ship over there? I didn't realize any of those were still flying. It can't possibly land on a planet, can it?"

"I don't think so," Mark said. "Those ships were built to travel solely in space, carrying cargo from one space station to another. It's probably just come back from the asteroid belt with a cargo full of processed ore and is dropping it off at the L5, where some other ship will carry it down to Earth. It'll probably return with a cargo of food and other perishable goods for lonely asteroid miners."

"I'm sure George St George will appreciate that," Zip remarked, thinking of the eccentric asteroid miner that they had met a few years ago. "He's still prospecting out there, isn't he?"

"Last I heard," Mark said affirmatively.

Joe received clearance from the automated docking system and turned over the *Red Tiger's* navigation to the station computer, which robotically guided it into a hangar. "Looks as

though we've got ourselves a reception crew," Zip muttered as Joe powered down the ship and opened the doors. Standing just outside were three armed guards.

The Starmen exited the craft and walked forward to meet them, eying them warily. "I'm David Foster, and this is Joe Taylor and Mark Seaton," he said, introducing his friends. "We've come -"

The largest guard interrupted them. "Howard, Fine, and Howard, at your service," he said curtly. "Right this way." He opened a door leading into the station and stepped through it, while the other two guards beckoned the three Starmen to follow him. They did so, and the two guards followed them in the rear.

"We were told that there was a serious problem here," Zip began again, "and Richard sent us to help. Do you know what is going on?"

"Right this way," the lead guard repeated, walking on down the hall. The three Starmen followed them. What, Zip wondered, was the nature of their emergency?

### CHAPTER 3

"IS THERE a longer route that we could take from the hangar to Nelson's office?" Joe asked Zip.

Zip shook his head grimly. The director's office was some distance from the hangar, and the guards seemed determined to take the longest possible route to their destination. They were probably new, Zip thought, and not well-acquainted with the layout of the station. Had it not been for the urgency of their situation he might not have minded; the station reflected Thomas Starlight's love for elegance and grace, and he marveled at its beauty. Instead of dark, narrow corridors the base was filled with large, open spaces; there were tall galleries, waterfalls, small streams, trees, and even simulated glass ceilings through which streamed a soft, yellow light. Tom had gone to great lengths to

make the base feel as Earth-like as possible and the effort had paid off; he understood how people could spend their lives here and not feel as though they were cramped inside a metal container out in space.

It took them a full ten minutes to arrive at the director's office. The guards deposited the Starmen in the secretary's office and then, to their surprise, abruptly left. The secretary seemed unruffled as she pressed a button on her desk.

"Three Starmen from Starlight Enterprise are here to see you," she said calmly. "At least, I think they're Starmen."

"Send them in immediately!" the director barked. "There's no time to waste!"

The secretary gestured toward the director's office door but did not move to open it for them. Zip walked up, opened it, and stepped inside.

Mark had to admit that Alfred Nelson had a real taste for interior design. The office was decorated in a beautiful African theme: it had a large mahogany desk, a comfortable-looking couch decorated with a print of animals from the African plains, shelves filled with books on the Dark Continent, and pictures of what he guessed was Alfred Nelson on various African hunting expeditions. Hanging on the wall behind the director's desk was a pair of ancient rifles, but curiously, he didn't see any mounted animal remains. To one side of the room was a wide, low glass case that was filled with odd models. Mark spotted a very old-looking motorcycle, airship, and submarine that had to date back to at least the 1920's, if not earlier.

Before the Starmen even had a chance to introduce themselves the director spoke up. "I'm so glad you're here!" he said. He acted as if he was going to say more, and then stopped, got out of his chair behind his desk, and began pacing around the room. "It's terrible, just terrible," he said, as if to himself. "You've got to *do* something!"

"How can we help you, Mr. Nelson?" Zip asked. "Richard Starlight told us that you have a problem."

"I have a problem! *We* have a problem!" he shouted. "*Earth*

has a problem, young man! If you don't do something they're going to destroy us all!"

"Who is going to destroy us all?" Mark asked.

"The Xenobots! They're here!"

The Starmen were astonished. "Xenobots?" Joe asked. "Here? Where?"

"I *know* they're here," the director said, looking at them excitedly. "They've infiltrated this station and are using it as a base of operations! They have a secret laboratory where they are manufacturing trillions of tiny nanobots. Once they finish their evil work they are going to release them in swarms on the helpless planet below, where they will multiply in the oceans and then boil them away! We'll all die and the planet will be ruined!"

Zip was speechless, but Joe was not. "Have you considered evicting the Xenobots?" he asked. "That's got to be a violation of their renter's agreement."

Alfred Nelson continued on ranting without missing a beat. "I tell you I've got Xenobots on this station, and you've got to get rid of them," he said, pointing his finger right at Mark. "They've been wrecking havoc with my station. Do you realize that this station has started *singing*?"

"Singing?" Mark asked in surprise.

"Yes, singing," the director insisted. "Late at night I'll hear it over the intercom: someone is singing *Away Down Yonder with Davy Jones*. It's terrible – the words are right, but it's off-key. I don't know where it's coming from; no one can pin it down. Just ask anybody. We keep hearing distant rumblings that don't seem to have any particular source, and shadowy figures have been spotted in places where they don't belong!"

"And that's only the beginning!" he raged. "Hangar doors open and close on their own – which is blasted inconvenient, if you happen to be in them and get sucked out into the void of space. The power keeps fluctuating, as if someone's straining it, and high-security authorization codes just suddenly stop working. *Someone* is messing with this station, and I tell you that Xenobots are behind it! I have proof, young man!"

While the Starmen were standing there astonished, unsure what to say, he pressed a button on his desk and demanded that Dr Daystorm come in. The doctor entered a few minutes later, carrying a heavy metal briefcase. When the director saw it he pointed to it. “That,” he told the incredulous Starmen, “is our proof.”

“What’s in it?” Zip asked Dr Daystorm. He set the locked steel case on the director’s desk. “Something amazing – something we found just this morning. You’ll never believe it: *self-replicating nanobots*.”

“That’s astonishing,” Zip said. “Starlight Enterprise has been working on that technology for fifty years and has never perfected it. I had no idea that such a thing existed.”

“I’m telling you,” the director said – and then the lights went out. All sound ceased, and it became dark – *very* dark.

## CHAPTER 4

“UM.” Joe said, after a minute had passed by. “Shouldn’t the emergency lights have come on by now?”

“Yes, definitely,” Dr Daystorm replied. “I can’t imagine why they haven’t.”

“It’s Xenobots,” Mr. Nelson muttered quietly. “I just know it.”

“We’ll take it from here,” Zip reassured him, and then turned to his fellow Starmen. He took out his compad and activated its flashlight component – a small, ultra-bright LED that could last indefinitely. Mark and Joe activated theirs as well, and after taking a brief look around they turned their attention to the door.

Mark tried to open it but it refused to open. “Electric doors,” he muttered. “Aren’t these supposed to have a fail-safe in the event of a power outage?” He called Zip over, and the two of them, with their combined strength, were able to force it open with some effort. After bidding Alfred Nelson to be careful the

three of them raced out of the office and into the hallway.

“Let’s go to the power plant,” Zip said. “I think it’s down below – we passed it on the trip to the office.”

“Good thinking,” Mark said. “If there’s a base-wide electrical problem then the root cause can probably be found there.”

“And if there are any Xenobots there,” Joe said, “we can take ’em on in hand-to-hand combat. I don’t suppose you brought along any weapons, did you, Zip?”

Zip stopped, suddenly realizing that they were unarmed. “I know there were some in the *Red Tiger* but I didn’t bring them with me. We probably should have, come to think of it, but we were in such a hurry to get to the director...”

“C’mon,” Joe urged. “I, personally, will be surprised if the problem turns out to be anything larger than a mouse.” The three Starmen raced down the hallway, deftly threading their way through the restless, lost mob that roamed the pitch-black hallways. Here and there the Starmen saw a few flashlights bob in the distance.

In less than three minutes the Starmen found themselves in the power plant, which was a hive of activity. Technicians were running everywhere, working with various stubborn pieces of equipment, and an energetic man, answering to the name of Brown, was barking out orders left and right. Zip noticed that the room was being lit by what looked like a few strategically-placed flashlights. Evidently, he thought, the emergency lighting system was not working here either.

“That’s odd,” Mark suddenly said. “If we don’t have any power then why do we have gravity? Doesn’t the artificial gravity grid draw a lot of power?”

“It certainly does,” the one called Brown replied. “We haven’t lost all power; the life support systems – of which the gravity grid is a part – are still up and running. It’s only everything else that is down, and we don’t really know why.” He turned to give an order, and Mark suddenly realized that he wasn’t talking to people – he was talking to *machines*.

All over the place were little short, squat machines, about two

feet high. As Brown directed orders to them they roamed the plant and performed tests: some opened cases, some checked wiring, and some tinkered with various pieces of circuitry. Brown noticed the surprised look on their face.

"They're drones," he said, "the very latest in robotic technology. They don't really have any more brains than a pea, actually, but they can follow orders and they're handy in a tight spot."

"I had no idea," Zip said. "When did you get these? I've never seen this type of robot before."

"We got 'em three weeks ago. We're modernizing here – moving with the times – I'm sure you understand. They're highly useful – inside, outside, repairs, lifting, you name it. The central computer system gives 'em orders; when something needs to be done it tells the drones and they make it happen. All they need is an order; they can carry it out on their own. Huge improvement over using trained monkeys."

"Hey!" an insulted voice called out from the back of the room.

Another man in blue overalls, with the logo of an ioneer on his sleeve, ran over to Brown. "I think I've found the problem, sir. It seems that a huge power surge a few minutes ago blew a fuse. The fuse it blew was faulty, though, and allowed some of the current to flow into the central computer's data core, which corrupted it. Since the data core is corrupted the computer is not working and the power plant shut down."

"Then fix it!" Brown barked. "Let's get these lights on."

"It's not that easy," the ioneer replied. "Sure, we can replace the fuse – we have them in stock, you know – but the data core has been corrupted. If we replace the fuse the lights will stay off because the computer that runs everything won't start with a corrupted data core. The core has got to be fixed."

"No problem," Brown said. He turned to a nearby drone. "Hey – GR9104. Go extract the data core, bring it to the lab, and see that it's repaired." The drone acknowledged the command by repeating it to him and then scurried off. Zip watched it roll over

to an imposing computer that was against the far wall and unscrew an access panel; once it was open it extended a mechanical arm inside the unit, gripped something, and then pulled out the data core— a small cylindrical device roughly three inches in diameter and six inches high. Zip knew that that particular data core could house entire petabytes of information; fixing it would be no easy task. The drone deftly placed it inside a padded steel cylinder that was a little larger than a thermos, brought it inside its chest and secured it, and then scurried outside.

Satisfied, Brown had turned back to the ioneer. “While it’s doing that, you find a way to get the lights back on – it’s dark in here – and then track down the source of the power surge. We’ve been having power problems all month now, and – ”

Mark watched the drone leave the room and head down the hallway, and then suddenly he snapped his fingers. “Wait a minute,” he said, addressing Brown. “Where is your data repair center?”

“Upstairs,” Brown said, irritated that he had been interrupted. “Why?”

“Because the drone is headed downstairs,” Mark replied patiently. “Do you have a spare data core or something?”

Brown’s eyes got wide and he rushed outside, the ioneer following close on his heels. He was just in time to see the drone, far below, open a hangar door and roll inside. “After him!” he shouted, purple with rage. “If we don’t get that data core back and repaired in four hours we’ll have to abandon the station! *Go get him!*”

Even as he gave the order they could hear the airlock door in the hangar below open into space and the noise of a ship leaving the hangar.

## CHAPTER 5

“OH BOY,” Joe muttered, as the Starmen raced back to the *Red Tiger*. “This day just keeps getting stranger.”

“I don’t understand it,” Mark said thoughtfully. “Why would the drone ignore a direct order and evacuate the space station with the data core? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“All I know,” Zip said, “is that if we don’t catch him we’re going to have a huge problem on our hands. I don’t even want to *think* about what evacuating this station would mean.”

The three Starmen weaved their way through the pandemonium inside the darkened space station and made it to their hangar.

“Of all the rotten luck,” Joe said as they boarded their shuttle and prepared to leave. “Do you realize that if the hangars were without power the drone would never have been able to leave? And just how are we supposed to find the drone once we get into space, anyway?”

“We’ll just have to do the best we can,” Zip said.

Joe sent the signal to open the hangar doors. Once they opened he blasted the shuttle into space, and then had to immediately slow it down.

“Watch it!” Mark yelled, as a massive space freighter loomed their way. Joe turned the shuttle away just in time and desperately tried to cut down his speed.

“What a mess!” he muttered as his hands worked the controls. “Everyone depends on the space station for flight control information. Now that nobody has it everyone is flying blind. It’s all I can do to keep from hitting something.” Joe carefully weaved the ship through the massive traffic jam. He was a good enough pilot to avoid collisions but they weren’t making very good time.

“Of course,” Joe said after a brief pause, “we still have our original problem. How are we going to find out what ship the drone took?”

“Call up the space station and ask them,” Zip said. “Even if

their computers are down there has to be someone there who knows what ship was in that hangar. Once we know its transponder number we should be able to track it.”

While Joe tried to keep the ship from being destroyed in a collision Mark attempted to raise the station. Several minutes went by before he was able to get someone to answer his call, and it was ten minutes after that before Mark was finally given the information he wanted.

“This is the one you want to track,” Mark said as he typed some information into the shuttle’s console. “It’s not a very fast ship so we should be able to catch up with it.” The computer recognized the tracking information and brought it up on their overhead display.

By this time Joe had piloted the *Red Tiger* beyond the immediate vicinity of L5. He looked at the dot on his overhead display and plotted its course. “It appears to be headed for Earth,” he said after a few minutes. “If he keeps on his current course he’s going to land somewhere on the East Coast of the United States.”

“Can you arrange to be there when the ship lands?” Zip asked.

“I think so,” Joe said. “He’s gotten a good head-start but we should be able to make up the time.” Joe entered an intercept course into the ship’s computer and then settled back into his chair.

“We really should call Richard,” Zip said. “I’m sure he’s got to be wondering what is going on and we did promise to let him know as soon as we knew something.”

“Do we know what is going on?” Mark asked. “What are you going to tell him?”

“Well,” Joe said, “we can always tell him that Xenobots have invaded the L5 space station and are trying to destroy the Earth’s oceans, and that we’ve got to stop them before it’s too late!”

“Uh-huh,” Zip said skeptically. “What about the drone?”

“It could be a part of their evil plot!” Joe said, warming to the idea. “They’re forcing everyone to evacuate the base so that they can have it all to themselves.”

“Or not,” Zip replied.

“Or not,” Joe agreed.

“I think the problem is tied to their new drone system,” Mark said thoughtfully. “Maybe the addition of the drones hasn’t gone as well as they thought, and the computer has been doing strange things because it just can’t handle them. The fact that the drone just headed off into space after being told to repair the data core sounds like a piece of defective equipment to me. That could explain the whole mess.”

“Sounds good,” Zip said. “Let’s contact Richard and fill him in. If we can’t retrieve the data core in time then I’m sure SE’s help will be needed to evacuate the station.”

“We’ll get back,” Joe said confidently. “After all, what could happen?”

\* \* \* \*

Fifty minutes after leaving L5 Joe Taylor landed the *Red Tiger* in a small, grassy field. The drone had chosen a small town on the eastern shore of New Jersey as its landing site and Joe arranged for them to be there well before the drone touched down.

“We should have no trouble intercepting the drone and retrieving the data core,” Zip remarked as they stepped out of the shuttle.

“We just have to make sure we don’t damage it any further when we’re retrieving it,” Mark warned.

“We don’t want to make things even worse than they already are. We only have three hours before the station has to be evacuated, you know.”

“Hey there!” someone behind them shouted. They turned around and saw an agitated old man hurrying their way. “What do you think you’re doing there, landing this flying piece of junk in my field?” he asked, brandishing his cane at them.

Zip took a step backwards, surprised. “It’s an emergency,” he said. “A robot has stolen the data core from the L5 space station,

and we need to retrieve it before the whole station has to be evacuated. We don't have much time."

"A likely story!" he roared. "Runaway robot indeed. Do you guys think you're Starmen or something? Now you listen here: you get that ship out of my field or I'll have you all arrested for trespassing and vandalism!"

In the distance, the Starmen saw the ship they had been tracking make a low pass over the city. It was coming in for a landing. Zip realized that the Starmen didn't have any time to waste if they wanted to catch it before it escaped again.

"I'm sorry," Zip said, "but we don't have the time to move the ship right now! We've got to go, but we'll remove the ship as soon as we can."

"You bet you will!" the old man yelled as the Starmen ran off into the distance. He picked up his cell phone and began making calls. "Young people these days," he muttered. "What's the world coming to?"

\* \* \* \*

The three Starmen raced down the street, heading roughly in the direction where they saw the drone's ship land.

"I thought he was going to land nearby," Mark said.

"I guess he changed his mind," Joe replied. "I sure wish we had brought our red Starman suits. Zip, are you sure that there weren't any in the shuttle?"

"Definitely," Zip said. "I wasn't exactly planning on making a trip to Earth today."

Joe took out his compad and activated its tracking function. He soon found the drone's shuttle – a half-mile away. "We'd better hurry," Joe said. "If it gets out of sight we'll never find it."

The Starmen were able to reach the site within five minutes but found it abandoned. A quick search of the ship turned up nothing. Small tire tracks led from the ship to the road but after that there was no further sign.

"So, what do we do now?" Zip asked.

"I can't get a fix on the droid on my compad," Joe said sadly. "It's a small metal object and there are all kinds of those around here."

"It's got to be around here somewhere," Mark said. "Maybe someone saw it go by."

"I suppose we could start asking around," Zip replied. "Which way should we go?"

Joe thought a moment. "Well, the tracks lead to the road, and there's only one road around here. We took the same road here and it didn't pass us, so it must have gone the other way."

"Sounds good," Zip said. "Let's get going."

As the Starmen jogged down the road they saw a red-haired lad coming toward them, riding on a bicycle.

"Hey there!" Joe called out. "You haven't passed any robots, have you?"

The lad eyed them curiously, said nothing, and pedaled harder. He was soon out of sight.

"He ignored me!" Joe said indignantly.

"Maybe he thought you were crazy," Mark said helpfully. "How many people do you think come out this way looking for runaway robots?"

"Thousands, I bet," Joe replied. "Maybe this is where the drone came from. Maybe this is its long-lost home. Maybe it's returning to the halls of its ancestors."

"There just doesn't appear to be anything out here at all," Zip said. "We've jogged for nearly ten minutes and haven't seen anything but countryside. Does anyone even live out here?"

After a few more minutes they came upon a small country village. The Starmen saw a handful of old houses, a few run-down stores, and a decrepit train station. A few people were milling around, going about their business.

"Excuse me, miss," Mark said to one lady who had just stepped out of a nearby store with a package in her arms. "Have you seen any robots walk this way?"

The lady eyed him oddly. "No, young man, I have not, nor have I seen any elves or dwarves. If I do, though, you'll be the

first to now.” With that, she hurried off down the street.

“This is *not* going well,” Joe remarked, after that same question elicited similar responses from everyone else in sight. “You’d think they’d never seen a runaway robot before.”

“Let’s try the train station,” Zip said. “Maybe the drone’s on his way somewhere else.”

“They why not fly there?” Joe asked reasonably. “Why stop here and then take the train to his final destination?”

“Maybe you can’t fly to where he is going,” Zip said mysteriously.

\* \* \* \*

The tiny train station was composed of a single wooden building that sat beside a high-speed railway. “I bet not many trains stop at this station,” Mark said. “This doesn’t look like a major metropolitan area to me.”

To their surprise, as they stepped onto the platform they saw that there was already a small high-speed train sitting at the station. “Look!” Joe shouted, pointing. The three of them just caught a glimpse of the drone boarding the train!

The three Starmen raced after it, only to be stopped at the door of the train by a conductor. “Tickets, please,” he said.

“It’s an emergency!” Zip said. “A robot just boarded that train with a data core that it stole from the L5 space station an hour ago. We’ve got to recover it before the station has to be evacuated! We don’t want to ride the train – we just want to get our robot back!”

“Tickets, please” the conductor said calmly.

“A *robot* just boarded your train,” Joe said in a strained voice. “Didn’t you notice?”

“The robot had a ticket,” the conductor said, “which is something you seem to lack.”

“It’s an *emergency*,” Joe repeated.

“It always is,” the conductor said calmly.

Zip sighed. “Just go buy three tickets,” he told Joe, “and

hurry.”

\* \* \* \*

Joe sped off to the ticket booth in a sprint and was thankful (though not surprised) that there was no one in line.

“I’d like three tickets,” he told the lady inside the ticket booth.

“Where would you like to go?” she asked him.

“I don’t care. I just want three tickets for that train that’s about to leave any second with a robot on board.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t give you three tickets with no destination. You have to tell me where you want to go.”

Joe sighed. “Fine. Give us three tickets to the Aquapolis.”

The lady typed at her computer for a minute. “I’m sorry, but this train doesn’t go there. The nearest train that stops at the Aquapolis is 40 miles from here.”

“Oh. So where *does* this train go?”

“Just about anywhere. I don’t know exactly; I’ve never taken it.”

“Ok,” Joe said slowly, then he got an idea. “A few minutes ago a robot purchased a ticket from this ticket booth. Where did it want to go?”

“I have no idea. I didn’t see any robots. They don’t often take this train.”

Joe noticed that two people were now in line behind him. “What is the name of this town?”

“Sharps Chapel,” she replied.

“Ok, I’ll take three tickets to Sharps Chapel. Can you do that?”

“I suppose,” she said, surprised. She typed away at her computer. “Ok, that will be \$89.72.”

Joe opened up his wallet and took out his SmartCard. “Here,” he said, handing it to her.

“I’m sorry, but we only take cash.”

“Cash!” Joe said, surprised. “Do they still have that?”

“The sign says cash only,” the lady said, pointing to a faded,

illegible sign that was posted on the ticket window. “That will be \$89.72.”

The line behind Joe had grown larger and the people were starting to grumble. “Are you going to pay the lady or not?” the person directly behind him said. “We don’t have all day!”

“ZIP!” Joe yelled.

Zip came sprinting over. “The train is about to leave!” Zip said. “What’s taking so long?”

“We have fallen among philistines who will only accept cash. You don’t happen to have \$89.72 on you, do you?”

Zip shook his head, took out his wallet, and handed a \$100 bill to the ticket master without saying a word. She calmly took it, gave Zip his change, and handed him his tickets. “Enjoy your trip. Next!”

Zip and Joe sprinted over to the conductor. “Sharps Chapel!” Zip said in surprise, looking at the destination printed on his tickets. “Where’s that?”

Joe sighed. “Don’t ask.”

Zip handed the tickets to the conductor and then the three of them boarded the train. The conductor gave out one final “All aboard!” and then the train began to pull out from the station.

## CHAPTER 6

AFTER STEPPING inside the train the three Starmen took a quick look around. They were in a sleek high-speed train that was divided into six compartments. Each compartment had 24 booths, with 12 on the left and 12 on the right. The booths were divided into pairs that faced each other, and each one could sit two people.

“I don’t see him,” Zip said as he briefly scanned the people inside. This compartment was roughly half full.

“Neither do I,” Mark replied. “He must have gone to another compartment.”

A conductor came by. "Please sit down. No one is allowed to be standing up while the train is en route."

The three Starmen sat down in a nearby booth. "Where is this train going?" Joe asked.

The conductor looked at him in surprise. "To New Spindrift, of course," he said, referring to the giant floating city off the coast of New Jersey. "This train reaches a top speed of 475 miles per hour, so we should reach it in precisely 32 minutes."

"That explains it," Zip said after the conductor walked by. "The drone couldn't land there so he landed at the nearest town and took the train the rest of the route."

"Wonderful," Joe said. "It's amazing what robots can do these days."

Mark had his compad out and was studying it intently. "I think the droid is in the next," he said. "I'm picking up some energy signatures from that cabin that correspond to a nuclear power source. I can't be sure, but that would be my guess."

Zip nodded. Calling over the conductor, he asked if they could move to the compartment up ahead.

"That's the first-class cabin," the conductor told him. "Do you have first-class tickets?"

Zip took them out and looked at them again. "Um, no," he said.

"Then I guess you can't."

"I don't suppose," began Joe, "it would help if we told you that we were after a runaway robot who had stolen a data core from the L5 space station, and that if we don't retrieve it soon the space station will have to be abandoned."

"Nope. That is a new one, though! Never heard that excuse before." The conductor calmly went back to his post, leaving the Starmen sitting there.

"Next time," Zip said grimly, "we *are* going to bring our Starman uniforms with us, even if it means going all the way back home to get them. This is ridiculous."

"Well," Mark said reasonably, "it looks as if the drone is headed toward New Spindrift. We're over the ocean now," he

said, pointing outside the window, “and the drone can hardly leave the train while en-route. We know where he is, so we can just wait until he gets there and then make our move.”

“I’ve got an even better idea,” Zip said. “Let’s call Richard and tell him what happened, and see if he can arrange to have the drone met with a reception committee when it arrives. I’m sure that Starlight Enterprise has a significant presence on New Spindrift – it’s mainly a research facility, isn’t it?”

He got out his compad and dialed Richard’s number. Since he was located on the moon and they were on Earth there was a three-second delay on each end of their conversation.

Zip explained the situation to Richard and asked him how things were going on L5. “They haven’t gotten any better since you left 90 minutes ago,” he said grimly. “If you don’t recover that data core in time the station will have to be evacuated. I’ll arrange for some of our personnel to be there when the train arrives. It should not be difficult to intercept an unarmed drone. I only hope that it hasn’t damaged the core any further.”

Zip signed off. Directly across the aisle a little four-year-old girl was staring at them, wide-eyed. She turned to her mother and said “Look, mommy! Those people think they are *spies*!” The mother hushed her child and picked her up, then turned away from the Starmen and stared out the window.

\* \* \* \*

“Twenty more minutes,” Mark said, “until the train arrives. We can wait that long. I’m sure that Richard will have a group awaiting its arrival. Our part, gentlemen, is done.”

“Unless the drone tries to escape,” Zip warned. “It’s done a pretty good job of that already. And we *still* don’t know what is going on up at L5. For all we know there really may *be* Xenobots involved.”

“Or their mothers,” Joe remarked.

There was nothing for them to do but wait, so wait they did. After what seemed like an eternity the train pulled into the

station.

“Let’s go!” Zip said, jumping up to his feet – but it was already too late. A large crowd had formed as soon as the train started pulling in, and try as they might they could not fight their way through it. The compartment had two exits and both were blocked: one by a man struggling with his luggage, and the other by a very large lady who was talking in a loud voice to her friend about how *awful* these trains were and how *pushy* everyone was and how things were so much *better* on other lines. They seemed content to just stand there and discuss the situation, while the people behind them grew impatient.

The Starmen tried to push their way through the crowd but all they got were some dirty looks from their fellow passengers.

“The windows?” Zip asked his friends.

“Sealed,” Mark said.

Zip sighed.

When they finally made it outside the train they began looking around. “Look!” Zip shouted, pointing. Over in the distance, emerging from the front compartment, was the drone that they were seeking.

“And look over there!” Joe replied, pointing in the opposite direction. Approaching the drone was a group of men, but they were definitely not from Starlight Enterprise.

## CHAPTER 7

“OH BOY,” Joe said. “Just where is the cavalry when you need them, anyway?”

The three Starmen raced toward the drone, but they knew that they were too far away: by the time they got there it would be too late. Sure enough, the men closed in on the drone – but as they got close the drone flew over their heads and soared into the distance.

The Starmen stopped in their tracks. “Woah!” Joe said. “I

don't remember anyone telling us that those machines could fly."

"Wonderful," Zip said, "just wonderful. Now what are we going to do?"

"Um, probably get involved in a fight," Joe replied, observing that the men who had tried to stop the drone had noticed the three Starmen and were headed their way, looking none-too-pleased. "What do you say you let me take all four of them at once, Zip, just to make it fair?"

"I don't think so," Mark said, shaking his head. "The middle two are mine – you can have the others."

Thirty seconds later the fight ended with their four attackers lying on the ground, moaning in pain. Just as the fight ended the Starmen noticed a group of three officers running toward them, accompanied by several Starlight Enterprise personnel.

"I'm sorry we were late," one of the officers told Zip, "but it took us longer than we thought to get to the station."

"That's ok," Zip said. "Can you take custody of these men? They tried to grab the drone right after it got off the train, and when it flew off into the distance they turned and attacked us."

The officers helped the injured men off the ground and arrested them. "Ok, let's hear it: what were you doing here?" But they refused to talk. They led them away, leaving the Starmen with the four personnel from Starlight Enterprise.

"We know the drone is here somewhere," Zip said, "we just don't know where. It couldn't have gone far. Do you have a way to search the station?"

"I think so," one of the personnel said. "We should be able to track it by its energy signature. That particular model uses a special nuclear power source that can be tracked from a distance with the right equipment."

Using a special tracking device that the Starlight Enterprise personnel had brought, the Starmen were able to pinpoint the machine on the island. It had apparently taken refuge inside a large building a short walk away. "Very nice," Zip commented. "Remind me to ask Richard to start building those into our compads."

“Don’t forget the popcorn maker, too,” Joe said. “I’ve been wanting that for years.”

The three Starmen and the four Starlight Enterprise personnel raced toward the location specified on the tracking device. “It doesn’t seem to be moving,” Mark noticed. “I wonder what it’s doing.”

“Should we call in any backup units?” a technician named Bradley asked. “We have some on standby in the case of an emergency.”

“Not yet,” Zip said. “Let’s see what is going on first. If trouble breaks out then we’ll call them in.”

In less than five minutes the group found themselves in front of a large glass building. “Cyragon Data Services, LTD,” Mark said aloud, reading a large sign posted on the building’s front lawn. “I’ve never heard of them before.”

“Let’s go!” Zip yelled, sprinting across the lawn toward the building’s entrance. The entire group charged inside, bursting into the lobby. They raced past the startled secretary in the outer office and ran down a long hallway.

“Which way?” Zip said.

“Down here,” a Starlight technician replied, examining the tracking device, “and to the left – no, to the right,” he said. “It looks like the drone is in a big room at the end of the hallway.”

“Got it,” Zip said. Within seconds the entire group had burst into that room. Inside they saw what looked like a large laboratory; parts and equipment were strewn everywhere, and technicians in lab coats were scattered around the room. To one corner Zip spied the drone they had been looking for, standing motionless.

The Starmen’s noisy entrance into the room startled all of the workers in the laboratory. All of them, in unison, turned around to see what had caused the commotion. One of them stepped forward to greet them.

“Hello gentlemen,” he said, stepping forward to extend a hand. “I’m Dr. Lowery, the head of the data retrieval department. How can I help you?”

Zip pointed at the drone. “We’ve come to get him. Do you know what he’s doing here?”

“Ah, you must be from L5! Don’t worry - we’ll be done in just a minute,” Dr. Lowery assured him. “This data core has been badly damaged but I think we can transfer its data to a new unit. Give us another fifteen minutes and we should be good to go.”

“The data core?” Joe asked.

“Why, yes! This is where that data core was first designed. It’s pretty badly damaged, but we have a lot of experience in removing data from damaged data cores. This particular core is actually so old that we’re probably the only laboratory in the world that can do the job. We’ll have it transferred in a few minutes and then you should be good to go.”

“Ah,” Zip said. “Thanks. We’ll get out of your way, then.”

The three Starmen left the room and headed outside.

“Do you need anything else?” Bradley asked.

“No, but thank you,” Zip said. “I think we can handle it from here.”

As the four Starlight Enterprise personnel walked away the three Starmen looked at each other. “So, the drone was told to go fix the data core - ”, Zip began.

“- and did exactly that,” Joe responded.

“Yup,” said Mark.

There was silence. “I guess we wait,” Zip said.

“I guess so,” Joe replied.

Fifteen minutes later Zip, Mark, Joe, and the drone were all riding together on a high-speed train, bound for Sharps Chapel, New Jersey. None of them had very much to say.

\* \* \* \*

Three hours after leaving the L5 space station Zip, Mark, Joe, and the drone docked once again in the L5 space station. The three Starmen had to fly with the drone because their shuttle, the *Red Tiger*, had been impounded by the police and was no longer parked in the field.

The pandemonium inside L5 was not nearly as bad as it had been when they left. They had contacted the station while en-route to let them know that they would be back in time, and the crowds became calmer after the emergency lighting had been restored and after they were told that things would be back to normal shortly. The three Starmen followed the drone from the hangar to the power plant, where it placed the repaired data core back into the central computing unit. Within minutes the main lights came back on and the station was back to normal.

Once the lights came back on the Starmen walked upstairs to Alfred Nelson's office to let him know what had happened. When they arrived at his office they saw that he was now a very happy man.

"The police called after you left New Spindrift," he told the Starmen. "The men they arrested have begun to talk."

"That's great!" Zip replied. "What did they have to say?"

"Oh, they said quite enough. It turns out that they were part of a small startup company that had taken residence aboard this station. They were conducting secret nanobot experiments, trying to build self-replicating machines. They didn't have much money so they decided to hack their way into the power supply of the base to avoid running up a huge electrical bill. They also tried to tap directly into the processing unit of this base to avoid paying computer time fees."

"Ah," Joe said.

"The problem is that they didn't do a very good job. Their hacks caused all kinds of problems; the computer started doing weird things, and they drew so much power that the plant blew a fuse and shorted out the data core. They *will* be properly punished," the director said firmly. "I'll have none of that on board this station! I'm going to seriously improve the security around here."

"Sounds good," Zip said. "Did they say what they were doing on New Spindrift?"

"Oh yes!" he replied. "They realized right away what had happened to the space station, and they went to New Spindrift to

see if they could expedite the repair process. They arrived shortly before you did, as a matter of fact. When they saw you approaching the drone they thought that you were trying to interfere with it and they attacked you in order to protect it.”

After making sure that there was nothing else they could do, the three Starmen walked back toward their hangar, where they boarded a Starlight Enterprise shuttle. Joe guided the ship out of the hangar into space and then set it on a course that would lead back to Amundsen City.

“So,” Zip said after Joe set the ship on auto-pilot, “what did we accomplish this afternoon?”

“Why, obviously, we saved the L5 space station from a horde of angry Xenobots intent on taking it over,” Joe replied.

“Sounds good to me,” Mark said. And that was all they said until they were back on the Moon.



## Pottery, Part 1: Art

“I WANT you to turn that into Art,” my instructor said after I sat down.

I looked at the lump of clay that was sitting on the table in front of me. It was a drab, shapeless red blob that did not remotely resemble a work of art.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” I replied. “It’s a shapeless, ugly lump of clay. How am I supposed to get art out of that?”

“Easy!” he said, gesturing excitedly. “You just take your hands, so, and shape it, like so, and work with it, and pour your heart and soul into it, and voila! You have Art.”

“Uh-huh. Look, professor, I’m no artist; I don’t know the first thing about carving clay. You’ve picked the wrong person.”

“No, no, no! You misunderstand. You do not *carve* clay; wood, yes, but not clay. Clay must be shaped; it must be molded; it must be designed. I know you can do this!”

I sighed. “No, really, I’m no good at this; I’ve never done this before. There’s no way I can turn this lump of clay into something that is even recognizable.”

“Well, my friend, if you have never tried then how do you know this? Perhaps, with practice, you can do more than you think. Your skill is small now, yes, but you can make it grow; you can water it, and feed it, and nurture it until it blossoms into beauty. But you cannot get anywhere if you do not try.”

I looked at the lump of clay again and got the distinct impression that it was mocking me. A shapeless mass of clay is just not an inspiring sight.

My professor saw my hesitation. “Look. You must start if you

want to finish! Yes, perhaps at first your creations will not match your hopes. Yes, perhaps people will see them and laugh at what a terrible sculptor you are. Perhaps you will try, and fail, and try, and fail over and over and over. But through all that you will be learning; you will be practicing; you will be growing. Over time, through trial and instruction and effort, you will learn, and one day – I know this – you will be doing things you thought impossible.”

“But it’s laughing at me!” I said. “The clay is sitting there, laughing.”

“Then laugh back at it!” he replied. “Are you going to let a lump of clay decide what you will do and what you will not do? Is your entire self-esteem dependent upon what a lump of clay thinks of you?”

“Come, now,” he said. “Turn it into Art!”

## Pottery, Part 2: Lighthouses

I WAS sitting at my desk, happily molding a shapeless lump of clay into a beautiful work of art, when my professor walked by. He examined what I was doing with a frown on his face.

“What is that?” he said, gesturing toward my creation.

“A lighthouse!” I said. “Can’t you tell?”

“Yes,” he said, “I see it is a lighthouse. But – why?”

“Why?” I said, not understanding.

“Yes. Why? Why do you make these lighthouses? I have seen you make a dozen of them, one after the other. That is all you ever make – lighthouses. Why?”

“I’ve specialized!” I said. “I’ve discovered that I am good at making lighthouses; they are easy, they look nice, and they turn out so well. I’m starting to get the hang of this!”

“But why a lighthouse?” my professor asked. “What does a lighthouse mean to you? Does it have some deeper meaning? Does it express a heartfelt longing within your soul?”

“Don’t be silly, Professor! It’s just a lighthouse. It took me forever to find something that I could make, but I finally found it! You are looking at a very happy person.”

“Then it’s no good!” he said. “No good at all. If it means nothing to you then why do you think it will mean something to your audience? Why do you spend your time making things of no value?”

“Because it’s easy!” I said. “Look how good these things are turning out!”

“Bah!” he muttered. “Look. The purpose of art is not to make rows and rows of meaningless lighthouses that offer no light; the

purpose of art is to speak – to shout – to whisper – to educate – to illuminate. Your art must have meaning, it must have purpose, it must have feeling. You must put your very heart and soul into it. If you put nothing into it then you will get nothing out of it, and it will all be nothing more than a waste of time. Why spend your time making things of no value?”

I looked at him, and then looked back at the half-formed lighthouse that sat in front of me. “But this is so much easier,” I said.

“Doing nothing is easier than doing something,” he agreed.

## Pottery, Part 3: Sales

I WAS sitting at my desk, staring dejectedly at the clay scene that I had crafted, when my professor walked by. “Why are you so sad?” he asked.

I sighed. “It’s these sculptures I’m making – they drive me crazy!”

He shook his head. “I do not see why; it is resting peacefully on the table. I have never yet seen a sculpture come to life and wage war against its creator.”

“Very funny, professor. Listen. Do you remember when you told me to start putting myself into these things – to make something that was meaningful?”

He nodded.

“Well, I’ve started doing exactly that. I’m not making lighthouses anymore, now I’m making – that,” I said, pointing to the object in front of me.

“I had noticed,” he told me. “I am very impressed! You should be proud.”

“It hasn’t been a success,” I said. “I don’t know if you noticed, but the lighthouses were selling really well. People love lighthouses. These – things – they just aren’t selling.”

“It’s a beautiful scene,” he replied. “Very nicely rendered, done using a fine technique. The people look very lifelike, and the animals – ”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure the technique is nice, professor, but they just aren’t selling! No one wants them. Why am I making them if nobody cares? What possible good am I doing? I might as well be at home scraping mold off the walls.”

"I have a mold problem too," the Professor said thoughtfully. "It is most troublesome. Have you tried – "

"You're not paying any attention!" I said. "I don't care about mold. You told me that I should take the time to learn sculpting. You told me that I should put my heart into it. You told me that I should give it my very best. And what happened? I spend days making figures for nobody!"

"Nobody?" he asked.

"Nobody," I replied.

He stared at the sculptor I had made for a few moments, looking puzzled. "No one in the entire world wants them?"

"Not a single person."

"You took your sculpture to everyone in the entire world and you could not find anyone who was interested? Not even your mother?"

"C'mon," I said. "You know what I mean."

"How can I know what you mean if you do not mean what you say? You say that you have tried to offer your sculptures to everyone in the universe, but I think that is not the case. Yes, there are those that are not interested in quality, but there are those that care a great deal about it."

"I suppose so," I said, "but they're not easy to find."

"I did not say life would be easy," he replied, "only that it would be worthwhile, if lived for the right reason. But suppose that what you said is true and every single person who has ever been born and who ever will be born despises your sculptures. You have a natural talent for this; not everyone can do what you have done. Are you saying that you are only willing to exercise it if you can find a willing audience?"

"Of course!" I replied. "Otherwise it's just a waste of time."

The professor drummed his fingers on the table and looked at the sculpture thoughtfully. "Let me say this, and then I will go. You have a talent for this work. Given time and effort, it may be that you will turn into an amazing and world-famous sculptor. It will take time. It will be hard. It will take long nights and agonizing and other general unpleasantness. It will not be easy,

but it is a journey that you are capable of making.”

“So,” he said, “you have a choice. You can decide that the road is not worth it and abandon this effort to do something else – something easier, perhaps. Or you can continue to take the road, not knowing where it will lead. It is entirely up to you.”

“But I don’t know what will happen,” I said. “I might end up just wasting my time.”

“Only God knows what will happen,” he replied.



## Pottery, Part 4: Inspiration

I WAS sitting at my desk, staring out the window at the cars that were driving by, when my professor walked up to me. “I see you are once again lost in thought,” he said.

“I guess,” I replied.

“What seems to be the trouble? I see you are here, yes, and you have your clay. Your skills have been growing nicely! Your sculptures – they are taking on a nice feeling of elegance and style.”

I sighed and tore my gaze away from the outside world. “I just can’t think of anything to sculpt. I’m not feeling inspired today, professor. It’s just not working.”

“But the world is full of ideas!” my professor said enthusiastically. “There is no end of things to do. In a lifetime you could not exhaust the possibilities!”

I looked at my professor skeptically. He was a small, thin man, with a bald head, round glasses, and little beady eyes. (I was always intrigued by the little beady eyes.) I had no idea how old he was but he looked older than Moses. Sometimes I wondered about his sanity – and, I’m sure, sometimes he wondered about mine.

“What are you talking about?” I said. “Everything worth doing has already been done. There have been millions of artists before me, and they’ve done everything I can think of – and probably better than I would have done it. There’s just nothing original left to say.”

He looked out the window for a few seconds and said nothing. “I see,” he said at last. He removed his glasses and started

cleaning them with his pocket handkerchief. "So you are once again convinced that you are wasting your time."

"Not exactly, professor. I just can't think of anything to make that hasn't already been made by someone else. There's nothing left to be done. I don't even know why I'm sitting here."

The professor put his glasses back on and looked at me. It was hard to read the expression on his ancient face. After some time he spoke.

"My uncle – he is a farmer," he began.

"You have an uncle?" I asked, surprised.

"Well, he is not my uncle, exactly. I call him that, but the relationship – it is different. He is my grandfather's sister's husband's second cousin's older brother's son. It is a close bond that we share."

"Ah," I said.

"As I said, my uncle, he is a farmer. Every day he goes out and farms in the ground. Always he is growing things. When the harvest comes in he takes them to the market and sells them to the people."

"Wonderful, professor. I'm glad it works out for him."

"Yes, it is wonderful, but I think he is wasting his time, no? Surely he has done this before, the same thing, many times. Every year he grows crops. Every year he sells them. Every year people buy and eat them. It becomes repetitive – it is nothing new. Why do these farmers do this?"

"So people can eat, I guess," I said. "If they didn't grow food every year we would all starve to death."

"Ah," my professor said, "I see. But people have already eaten in the past, no? Why do they keep doing it again?"

I shook my head. "You're really reaching, professor; sculpting is nothing at all like farming. You really need to brush up on your analogies. If people don't eat then we'd starve. Food is consumed, and once it's consumed it's gone."

"And these sculptures – they last forever, no? All of the sculptures that have ever existed – they still exist, yes? And all the people – they can see all of them whenever they want, no?"

“Of course not!” I said. “Everything is temporary. Things just don’t last.”

“Ah, I see. So the people – they need new things to nourish and inspire them, as the old things pass away.”

“I guess,” I said.

“And you – you are providing this nourishment! You are building things for the people – to inspire them and help them on their walk through this life. And to think that of all the sculptures on this world, some of the people choose yours. It is good, no? If they want your cooking, then why not feed them?”



## Pottery, Part 5: Motivation

AFTER AN absence of several months I once again found myself in my professor's studio, staring dismally at a shapeless lump of clay. The unappealing red mud was sitting untouched on the wooden table in front of me; after sitting there for half an hour I had still not found the strength to do anything with it.

While I sat there my professor walked up and decided to disturb my blissful inactivity. He surveyed my handiwork and shook his head.

"You are wasting time!" he said briskly. "Now – to work! You have much to do."

"I know, I know," I said.

"That is good! I had begun to wonder. Perhaps, I thought, you had mistaken this for a doctor's waiting room. Your expression – it is one of pain, no? Perhaps you think I will remove your kidneys?"

I shook my head. "I just don't know why I'm here, professor. I mean, what's the point?"

He sighed. "We have been over this many times, no? Surely we do not need to repeat ourselves. You always come here, no?"

"Yeah, I do. It just seems like such a waste of time! Surely there's something better I can be doing. I just can't seem to motivate myself today."

"I see," he replied, as he turned his gaze from me to the untouched clay sitting on the table. "So – perhaps you are right. Sculpting – it will not change the world, no?"

"Exactly! It won't. I've made a lot of sculptures in the past few years, professor, and I've become convinced that there has got to

be something better to do with my time than make these – things.”

“You may be right,” the professor replied. He looked at me and nodded his head thoughtfully. “You have a good point, no? Perhaps you should be the one to remove people’s kidneys. Or you could fight fires. Or develop new medicines, yes?”

“Something like that. I was actually thinking more about going home and watching TV. It’s a lot easier than sculpting!”

“I am sure that would save many lives!” the professor remarked. “Think of all the mighty works of art that have been created by TV watchers! Or – even better – think of all the wonders this world could have accomplished if only more people watched TV! What tragedy! Yes, I can see that you have chosen the better path.”

I looked sourly at my professor. “It’s not all about work, you know. A person needs some time to recuperate. It’s a rough world out there! Have you seen the way people drive these days?”

He looked at me keenly. “Yes, I can see how overworked you truly are, my student. This past half-hour – how you have labored! The giant stack of artwork that you failed to create towers overhead. But I must end this discussion,” he said. My professor turned and began walking toward the door.

“Hey!” I said. “Where are you going?”

“To join the massive legion of media consumers!” he replied without turning his head. He reached his hand toward the doorknob. “The world – it must be saved, no?”

“Wait! How am I supposed to finish this without you?”

He opened the door, and then turned to look at me. “You must first begin, before you can finish. Let me know when you have gotten that far.”

And with that, he was gone.

## Rainfall

IT WAS the Accident, as later generations called it, that was responsible for completely destroying the mightiest civilization ever to exist on the face of the Earth – a civilization so powerful that, had it not been destroyed, might still rule the planet today. Never before had anything like the Accident ever happened; never before had an entire civilization been wiped out by a single event. It was, without question, the most devastating disaster ever to occur in human history. The mists of time have obscured many things, but the Accident caused devastation on such a scale that no surviving race has ever forgotten it. Each generation afterward passed the story down to the next in tales that left its hearers spellbound. After millennia had passed the story seemed too incredible to believe, and some doubted that it was more than an ancient legend – after all, who could believe that such a mighty race could be wiped out, almost to the last man, in a single day?

As is often the case, the mighty Empire of old had been warned of the coming destruction. Had they chosen to heed the warning the Empire could have avoided the disaster, but the Emperor – like his people – thought that such a thing could never occur.

In fact, the Emperor was quite content on the day the Accident occurred, for that day fell upon the Emperor's 600<sup>th</sup> birthday. All throughout his unimaginably vast domain, everyone from the sub-janitor in the Sanitation Department to the President of the Council of Elders was on holiday. Everything throughout the planet shut down as the thirty-four billion citizens of his domain strove to honor and glorify their ruler in celebrations unrivaled in the course of history.

When the afternoon gave way to evening and twilight stole over the globe, the Emperor retired to the royal penthouse on the 261<sup>st</sup> floor of his Tribertian Tower. The day had been a pleasant one, but the festivities had worn the middle-aged Emperor out. Besides, the Emperor's favorite part of the day was about to begin: the transition from day to night would soon take place.

Whenever the Emperor had time he liked to sit in the private glass-walled parlor of his palace. The Emperor loved looking over the capitol city of his Empire and he spent as much time as possible watching his people move around his city. From sea level one could observe only a small portion of the 200,000 square miles that made up the city limits of his capitol, but from the air one could see almost all of it. That is why the Emperor had commissioned the mile-high Tribertian Tower and installed his palace in its top: it and it alone gave him the view he wanted.

The Emperor had worked all his life to construct that view. It had taken centuries of effort to design and build the city that lay at his feet, and it took centuries more to strengthen the economy of his world and make the city come to life.

From the planet itself the Emperor never had any trouble, for he lived in a venerable paradise. The Emperor had always taken the ever-clear sky for granted, not dreaming that the enormous hurricanes his astronomers spotted on other planets could ever happen on *his* world. No tornado had ever destroyed a city, no earthquake had ever wrecked his landscape, and no volcano had ever spewed lava onto his pristine wilderness. No hurricane had ever destroyed his coastline – for, indeed, his planet *had* no major coastline: not a single ocean existed anywhere in his lands. However, this lack of water did not make the planet an arid desert: every morning a heavy mist rose out of the ground and drenched anything left outside. The mist seeped into the soil from a tremendous natural underground reservoir: the engineers of the Empire estimated that the reservoir contained enough pressurized water to last the Empire for many millennia to come.

The atmosphere of his planet was as astonishing as its water cycle. Through a system of sophisticated chemical barriers the

planet blocked out all the deadly cosmic rays, and its robust magnetic field greatly enhanced the growth of living organisms. The result of this unique system was astonishing: everything grew to titanic dimensions and lived practically forever. Dragonflies had wingspans of over three feet, and trees that grew a hundred feet high on other planets reached heights of over four hundred feet on his world. Men could – and did – live for a thousand years. To top it off, the atmosphere held constant at a balmy 78 degrees from pole to pole: the inhabitants of his world never knew frigid wastelands or scorching deserts.

Yet amidst all this comfort the Emperor was not happy, for one thing – one person – disturbed him. It was a little, insignificant matter, but it annoyed the Emperor greatly: like a fly on his penthouse window, it spoiled his view and therefore had to be removed.

The problem was not that this fellow was breaking laws or inciting revolts (although the Emperor certainly wished he would, for then he would have a good excuse to eliminate him). No, the man and his family were very peaceful, content to live on the outskirts of his capitol. He had some kind of building project going on – he was constructing a vehicle of some kind, if he remembered correctly – but that wasn't the problem.

No, the problem was what he was *saying*. For more than a century now this self-proclaimed prophet had been preaching doomsday: the world was about to end! Repent or God will destroy you! Return from your wicked ways before it was too late! It was ridiculous, the Emperor muttered, all of it. Except for this one man, end-of-the-world preaching had died out a long time ago – and why shouldn't it? Nobody really believed that there was an angry God in the sky, and even if there was He need not concern Himself with the Empire, for the Emperor had everything under control.

At least nobody had listened to this poor, deluded man. The man had preached for centuries, and in all that time not a single person had joined his crazy cult. At least, the Emperor thought, his society had good sense!

The Emperor shook his head. Enough of this! Worry about it some other day: the great transition was about to begin.

In the entire world, no building even approached the majesty of the Tribertian Tower. The Tower dominated the entire capitol, and for that matter the entire world: no other building on the planet was even half as tall as this massive mile-high structure of glass and steel. The construction of the tower had been the greatest construction project ever attempted by the Empire. For many years engineers had thought that the architectural problems of such a massive building were too great: the 6,000 foot high building would have to endure fantastic structural stresses, and the internal infrastructure posed still more fantastic challenges. In the end, though, the Emperor had triumphed: under his urging the engineers had solved the final problems. It took them twenty years to complete the monstrous structure, but at last the final touch was added and the Emperor moved in. He was mighty pleased with its majesty and grace, and the citizens of his capitol felt the same way: no matter how long they had there they could never gaze at the mile-high Tower without marveling that something so large, so impressive, and so massive could be built.

In reality, the entire capitol was equally impressive. No other city had half the importance of the capitol, and few cities came close to matching its 200 million citizens. The downtown section of the city had the most impressive skyline in the world: while the Tower dwarfed everything else, the downtown was thick with majestic buildings thousands of feet high. Dozens of those colossal steel giants had worldwide fame. The Finance Tower, for instance, directed the finances of the entire planet: every day, via a system of satellite relays, supercomputers and fiber-optic cables, hundreds of trillions of dollars exchanged hands. Then there was the short, squat Defense Building, built with enough strength to sustain a direct hit by a nuclear weapon. It managed the military resources of the Emperor's world; war or peace, life or death, offensive maneuver or defensive maneuver, everything was under the control of the Directors that lived deep inside this

imposing structure. Every military unit, every spy satellite, and every intercontinental missile could be controlled from within its halls. It was commonly said that the Defense Building had enough firepower to obliterate every planet in its star system, and that was not too much of an exaggeration: it had destroyed an entire planet before, right down to its very crust and mantle.

The Emperor's attention, however, was focused on none of these: he was watching the sky. He loved to watch sunsets: the play of red and yellow light over the ever-pink sky never failed to fill him with awe. As he watched, night started to steal across the heavens. Slowly the shadow of his Tower lengthened across the landscape, and the streets below became obscured in its darkness. As the city became dark it began to turn on its lights: cars turned on their headlights, streetlights began to shine, skyscrapers glowed in the darkness, and the hypersonic transcontinental airliners turned on their wing lights. The city began to resemble an enormous multifaceted jewel, sparkling with the glow of a billion pinpoints of light.

The Emperor diverted his attention to the Tribertian Airport, where he watched the arrival and departure of his transplanetary air fleet. The Tribertian Airport was the largest in the world, dwarfing even cities by its monstrous size and complexity. More than ten million people a day traveled through it to get to their destination, for it served the entire world: no nation or city was out of range of its hypersonic jets.

Yes, the Emperor thought, the view made it all worthwhile. His father's labors had finally paid off. If only he could have lived to see the events of the past four hundred years! It was a shame that men could only live for a single millennium.

He thought back for a moment to the time when his father was still a child. Back in the dawn ages, as they were called, the world was divided up into many factions: one king ruled over one race, another king ruled over another race, and wars, famine, and disease ravaged the planet. His father had dreamed of uniting all the races of the world under the rule of one man. He was not the first to attempt such a goal: many others had spent centuries

trying to carve out a world empire, but in the end they had all failed. His father, though, had succeeded.

At times his father had wanted to give up. The difficulties of conquering the planet proved far greater than he had first realized. He quickly discovered what his predecessors had learned: in the healthy, fertile atmosphere of the planet, killing someone was nearly impossible. It was useless to wait for his enemies to die of old age, and soldiers could rapidly recover from even the most severe injuries. For a reason his scientists had never understood, wounds healed astonishingly quickly: in a matter of hours a man with a seemingly mortal wound had recovered enough to return to combat.

In the end it was the atom that gave him the victory that had eluded his predecessors. His scientists had discovered the fissionable property of uranium long before his enemies did, and they were able to harness the raw power of nuclear weapons while others were still doing preliminary research. He at last had a weapon that no one else could counter, and all it took was turning a single continent into a radioactive sea of fused green glass for the others to see the light and surrender unconditionally.

When he had finally died at a venerable old age, his son - the Emperor - took the reins of power. The world his father had given him, however, was in wild chaos: terror, lawlessness, and rebellion were widespread and devastating. It had taken a lot of hard work, but he had finally put the world under his submission and led it down the road of prosperity. At times he had to be harsh, but his harshness had proven effective: after he had executed the billion people that inhabited the Lower Continent he was never again troubled with revolts.

The Emperor was filled with pride as he looked out over his capitol city. What a mighty city his capitol was - and to think that it was his and his alone! *He* reigned by the might of *his* power - and what a might that was! Peace, *his* peace, reigned all over the Empire. Justice, *his* justice, was equally measured out to all by *his* hand. *He* was the ultimate sovereign, the one who decided what was good and what was evil, and what an incredible sense

of power it gave him!

The Emperor's thoughts were interrupted by a loud explosion somewhere in the distance. Annoyed, the Emperor's hand reached for the telephone to find out who had had the nerve to disrupt his view when there was a second explosion.

The difference between the first explosion and the second was like the difference between a firecracker and an atom bomb. The first had interrupted his thoughts; the second rocked the world. The lights in the building went out, plunging him into darkness; the force of the explosion blew out the reinforced windows and sent shards of glass flying down onto the street below. The building heaved and began to buckle; the framework of his Tower seemed to bend to the breaking point.

Yet still the explosion deafened on! Solid ground began waving like water, and the gigantic skyscrapers that made up his city started collapsing, one after the other. Glass shards flew everywhere, and fires broke out in a dozen different places. Everywhere chaos and pandemonium rained, and yet the cause of all this was not in sight.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity had passed, the noise ceased. In the relative quiet the Emperor now heard wailing sirens: the emergency response teams had gone into action. Within seconds a generator in the Emperor's penthouse rumbled into action and the lights returned. As the Emperor staggered back into his chair and reached for the telephone to see who was to blame for this, the radio suddenly blared on and a robotic voice filled the room:

*"Attention. Attention. The number four reactor in the Greenfield Antimatter power station has exploded. This poses no danger to the inhabitants of this planet. All radioactivity has been contained. If you are in danger you have been spotted and the Emergency Response Team will be there momentarily to assist you. Repeat: Attention. Attention. The number four reactor..."*

With a glazed look in his eyes the Emperor set the telephone back on its cradle. So it had been the new antimatter plant! That

explained why there had been two explosions: the first one had been the destruction of the electronic cases that held the antimatter, and the second one had been the antimatter reacting with the atmosphere. That also explained why he could not see the explosion: why, that power station was clear over in --

He suddenly gasped. The *antimatter plant*! The thousandth of a gram of antimatter that was located in a normal warhead was enough to turn ten thousand square miles of land into radioactive dust. Entire *grams* were located in the Greenfield power plant. Why, there was easily enough antimatter in that station to crack the crust of the planet!

Crack the crust of the planet...No, it could not be! It *must not be*! If the crust of the planet was cracked, the vast underground reservoir of water would be released and its pressure would launch it into the sky. The enormous influx of water, combined with the dust of the explosion, would completely destroy the planet's fragile atmosphere and bring down the huge canopy of water that covered the planet and gave it its pink sky. The violent, swift insurgence of millions upon millions of tons of water – enough water to cover even the highest mountains – would completely obliterate every trace of his Empire as it rained down from the sky.

*Rain!* A worldwide flood that would destroy the planet! That was what his thorn in the flesh, that crazy, rebellious, doomsday-preaching Noah had been predicting for the past one hundred years. That was why he had built that silly, enormous wooden boat and had stocked it with every living creature from dinosaurs to cows. But surely, surely he and his God could not have been right. Surely God was not displeased with the Emperor's policies. Surely there must be some mistake...

As the Emperor looked outside, he noticed something: for the first time in the history his planet – in the history of our planet, for it was ancient Earth that he had conquered and ruled – it had begun to rain...

...and it didn't stop for forty days.

## Santa Claus

“SO WHAT do you think of Santa Claus?” my friend asked me.

I looked at him, confused. Bob and I were walking down an icy dirt road in the middle of January. For a reason I've never quite understood my large, bearlike friend enjoys being outside on days when even water cannot assume a liquid form. As for myself, I've always been a firm believer in the joys of the great indoors. How he convinced me to venture outside on such a cold day I'll never understand.

“Santa Claus?” I asked. “Hmmm. Well, for starters, he definitely needs to loose weight. All those extra pounds can't be good for his heart.”

“C'mon, be serious,” Bob replied. “Is he a good thing or a bad thing?”

“What do you think?” I asked.

“Well, he seems to have more character than Darth Vader, at least,” he replied. “He rewards good kids with presents and bad kids with coal. He appears on Christmas Day to give good gifts to mankind. You've got to admit he's got a lot going for him.”

“All true,” I replied. “But there's more to it than that, isn't there? Santa is more than just elves and presents and nasal-challenged reindeer. There's a dark side to Saint Nicholas.”

“I figured,” Bob replied. “What's the trouble?”

“Well, think about it,” I said. “Have you ever watched any of those TV Christmas specials?”

“Sure,” he replied, as we crunched through the snow. “Some evil force is threatening Christmas, and an enterprising hero has to find a way to save it.”

“How is Christmas put in danger?” I asked. “I mean, after all, how can you possibly threaten a holiday? Is an entire 24-hour period going to be struck from existence, never to be seen again?”

“That’s not a bad plot,” he said thoughtfully. “No, I think generally someone is trying to stop Santa from delivering presents.”

“Exactly,” I said. “Christmas has been equated with Santa Claus delivering presents. That’s all it is for millions of people – just a day for receiving gifts. Not giving them, even – just receiving them.”

“But isn’t that what the day is about?” Bob asked. “Not Santa, exactly, but it is the day that Jesus became man. Even the angels said something about good tidings, and giving gifts to men, and stuff.”

“True,” I replied. “Yet, of all those Christmas specials you’ve seen, how many even mention the real meaning of Christmas?”

“I think the Charlie Brown one touches on it,” Bob replied. “I’m pretty sure the kid with the blanket quotes from Luke.”

“Ok,” I said. “So you’ve got one that briefly mentions Christ. Out of how many?”

“A lot,” my friend admitted.

“Why do you think the world celebrates Christmas?” I asked. “Do you really think they’re praising God for offering His Son as a sacrifice for the sins of mankind?”

“Probably not,” he said. “But, thanks to Santa Claus, at least they are celebrating Christmas.”

“They’re celebrating something,” I said, “but I don’t think it’s Christmas. Maybe credit-card-debt day. But not Christmas.”

“It’s better than nothing,” he replied.

“But stop and think,” I said. “If there was no Santa Claus, or reindeer, or dancing snowmen, if there was only Christ and a manger in Bethlehem, isn’t it possible that people would actually celebrate Christmas, instead of Santa Claus Day?”

My friend thought a moment. “I just don’t know. They may not celebrate it at all,” he said.

“At least those who did would be rejoicing over something

that's real," I replied.



## Social Justice

MR. HERRINGSWORTH walked briskly into the drab concrete room in which his client, Eric Brooks, was already seated. A quick glance showed him that aside from his client, the dingy holding room contained only a small concrete table and two rickety plastic chairs. The policeman who escorted the lawyer into the room stepped outside and shut the door behind him.

The primly-dressed lawyer saw that his client had taken a seat in one of the chairs at the table and was holding his head despondently. Mr. Herringsworth calmly sat down opposite him and placed his leather briefcase on the table.

“You’ve got to help me, Bob!” his client said as soon as Mr. Herringsworth had taken a seat. “They’re threatening me with jail time – jail time! And me, as innocent as a lamb.”

“Of course,” the lawyer replied, as he opened his briefcase and rummaged through it. “All you did was – let’s see – ah, here is your file. You broke into a house, stole \$15,000 worth of equipment, burned the house down, ran over three police officers trying to escape, and caused a five-car traffic accident. Whatever possessed you to break into the home of a police officer, Eric? Couldn’t you have at least waited until they left the premises?”

“I didn’t know they were still home,” Eric said. “I was drunk at the time. You can put that in my case – temporary insanity. They’ll let me off for that.”

Mr. Herringsworth shook his head. “Just what were you trying to steal, anyway? Based on the list the police gave me it looks like mostly electronics equipment.”

“I was just trying to even things out a bit,” Eric replied. “They

had all kinds of expensive toys – insured, too, I bet. I just wanted a piece of it, that’s all. I’m sure that their insurance will pay them back. There was no harm done.”

His lawyer shook his head. “Your method is insane. Whatever convinced you that burglary was the right approach? If Officer Connors had preloaded his shotgun before you broke into his house we wouldn’t even be having this conversation. Your organs would have become a permanent part of his living room décor.”

Eric winced at the thought. “You’ve got to do something about that, by the way. See if you can prosecute him for breaking gun-control laws. Guns are dangerous – someone might get hurt! It’s just not safe out there for a burglar anymore.”

“I’m sure that the courts are very interested in taking guns away from police officers,” his lawyer replied. “That’s going to go over exceptionally well.”

Eric glared at him. “Fine, then. What would you have done, Mr. Moneybags?”

The lawyer leaned back in his chair and looked at him. “If you really want to have someone else pay for your big-screen TV then you need to approach the situation from the angle of social justice.”

“Social what?”

“Social justice! The fact that you have less than your neighbors is unjust, Eric – you’ve been wronged! Society has let you down and you’ve become a victim of circumstance. You need to talk to a few reporters and tell them how you are just trying to earn a meager living while the high-rollers down the street are living it up with huge TVs. Tell them that it’s not far that they have things that you don’t. Get the reporters to write stories on the huge gap between the rich and the poor, and the great unfairness of it all.

“With a little effort you could get a nationwide campaign going and form some special interest groups! The groups could then pressure politicians to increase taxes on the wealthy and give that tax increase to you – in the interest of fairness, of course. You can then use that tax increase to get the things that you could

never have afforded before.”

“That seems like a lot of work,” Eric said.

“But think of the benefits! If you had done it that way then you would have had the police power of the state behind you. If Officer Connors had refused to pay his taxes in order to fund your new TV the government would actually go into his house, arrest him, and take away everything he owned. Not only would you have your TV but the police would actually arrest anyone who tried to stop you from getting it.”

“Hmmm,” the burglar replied thoughtfully. “So instead of being behind bars – ”

“You would be at home right now, watching a TV paid for with someone else's money.”

“Beautiful,” Eric said. “This opens up whole new horizons! My car payments, medicines, insurance – ”

“You got it,” his lawyer replied. “You would have had everything paid for.”

“Wow. That's amazing! You mean to tell me that method actually works?”

“Think about it,” Mr. Herringsworth replied.



## Students

JARVIS UNIVERSITY was a hive of activity. The massive campus was built deep in the wilderness on a hundred acres of gentle green hills, a thousand miles away from any major settlements. Massive buildings hundreds of years old were neatly nestled into the landscape, almost seeming to be a natural part of it. Students were milling about – some enjoying the fine day, and others hustling to get to class on time.

Isaiah Long was walking to his mathematics class when he saw an old friend sitting on the campus lawn at a circular stone table. The figure, dressed in worn overalls and his trademark wide-brimmed hat, was intently reading a very thick textbook and seemed oblivious to his surroundings. Papers covered with mathematical equations and theorems were strewn haphazardly about the table, and a large collie dog was lying at his feet, sound asleep.

“Brice!” Isaiah called out as he approached the table. “It’s so good to see you, my friend! I haven’t seen you in ages.”

The individual turned around to see who had called out his name. “Ah, Isaiah!” he replied, standing up from the table to grasp his hand. “It is also good to see you. Here – have a seat!” he said as he picked up some papers and set them aside.

Isaiah sat down beside his friend and helped Brice straighten up the table. “I see you’ve finally shaved your beard!” Isaiah said. “That’s the first time you’ve been clean-shaven in what, a thousand years? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you without it.”

Brice grinned. “Things at campus are not the same as they are in space. They are more – civilized, perhaps?”

“So what brings you here, anyway?” Isaiah asked. “This is the very last place I would expect to find you. I thought you hated classes and studying – and especially mathematics!”

Brice laughed. “I never claimed to be a scholar. That is more your line than mine.”

“True,” Isaiah said. “I’m here studying history – particularly, historical analysis as it applies to economic patterns.”

“Wonderful,” Brice said, looking at the theorems textbook that his friend had laid down on the table. “I am sure that math is very useful in history classes, and that only my natural ignorance prevents me from seeing that fact.”

“You’d be surprised at how useful mathematical theorems can be when engaging in historical analysis! It’s very useful when plotting trends and analyzing economic patterns over time.”

“I knew it,” Brice said. “Life is really much simpler out among the stars. There is no economy on unsettled planets.”

“Which explains why you are studying – what’s that – applied relativity? That’s certainly not a field for beginners!”

Brice nodded. “I’m really struggling with it – this has to be the hardest thing I have ever done, including founding that colony on Omega Centauri IV. There is much here that I understand – that comes from spending so much time in the field – but the math behind it, yes, the math is hard. I try to avoid math, but I can do that no longer. I have avoided your world of studies as long as I can, but that time has ended.”

“I’m impressed!” Isaiah said. “For a thousand years we have been as different as day and night. I stay at home and read about the stars, and you spend your time traveling among them. You make the discoveries and I read about them in magazines. I’ve been all theory and you’ve been all practice.”

“I have not been mentioned in magazines that often, my friend – I am just one of many. There are thousands of us – millions – and I am just a small part of the effort.”

“You are much too modest! You don’t give yourself enough credit. I’ve read your reports, you know. Speaking of which – why are you studying here, anyway? Last I heard you were part

of a big expedition.”

“You must have heard of the Door,” Brice began.

Isaiah nodded. “Ah! You’re still trying to open it, aren’t you?”

His friend nodded. “That is all anyone is doing now. It has been an obsession since we discovered it five hundred years ago. I still remember the surprise it was.”

“I remember reading about it,” Isaiah said. “You’ve seen it, though, haven’t you?”

“I have seen it many times. Years I spent in vain trying to open it, but I failed like all the others. That is why I am here, learning. This is not my field, to be studying, but it must be done. I have explored the stars for thousands of years using technologies that I did not understand; I have now reached a point where I must understand what is going on behind the scenes if I ever hope to get through the Door.”

“So that’s it,” Isaiah mused. “But I still don’t understand. Why do you think that a course in applied relativity will help you?”

“The Door is a machine,” Brice said. “We are now quite sure of it. We thought at first that it might be a part of the world beyond science – we have found such worlds, you know – but we have proven that it is just a machine, and machines can be understood and used. We have learned that it links two universes together – ours, and another. It does this in a way that we do not understand, but it does it scientifically.”

Isaiah looked at the equations on the papers strewn in front of him and thought a moment. He was familiar with some of them (that came from his lifelong love of mathematics) but others were beyond his ability. His friend was clearly getting into deep waters. “And so you hope that, by studying spatial mechanics and relativity and so forth, that you’ll gain a greater understanding of that type of technology and will be able to use that understanding to aid in the effort to open the Door?”

“Yes, exactly,” Brice said. “I must understand what is going on. Alex,” he said, nodding toward the sleeping canine, “he does

not like all of this research so well. I think he would rather be back in space, on our ship. But this will end soon. I have been here four years now; another two years and I will be back in space.”

“I wondered about that,” Isaiah said. “Your dog is so much like you, you know. Is Alexander picking up very much of this?”

“Some. I do not think he is so interested, though. His knowledge is more than enough to be valuable in the field, and he is content with that. Alex is not much of a learner, really! It took a long time to convince him to learn to pilot our ship, and then he learned only because he knew it had to be done. Bookwork is not so much to his liking.”

Isaiah looked surprised. “You’re kidding! You can’t possibly tell me that you allow a dog to fly your starship!”

“Oh yes! Many of us do. They are quite smart, these dogs. You would be surprised! Sometimes they even have good advice. You really should get a dog, Isaiah. It would do you good. At the very least it would give you someone to talk to – someone that would actually talk back, unlike your books!”

“I’m not much of an animal person,” Isaiah said, laughing. “I just can’t imagine asking any animal to take a starship and run to the nearest space station for supplies.”

“That is because you stay here, in your world of papers and printed words. If you were out in the field you would learn to live in ways that you have not lived before. Reading books about the Door is nothing like actually seeing it with your own eyes. You know much more than I do about all of these things, but I have actually seen them myself, and you have not.”

“True,” Isaiah replied. “Together we might make a great team. In fact,” he said, his eyes twinkling, “I can even tell you what is beyond the Door.”

Brice thought a moment. “Man,” he said finally. “Man is behind the door. I do not know what that means, but I know that is the case. That is what is written on the Door.”

“That’s right. Do you know what else is written on the Door?”

“Not really,” Brice said. “I have been trying to open it, and

that is a technical problem. Deciphering what the door says – that is for scholars and linguists. I have heard that it does not help open the door, so I have not considered it to be important. It is just history, Isaiah, and history is not interesting to me. I prefer the future to the past – the past is finished, and the future is not.”

“I think you are greatly mistaken. What will you do once you open the door?”

“Go through it, of course.”

“Right. And what are you going to find when you go through it? Who will you be dealing with? What situation will you find? Does that not seem important to you?”

“I suppose,” Brice said slowly. “I had not really given it much thought.”

“Then let me give you a short history lesson, so you will be prepared. On the other side of the door, as you said, is Man. Man is an old creature – they date back to the Old World.”

“I have heard that,” Brice replied. “They are in the New World but that is not where they came from. They are an older species than that.”

“They are not the oldest, though,” Isaiah said. “Another race – the angels – they existed before Man. We don’t know anything about them, though – they don’t seem to live here. Do you know what happened to the Old World?”

“Not really,” he said. “I know it no longer exists – the Creator destroyed it and replaced it with this place where we live in today. I do not know why.”

“The Old World came first,” Isaiah said. “The Creator made it and planted a garden in it – a place called Eden – and formed the first Man and Woman and placed them in that garden. However, Man was not content with the Creator’s design, and chose to bring evil into the world. Through him the world became polluted, and the Old World was filled with disease and death and pain and agony. It was a terrible place.”

Brice shook his head. “I don’t understand. What is death?”

“Death is the final result of evil. It is what happens when a living creature shuts down and decays, and returns to the dust

from whence it came.”

“Dust?” Brice asked.

“Man was made from dust,” Isaiah explained.

“How odd,” Brice said. “They must be strange creatures. Do they get muddy when it rains?”

“I don’t really know. No one has ever seen a Man. I can’t really say.”

“Man sounds very bizarre,” Brice said. “Why would he choose to go against the will of the Creator?”

“I don’t know,” Isaiah said. “I cannot imagine what the Old World used to be like. It was certainly nothing like the one we are in now. When its time was over the Creator destroyed it and put this one in its place.”

“I’m glad of that. But – this Man – has he changed? If they are as bad as that then perhaps the Door was created to protect us from them.”

“Yes,” Isaiah said, “they have changed. They could not change themselves, so the Creator paid a very great price to redeem them. I don’t know the details – the Door did not say – but they were restored, and they now live with their Creator.”

“Do you mean to tell me that the Door leads directly to the dwelling place of God?” Brice asked.

“Yes,” Isaiah said.

“Wow. I did not know that.” Brice fell silent for a few minutes, thinking.

Isaiah looked at his watch. “I’m afraid I have to go or I’m going to be late for class. Now that I know you are staying here, do you mind if I look you up later? Maybe we can eat dinner together, or something.”

“Sure,” Brice said. He took a card out of his pocket and handed it to his friend. “Here is my contact information. Feel free to drop by anytime.”

“Thanks,” Isaiah said, as he took it from his friend. After bidding Brice farewell he disappeared into the air.

In the distance, hidden from view, a man stood in the shade of a large oak tree. He had heard the entire conversation between

Isaiah and Brice and was quietly laughing. “The best way to open the door,” he said to himself, “is with the key. I wonder how long it will be until they find it?”



## The Burglar and the Boy

THAT KID was the oddest person I'd ever met. I'd met some strange people in my life (that's the way life is), but that kid – he was a little different.

I met him back in the mid 2780's when the great jewel collection of Malthor the Wise was on loan to the Wisecarver Museum of Natural History. I thought that fabulous jewel collection was too big a prize for a thief like me to pass up, so I boarded the next ship to Mercury. After landing at Atom City I took a monorail to Sunbright, and once there I checked into a respectable hotel and began to do a little reconnaissance.

Back then Sunbright was a small town populated with friendly and easygoing people. It was easy to see that the local population was a quiet, happy bunch that didn't worry too much about things. I suppose you had to be that way if you were going to live in Mercury, protected from the fierce Sun by only a thin polarized electric field. Me, I'd be worried constantly that the power would go out and we'd all be baked to cinders, but I suppose that's why they live on Mercury and I don't.

The museum was a large building on the edge of town. It probably didn't get very much traffic in ordinary times but the arrival of the jewel collection changed everything. They were pretty packed that day, which gave me great cover to scout out the museum's security system. It really didn't have much of one; aside from a couple robotic droids and the standard alarm system there wasn't anything at all – not even so much as a single armed guard. I guess nothing ever happened in Sunbright.

I headed back to the museum late that night, after everyone

had gone to bed and the town was quiet. Days and nights on Mercury are very long and the jewel collection had arrived during one of Mercury's long nights – which, in my opinion, was perfect timing. I made it to the museum without being seen and began disabling the museum's security network.

Burglary was much harder centuries ago. It used to be that breaking into a building involved a lot of painful manual labor: you had to break windows, climb walls, and do all sorts of unpleasant things. These days it's all about knowing how security programs work and having the right electronic gadgets to trick them. Modern burglars tend to be computer programmers gone bad, since non-techie-types don't have the know-how or the patience to fight software programs. A lot of burglars that go straight end up with high-paying programming jobs, which maybe explains why there aren't as many of us as there used to be.

Anyway, I knew what I was doing and I had no problems breaking in. I'd spent a lot of time over the past few years writing software to overcome security systems just like this one, and that night it really paid off. I was able to fool the system into disabling itself while still thinking that it was still on; it would let me in without ever alerting a soul. Hey – if the guy in the basement of the museum was depending on his software to secure the place and didn't check things with his own eyes that was his fault, not mine.

Once inside the building I headed straight for the jewels. Malthor had amassed a priceless collection of gems back in his heyday: each enormous jewel was finely crafted and laid in an extraordinary, elegant setting. To those who knew about such things (and I wasn't one of those people) each jewel had a particular meaning associated with it, and the collection as a whole told some kind of story. Those jewels were highly sought after on the black market and I knew I would have no trouble fencing them.

I had almost opened the case when I was startled by a voice behind me. I whiled around and saw a little boy, not more than 10

years old, standing behind me. "Watcha doin'?" he asked.

I looked at him in surprise. "Why, I'm trying to steal the jewels in this case. What's it look like to you?"

"That's what I thought, but I wasn't sure," the little boy replied. "I'd never seen a burglar before."

What a strange creature. "Hey, kid, what are you doing in the museum at this hour of the night? Aren't you supposed to be in bed or something?"

"Yeah, but you woke me up. I was asleep over there," – he pointed to a bench a hundred feet away – "and there I was, sound asleep, when you came along and woke me up."

"But why were you sleeping there?"

The kid shrugged. "Why not? It beat sleeping on the floor."

I never would understand kids.

Before I could say anything else the kid spoke again. "Why are you trying to take those jewels? Do they belong to you?"

I shook my head. "Of course not."

"Then why are you taking them?"

Maybe, I thought, this kid wasn't fully awake yet. "Look at them! They're gorgeous. They're worth a fortune! Billions of people would love to have them. Wouldn't you?"

The kid shook his head. "Nope. They're not mine."

"Look, I know that, but wouldn't you be happy if they *were* yours?"

He thought a moment. "What would I do with them? I don't need any more rocks."

"But think how much they're worth! You could sell them and use the money to buy anything you wanted."

"I've got a dollar," the kid said. "That'll buy me some candy in the morning, and that's all I want right now. If I need something else I can just ask dad for it."

"Is your dad rich or something?"

"Oh no. He's just a security guard in a museum. But he's got enough to feed me and stuff and that's all you really need."

A light dawned. "What museum is your dad a security guard for?"

“This one.”

“Is that why you’re sleeping here tonight?”

He nodded. “Our house is being fumigated – we got termites – and so dad let me sleep here. Mom and the baby went over to the neighbors, but I thought being with dad would be more fun. I still don’t know why you want to take those jewels though. Don’t you have enough to eat?”

I knew I was getting sidetracked from the job but this kid’s way of thinking puzzled me. “Well, sure, but think of all the things I could buy if I had those jewels! I’d be a wealthy man.”

“So?” the kid said.

“What do you mean, so?” I asked. “I’d be able to buy everything I ever wanted! I’d be happy for the rest of my life.”

“You mean you can’t be happy without all those things?”

“I’d be happier *with* all those things, kid.”

He thought a moment. “That must be pretty sad, needing all those things to be happy.”

“What on earth do you mean?”

“Well, my dad told me that either you’re happy or you’re not. If you’re not happy then buying more things won’t change that. If you can’t be happy with what you’ve got then getting more won’t make you feel any better. My dad always told me that we were made to walk with God, and that nothing less can ever satisfy us.”

This kid was like an alien from Mars or something. “But look at those jewels! Aren’t they beautiful?”

The kid nodded. “Sure they’re pretty. But look, mister burglar, they’re just rocks. They look different, maybe, than other rocks, but they’re still just rocks. Why are you spending your life trying to steal rocks?”

“Not just any rocks, kid – *these* rocks. Which reminds me: I have a job at hand. Would you mind if I got back to what I was doing?”

The kid shook his head. “Nope, but I can think of two reasons why you might want to change your mind.”

I sighed. “I’m listening.”

“First, mister burglar, God doesn’t like stealing. When you

stand before God after you die you'll have to answer for stealing them and God won't be too happy about it."

"Ok," I said, "that's one reason. What's the other one?"

"Well, that's my dad over there with his robot, and he's supposed to guard those jewels. If you try to break into the case again he might not like it."

I turned my head and, sure enough, there stood the kid's dad, armed to the teeth, and next to him was a large, menacing security droid. "I came to check on my son," the father explained.

When I finally got out of jail I went into computer programming – I had a natural talent for it, and it seemed to be a better career choice than going around stealing rocks. I never did forget my encounter with that kid on Mercury, though. What does it take to satisfy a person, anyway?

I would probably never know.



## The Curse

THE PLANET was an absolute wreck. The whole landscape, as far as the eye can see, was shrouded in a black, acidic fog – the relic of some ancient disaster hundreds of years ago. Bare, jagged hills jutted out of the parched brown soil. The elegant terraces that used to cover the hills had fallen into complete disrepair. Only crumbling ruins remained of the mighty structures of steel and glass that had once formed sprawling cities. Everything looked dead, destroyed, and barren – the relic of a war long ago, perhaps, or of some mighty ecological disaster.

It was hard to say what had caused the devastation. I had discovered this planet a few years ago while looking for new source of iteria – a rare earth element that is highly useful in the production of antimatter. The probes I had sent out had flagged this star system as being of interest, so I came out to take a look at it. It turned out that the planet did not have what I was looking for, but it did capture my interest. At the time I was in too much of a hurry to follow up on my discovery, but when my life calmed down I came back to have another look.

The destruction that I found was simply immense – I had never seen an entire ecosystem destroyed before. The cities were in ruins, the fields were abandoned, and the atmosphere was slowly turning into poison. Thick, black pockets of some highly corrosive gas lingered in pools along the ground and seemed to eat alive the few ruins that remained. The sky was low, with fast-paced gray clouds covering an always-overcast sky. The air was hot and dry; it was breathable, but very unpleasant. I wore my spacesuit for excursions onto the surface and brought along my

own oxygen supply.

The only plants that I could find were dry, half-dead weeds that were trying to eke out a meager existence in a few protected cracks in the mountains. I found a few sources of water but they were all polluted by a black, oily substance. The planet was so dead that not even insects could be found in abundance. Sand, wind, and a strange black gas combined to erode any surviving structures at a remarkable rate.

I landed my ship near one area of ruins and stepped outside to take a look around. For two days I found nothing, but on the third day something happened.

I was in the heart of what must have once been a giant city, trying to pick my way through a ruined courtyard, when a figure loomed up through the smoke. It was difficult to see through the black haze, but the figure appeared to be a man – a very old and thin man, eaten up with disease. I don't know how long he had been watching me, but when I first noticed him he was already walking toward me. When he realized that I had noticed him he waved his bony arms and called out, but I could not hear him through my spacesuit.

I removed my helmet so I could hear him better. The atmosphere hit me immediately – it smelled terrible, and it hurt my throat to breathe it. If I wanted to talk to him, though, my helmet had to be off.

I walked toward him. “Hello there!” I said. “I’m Jones – a privateer. Who are you?”

The old man looked intently at me. “Nobody,” he said.

“What's that?”

“The curse has destroyed us all!” he said, wheezing and gasping for air as he spoke. “There is nothing left!”

“It looks like you are still here, my friend. I didn’t realize that there was anyone left alive.”

The man laughed – a short, harsh laugh, that sounded more like a wheeze. “There is no one left alive,” he said in a voice that sounded like a rusty hinge. It was hard to make out what he was saying. “Only the dead remain.”

By this time I had made it over to him. We both sat down on a broken stone column. I took a good look at him: he looked very old and was clearly in poor health. His bones looked brittle and his arms and legs were incredibly thin. His skin was pale and wrinkled, and he was very dirty. It must have taken all of his energy just to walk across the courtyard. I could only imagine what a lifetime of breathing that air must have done to him.

“Where do you live?” I said. “Surely you don’t live in these ruins.”

“There is no where else we can live,” he replied, as his gray eyes looked into mine. He stared at me constantly, as if I was the first person he had seen in ages.

“Are you the only one left?” I asked him.

The man shook his head. “There are a few others, but we are all dying. The young are all gone – they were the first to go. When we are gone the planet will be inhabited only by the dead.”

“What happened here?” I asked, as I got out my water bottle and handed it to him. He shook his head and pushed it away.

“It’s no use,” he said. “It’s too late for us. The curse has taken us – and it will take you as well!”

“The curse?”

“Look at all of this! All of this,” he said, gesturing feebly around with his arm, “was once a city. Now it has been broken. I was once a young man; now I am old. Decay, ruin, and death!”

The man had a wild look in his eyes, and I wondered about his sanity. How long could a man live in a ruined world and retain his mind? Were there really others, or was he the lone survivor of some terrible catastrophe?

“I don’t understand, Mr. – what is your name?”

“The dead do not need names,” he said softly.

“Sure they do,” I said. “Everyone needs a name, and you look quite alive to me.”

He sat there in silence and said nothing. I noticed that he struggled to breathe. I was struggling not to breathe; the atmosphere was more than I could stand. I wondered how long it had taken him to get used to it, and if he even remembered what

clean air was like.

“What’s this about the curse?” I said at last. “Was there a biological war fought here, or something?”

“The curse is greater than that,” he said. “It levels all; it destroys everything. It turns mountains into plains. It turns buildings into rubble! It turns rubble into dust! None can withstand it!”

“Was it a virus? A bomb? An invading alien army? Some new, unforeseen threat, perhaps?”

“The curse is old,” he said. “Very old.”

I sighed. “But when did it start?”

“Ages ago. We were cursed long before my fathers were born. We fought it as long as we could, but we lost. All of our efforts could not stop it. It destroyed everything we had built.”

The old man looked at me and shook his head. “You don’t believe in curses, do you?” he asked.

“Not really.”

The man laughed again – or coughed; it was hard to tell. “You came here in a starship, yes?”

“That’s right.”

“Suppose you where to leave that starship parked in a field for five hundred years. What would you find after you came back?”

“A ruined ship, probably,” I said. “Time would have eaten it away. It would be worthless.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Oh, you know – the wind, and the rain, and the natural decay of things. Time takes its toll on everything.”

“But why?”

“Why?” I looked at the old man again. “That’s just the natural order of things. Time eventually destroys everything.”

“And you think nothing of it!” he shrieked. “The universe is running down! Everything is being destroyed! Why should it be that way? Why should we be cursed so? Why must everything come to ruin?”

“It’s just how the universe works,” I said. “There is nothing unusual about it.”

“There is everything unusual about it! If you lived on a planet where the sky was pink with black stripes, you would think it was the most natural thing in the world. If the sky one day turned to a deep blue you would panic and think that the world was ending. The curse is only normal because it’s all you have ever known! Why should it be that way? Why?”

“You mean *that* is your curse? You believe that things running down is a *curse*?”

The old man sighed. “One day you will understand. You have not seen a civilization decay into the dust, but you will. All civilizations die. All people die. All buildings die. Nothing lasts – the curse destroys everything. It cannot be defeated. It cannot be stopped. All you can do is hope that it does not hit in your lifetime. But us – we were not so lucky.”

“That is an awfully depressing outlook to have on life,” I said. “You need to think a little more positively.”

“I watched as our institutions decayed; as the safeguards that protected our way of life were slowly eaten away. I watched as our families disintegrated, as our nations gave way to chaos, and as the atmosphere was poisoned. I watched as it was all lost. In fifty thousand years there will be nothing left to indicate that anyone ever lived on this planet.”

“Of course not,” I said. “That’s just the natural order of things.”

“And suppose you had been born with two heads,” he replied. “Would that, too, just be the natural order of things?”

He walked away into the distance, and then was lost in the smoke. I called out to him, but he did not respond.

\* \* \* \* \*

I saw him again the next day. “You are still alive,” I said.

“And so are you,” he replied.

“I still don’t know your name.”

The man sighed. “You can call me Jonas.”

“Jonas it is, then,” I said. There was silence for a few minutes,

and then I spoke. "You don't have to stay here, you know. You could come back with me in my ship. There is room on board for you and your friends."

Jonas shook his head. "What would be the point? Death will take us all in the end. There is no place we can go to escape death. It is useless to run or hide."

"Maybe so," I said, "but I know someone who has defeated it. I have met someone with the power to roll back this curse of yours – someone who has defeated death, and who has promised to help you, if you will let him."

The man looked at me, surprised. "And who can do this?" he asked.

"Let me tell you about him," I said.

## The Eye Doctor

I WAS WALKING across my lawn, trying to find where the paper boy had hidden my morning newspaper, when I spotted a friend walking by. "Hey there!" I said. "Have you seen my newspaper?"

"Funny you should mention that," he replied. "I went to the eye doctor just yesterday! I feel like a new man."

I walked over to him and shook his hand vigorously. "Wonderful! You'd been needing to go for ages. I'm so glad you finally took my advice."

"I am too," he said. "I had really put off going for far too long."

"So what did he tell you? Did he give you contacts? I don't see you wearing glasses."

"Actually," my friend said, "he didn't tell me anything."

"What's that?" I said.

"That's right!" he replied, nodding his head. "He didn't say a thing."

"I don't understand. Why not?"

My friend looked at me, puzzled. "Well, why would he?"

"Well, you did go to see him, didn't you? Isn't it traditional for the eye doctor to tell you something when you see him? How else are you going to know if you need glasses?"

"I suppose," my friend replied, "but I didn't actually let him look at my eyes. After all, I already knew that they were fine! There was no sense in bothering the doctor about that."

"But that's crazy!" I said. "Your eyes aren't fine – they're terrible! You're as blind as a bat! Why, just last week you –"

“Hey now,” he said, “bats have terrific vision. Do you know that they can catch mosquitoes in the dark? Can *you* do that?”

“I’m not talking about bats, Jeffrey! I’m talking about *your eyesight*. If you’re not going to let the doctor see you then why even go?”

“Oh, everyone should go see their eye doctor,” he replied. “It’s a good practice. I’m glad I went – they’ve got fascinating magazines in their waiting room, and you meet the most interesting people. I’m looking forward to going back next year. Hey, speaking of that, do you know I went to the dentist last week?”

“I don’t want to hear about it,” I said.

## The Last Meeting

JOSEPH PUTNAM was desperately fighting to stay awake. It was a tough challenge for him; he had risen from bed before 5am just to attend this meeting and it was now approaching midnight. Putnam had thought the meeting was an important one, but as the day wore on he wondered if it was even possible to find a bigger waste of time.

The Silmara Holding Corporation was having its quarterly board meeting today, and as a member of the board of directors Putnam was expected to be there. He probably could have gotten out of it, but doing so might have damaged his career and he had worked for too long to risk damaging his connections. He was already comfortably well off, but as wiser men have found, having a few million in the bank doesn't mean you couldn't use a few million more.

Putnam tried to get his attention back to what the speaker was saying. What's that? Oh, something about a merger – no, a hostile takeover, it seemed. The speaker was suggesting that they should purchase some corporation on Ganymede (did Ganymede have any corporations? he wondered) by purchasing all its stock. Once they had its stock, they could dismember the company, sell off its parts, lay off a lot of workers, and when it was all over they'd have made a profit of some upteen million dollars.

There was a movement on the table – Finney again. Putnam groaned; Finney seemed to object to everything. What was it this time? Something about the ethics of hostile takeovers and harm to the families of the people who are laid off. Finney, Putnam thought, just didn't get it: the purpose of life – and especially

holding companies – was to make money, and you can't make money by watching out for the little people. As he expected, Finney's motion was voted down. He wondered briefly how Finney ever managed to rise to the board of directors; he just didn't seem to have the guts to succeed. Where did people like him come from, anyway?

Putnam woke with a start; had he been asleep? He poured himself some more coffee and tried to wake himself up. When he was young he had no problem working all hours of the day and night, but he was in his late 50's now and his lifestyle was beginning to take its toll. He wondered how his family was doing; they were probably all in bed now – not that he ever saw them. He wished fervently that he had scheduled a vacation today so he didn't have to sit through this endless meeting.

Someone had stood up and was showing some sort of presentation; there were lines, and graphs, and some kind of text that was far too small to be seen. Putnam snickered; this guy obviously didn't have a single presentation skill to his name. Everyone knew not to put that much text on a slide; you had to keep it sparse to make it readable and keep people's attention. The presentation looked like it had been slapped together in an awful hurry. Putnam was tempted to stand up and tell him that if he couldn't put in enough overtime to make a decent presentation that he should find another line of work, but he was too tired to make the effort.

His thoughts briefly wandered. He'd really done pretty well: it had taken a lot of work and a lot of long hours, but he had a huge home, millions in the bank, and a sparkling resume. He was in good shape. It's true that his three marriages had bombed and he had no relationship with his kids, but hey – he was successful, and that was what counted. Right? Finney would probably disagree, but then Finney didn't have the bank account he did. You had to make sacrifices if you wanted to get ahead in life.

Outside the large glass windows of the conference room he saw a dark sky with twinkling stars. It was a beautiful night, but he had seen too many of them. What was he doing at work this

late? He fervently wished he was asleep in bed.

All the sudden his drowsiness left him instantly. Outside, a brilliant light began to shine: the sky light up as if the morning sun had risen, only this light was more piercing than any sunlight he had ever seen. He gasped and rose to his feet. What on earth was going on? Was this what a nuclear blast looked like? Horrible thoughts ran though his mind and he wondered if he was about to die.

However, a shockwave never hit. No buildings dissolved; the light just became brighter and clearer. He had never seen anything like it, and he found himself unable to tear away his gaze. Had the sun gone nova? He didn't understand. Far off – and yet not far off at all – he heard a strange, deep sound. He didn't recognize the melody but it chilled his bones and filled him with dread. He wondered what it meant and what was going on. Part of him hoped it meant the meeting was over and he could go home.

Everyone in the room was standing and yet was silent; each was looking out the window and gazing into the distance. Putnam noticed with surprise that Finney was gone; he wondered when he had left. Maybe Finney had finally lost his mind. He never did seem very sane; his only care seemed to be about living for Jesus – whatever that meant.

Someone shouted “Look at that!” Putnam turned, and was shocked to see all sorts of people flying deep into the sky, as if gravity had taken the day off. Putnam rubbed his eyes and looked again, and the image didn't go away: people by the thousands were *everywhere*. He would have thought this was proof he was dreaming if there wasn't a terrible feeling that something very bad had just happened. Were aliens abducting the entire population of Earth?

Putnam continued to wonder what was going on until he caught sight of something in the sky – a person of some sort. No, he suddenly realized, it was The Person. He was incredibly glorious; light emanated from him so fierce and hot that he could not bear to look upon him, and yet he could not tear his gaze

away. The Person's face was awful to look upon: it pierced his very soul and turned his heart to stone. Putnam felt himself die inside just by looking upon this Man, and it only got worse when the Man looked at him.

All at once he knew what was happening. Long ago, his mother had made him go to Sunday School and they had taught him that one day a man called Jesus would come back. Putnam didn't remember a lot of the details – he had no time for church – but he suddenly remembered something about a trumpet sounding and Jesus coming back from the sky and His followers meeting Him in the air. The world, he realized, had ended; this was the last day. The meeting was over, and he could go home!

Then reality hit him. The world couldn't end yet, he heard himself screaming. He wasn't ready! He still had another ten years before he could retire, and he wasn't Chairman of the Board yet. His house wasn't fully paid for, his stock options had not been exercised, and his boat was still being designed. He still had at least thirty years left in his life; how could the world end now?

Other thoughts began to enter his mind as the gaze of the Person pierced him. His wife! What had he done? All those years of caring more for work than for her, and now it was too late to do anything. He had worked so many late nights that knew the janitorial staff of his office better than his own kids, and now he could never make it right. He had never cared before, but he now saw how foolish he had been. Why hadn't he thought of these things before?

Images began to form in his mind. What else had his Sunday School teacher said so long ago? Something about being brought before a great white throne, where the books would be opened and he would be judged by what was written in them. He cringed at the thought; he had a feeling that the Person would be judging him along very different lines than his coworkers had. This Person was not interested in bank accounts but in kindness and love and obedience and sacrifice – things he thought were an utter waste of time.

There was something else, he remembered – something about

having your name written in a book of life. Putnam knew that his name was not, and that Finney's probably was. He had a feeling this was bad, but he didn't remember why – and then he remembered.

As the weight of everything piled upon him he began to be overcome with horror. What was going to happen to him now? He had never paid much attention to preaching; he had figured it was all a bunch of nonsense anyway. He never really expected the world to end, and he definitely did not ever expect to see a very real Jesus return to judge the world. He thought it was just a figure of speech or something; it wasn't real – not in the same way that hostile takeovers were real. But there it was, big as life, and it was now too late. He saw thousands of people outside in the air rejoicing, with multitudes joining them; for them this was a day to rejoice, but for him it was a day of doom – a fate worse than death.

He wished fervently that all this was just a bad dream – that he had just fallen asleep in that everlasting meeting, and that he'd wake up any minute now and find it all been a dream. Putnam ached to undo his past or cover it somehow, but it was too late for that. As he watched the scenes unfold outside he knew that this was no dream, but that very soon it would turn into a nightmare.

*“And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them.*

*“And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.*

*“And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works.*

*"And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.*

*"And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire."*

*Revelation 20:11-15*

## The Lost Graveyard

ZACHERY SNOW had been hiking in the coal country of West Virginia for the past three days. The hilly region he had been exploring was wild and unkempt; the forest was thick and the hills were rough and jagged. Washed-out gullies and sheer cliffs abounded, ready to catch the unwary off-guard. Overhead the sky was dark and overcast, and a chill wind cut right through Zachery's leather jacket. It had rained earlier that day and then stopped, but the sky was threatening to unleash a new downpour at any moment. Zachery could hear the thunder rolling in the distance; it didn't appear to be heading his way but it was hard to tell. All of the trees were dripping with water and the leaves and ground was soaking wet. A light fog clung to the ground.

Few people ever ventured this far into the hills – especially these hills. Zachery knew that someone had to own this land but he had no idea who it might have been. People had abandoned this area years ago when the coal mines gave out, and there simply wasn't a reason to live out here any longer. Animals abounded, but Zachery hadn't seen a person for two days.

He wasn't really looking for anything in particular. Zachery liked exploring desolate and abandoned areas, especially if they had some special meaning to him. His ancestors had lived in that area a generation ago and he liked to think of them as he climbed over the rocks. Here and there he would find some ruins, overgrown with weeds and creeping vines: a covered bridge foundation, a collapsed barn, and even the occasional rusted-out car. To him they were mementos of a simpler era – one that had passed long ago.

As he climbed up a hill his foot slipped on a wet rock. He reached out and grabbed a tree limb to steady himself, but the tree was dead and the limb snapped off in his hand. He tumbled down the side of the cliff and came to rest in a little clearing – one he hadn't noticed before.

After standing up and making sure that he was unharmed he stepped forward into the hollow. The grass was tall, but through it he could still tell that the clearing held a graveyard – a very old one, by the look of it.

*This must have been abandoned for at least a generation*, he thought. He stepped forward into the graveyard and used his machete to cut a path through the tall weeds. It was difficult for him to make out the moss-covered stones through the tall grass, but he could see that they were definitely set out in orderly rows.

Zachery stepped up the nearest stone and pulled the weeds off of it. He then took a handkerchief out of his pocket and used it to wipe the dirt and grime off the stone.

“Rachael Ford,” he read aloud. The inscription was almost worn off, but he could just barely make it out. “1817 – 1851. You would have been – hmmm – a little over 40 years old when you died. I’m older than that!”

He stood up and looked at the other stones. *It looks like there are about 30 stones in this graveyard*, he thought to himself. *I wonder if there used to be a church nearby. Perhaps this was some church’s graveyard a century ago.*

Seized by a sudden impulse that he could not explain, Zachery decided to bring some order to the long-forgotten graves. Working one at a time, he walked over to each headstone and cleaned it off. Some of them had crumbled from age and were impossible to read, but others were in fairly good shape. *Look at all these names*, he thought. *Ryan Ford. Richard Simmons. Jim Simmons. Toby Greenwood. Hunter Atkins. Who were these people?* He noticed that some appeared to be grouped in families, but others were by themselves. They all appeared to date from the early 19th century.

It took him about an hour to clean up the graveyard and make

the stones visible. When it was over he was hot, tired, and dirty, but pleased with his efforts. He sat on a large rock on the edge of the graveyard and looked over his work.

*I wonder how long it's been since someone has been out here,* he thought. *There's no sign that anyone has been out here for twenty years. I may be the first visitor this graveyard has had in my lifetime.*

He thought about what he had seen carved into the stones. *Five Fords that died in 1848; I wonder why. I wonder who these people were, and what they did, and what they were like. Most were farmers, I bet.*

As he rested from his labors, a low fog rolled in over the mountain and settled over the graveyard. He watched as it partially obscured the crumbling stones, the wet grass, and the weeds that he had just cleared off the stones. *Right there,* he thought, *are thirty people who have lived there lives and passed on. There is no one alive who remembers them, or even cares that they ever existed. All that is left of them are some forgotten graves on a forgotten hill – and soon even that will be gone, and it will be as if they had never existed at all.*

He stood up, wiped his hands on his pants, and faced the graveyard. “And how long will it be before I join you?” he called out. “How long will it be until I, too, become nothing more than a forgotten skeleton in a lost grave, obscured by time until every trace of my life on Earth has been lost?”

“Oh, it's not as bad as all that,” a voice said behind him. Startled, Zachery turned around and saw a middle-aged man approaching him. He was wearing a pair of overalls and a dirty white shirt; he had black hair, a black beard, and a kind, smiling face. “The name's Powell – Mason Powell,” he said, extending a hand.

“It's nice to meet you,” Zachery said, shaking his hand and introducing himself. “You surprised me! I didn't know that people live around these parts.”

“Oh, they don't anymore,” Mason replied. “They used to, though. This used to be the center of a thriving farming

community – mostly livestock, you know, but some tobacco. Penn Station was just five miles up the river, north of here; it's where they shipped out the coal. Aye, lad, those were the days."

"Wow, Mr. Powell. That must have been a long time ago! I've seen the ruins of the old covered bridge, but it must have been abandoned at least a century ago. I had no idea that a rail line ever ran through here."

"Oh, no, it wasn't a rail line. This was in the days before railroad, remember. Back then we moved good around on ships; we'd load our crops onto a barge, and it would sail up river to town. The Atkins family handled the shipping trade; the rest were farmers – except for Greenwood, who was the pastor."

"Toby Greenwood?" Zachery asked. "You mean the guy who is buried over there?"

"Oh yes," Mason said. "That's the one! He was a lively fellow – preached in a little country church just over there. There's nothing left of it anymore – it was just a simple wooden building, after all – but man, it would sure be packed when he preached! He had such fire and energy. Always a helpful fellow, willing to lend a hand. I think it was tuberculosis that eventually did him in. Had a smile and a cheerful heart right up to his last breath."

"I can't believe that any record of these people has survived!" Zachery said. "When my parents were children they lived in this area but they never mentioned anything about a church or a graveyard."

"Just because you haven't heard of them, Zachery Snow, doesn't mean that no one else has! All of these people have histories, you know. Take the Ford family, for instance. Most of them died in a terrible fire back in '48. There weren't smoke detectors in those days. When tragedy hit, it hit hard – but the community was there to lend a hand. Elias could never have survived the loss of his wife and children if we hadn't stepped in and helped him. The two of them were so close."

"We?" Zachery asked.

"And then take the Simmons family," Mason continued.

“Richard and Jim were father and son. Richard was a good father – loving, kind, very dedicated to the Lord – but Jim, now, Jim was a wild one. Jim’s mother had died in childbirth and Richard could never control him. He never would listen to anybody, and just about drove his parents crazy. Always hanging out with the wrong crowd, causing a disturbance, and stealing anything he could get his hands on. We all knew it was just a matter of time.”

“Time?” Zachery replied.

“Aye,” Mason said. “Jim eventually picked a fight with the wrong person, and he never did recover from his injuries. He died at the tender age of twenty-four – a young man, cut down in what should have been his prime. Imagine! Never did learn what it meant to live life. It broke his father’s heart. Richard never was the same after that – I think he took it personally.”

Zachery shook his head. “It’s just not possible that anyone remembers these people. You’ve got to be making this up. Right? Tell me, how can you possibly know all of this?”

“Easy!” Mason said. “Come here.” He walked over to one corner of the graveyard and Zachery, out of curiosity, followed him.

“This one is mine,” Mason said proudly, kneeling down and reading the stone. “Mason Anthony Powell, 1798 – 1860. I died of heart failure.”

“Oh,” Zachery said. “I see. I’m sure it happens all the time.”

“It does indeed,” Mason said. “I know lots of people who have died of heart failure. Nice chaps, most of them.”

“Look, Mason. I’ve been to many graveyards in my lifetime, and they all have one thing in common: they’re full of dead people.”

“Yup,” Mason agreed.

“And the thing I’ve noticed about dead people,” Zachery continued, “is that they stay in their graves. They don’t come out of their graves and hold conversations. They don’t go into town and vote for candidates. They just rest quietly and bother nobody.”

“Eh, in a manner of speaking,” Mason said. “Their bodies lie

quietly. Their souls go on to their reward – be it good or bad.”

“True,” Zachery said. “But the dead do not come out of their graves and hold extended conversations with the living.”

“Sometimes they do,” Mason said.

“Like when?” Zachery said.

“Oh, like when the Lord returns and raises them all from the dead at the end of time,” Mason said.

“You can’t tell me that the Lord has returned,” Zachery said. “I think I would have noticed.”

“Aye, that you would have,” Mason agreed. “I’m still looking forward to it, myself. I guess we both are, now!”

“What do you mean?” Zachery said.

“Well,” Mason said slowly, “do you remember a while ago when you slipped and fell down the slope?”

“I think so,” Zachery said.

“Did you notice that when you stood up afterward you didn’t feel sore, or bruised, or anything?”

“Come to think of it, I did. I was glad.”

“You were dead, you mean,” Mason said. “The fall killed you.”

“Oh,” Zachery said. “Are you sure?”

“Yup. Turn around and look over where you fell.”

Zachery turned around to see what Mason was pointing at, and saw his body lying at the foot of the mountain. He gasped. “I see what you mean,” he said. “That is, um, kind of unfortunate.”

“It’s not as bad as it seems,” Mason said. “All those people you were mourning over – why, every last one of them are still alive somewhere. The traces of a person’s life only last for a short while on Earth, and then they’re gone, until you can’t tell that they ever lived. The person, though – why, the person lives on, be it with the Lord or without Him. Where the person ends up living – that’s a choice that is made during life. But the person does go on living.”

“Come with me,” Mason told Zachery. “I’ve already told the Ford family about you; they’re looking forward to meeting you. We’ve got a lot of catching up to do – you’re a relation to me,

you know! That's why I wanted to be here when you died."

"Now wait a minute," Zachery said. "How could I have cleared away all those weeds if I was dead?"

"Someone had to do it," Mason said. "You seemed willing, and I wasn't going to stop you. It's kind of nice to have one's grave cleaned. Gives you a good feeling."

"Dead people can't clean graves!" Zachery said.

"What a pity," Mason said. "If you had known that an hour ago you could have saved yourself all that trouble. Are you ready to go?"

And with that, the two of them vanished from sight.



## The Professor, Lecture 1: The Perils of Theory

AT PRECISELY 8:00 AM Professor Grimes walked into his classroom. “Good morning students,” he said.

The students that were awake mumbled a response.

Professor Grimes walked over to his desk, set down his papers, and took a brief survey of the classroom. The auditorium held 450 people, which was precisely the number that had enrolled into his university-mandated history class. There were 36 people there today – about average, he thought.

“Class, please open your textbooks to Chapter 5. Today we are going to discuss the lost civilization of CZW-209.”

A few students got out their textbooks and turned to the chapter, but the rest continue to sleep. Taking no notice, the professor walked over to the chalkboard and began writing.

“For the past four weeks we have been discussing the various lost civilizations that we have discovered around the galaxy – mighty races that have left behind only ruins. Today we are going to discuss the most significant find of all: the lost race that once lived on the sixth planet in the star system CZW-209.”

“Wonderful,” someone muttered.

The professor ignored the comment. “The ruins of this lost race were not found until two hundred years ago largely because no one considered that someone might have lived in that part of the galaxy. There are no histories of ancient peoples migrating to that area, so as far as we know this race must have been indigenous to the planet.

“Thousands of archaeologists have traveled to this remote world in the past two centuries in order to uncover the history of

this forgotten people. When the world was first discovered it was utterly devastated: there was not a single microbe still alive on its surface. Our knowledge of this people comes primarily from the ruins that cover the surface of the sixth planet in the system.”

Professor Grimes stopped writing on the blackboard and looked around the room. Jackie, his star student, was furiously writing down his every word. A few other students were making a handful of notes, but the rest were sound asleep. Grimes reflected coldly that they would not be sleeping when he handed out their end-of-semester grades!

He cleared his throat and began again. “The people – pay attention now, class – the people that once lived on this planet were by far the most advanced of all the ancient indigenous cultures. Archaeologists have found evidence that these people had mastered secrets such as genetic engineering, digital computers, fusion power, and even anti-gravity. At its peak their civilization was much like ours was five centuries ago. An amazing network of airports and roads has been – ”

A hand shot up. “Yes, Steve?” the professor asked.

“Why do archaeologists care so much about roads?” the student asked. “So they could make a road. Who cares?”

Professor Grimes resisted the urge to throw an eraser at the student. “Roads,” he said in his most crisp tones, “are important because they reflect the extent of a society’s development. Briefly, a society will only build roads to connect important locations; an abundance of roads indicates a prosperous planet.”

“Oh,” the student said while trying to stifle a yawn.

The professor continued. “The sixth planet in the star system CZW-209 was a well-populated planet, even by today’s standards. At its peak it is believed to have housed more than ten billion people, with some cities housing over twenty million. There is evidence that at one time satellites orbited the planet and were used for communications, weather monitoring, and global positioning. As far as we can tell they had all the resources to begin colonizing their star system.

“So, one might ask, why did their civilization collapse?” The

professor looked at his class. “Anyone?”

No one said a word. There was no sound at all, except a gentle snoring that emanated from the back of the room. Professor Grimes shook his head and continued.

“That was the key question that so puzzled the world of academia for two centuries: what – or who, as the case may be – led to the demise of this prosperous and advanced world? This remained a mystery until the unknown language of the planet was translated, but once that was accomplished the reasons became clear.”

“The reasons are – ”

A voice from the middle of the room interrupted the professor. “Will this be on the mid-term exam?”

He stopped and looked around, trying to spot the student that had so rudely interrupted him. “Of course it will; now sit up and pay attention. Hmmm – where was I – the reasons. Of course.” He resumed writing on the chalkboard.

“The denizens of this world made a very elementary mistake – a mistake so severe that it led to the complete extinction of all life on their planet. Very simply, they neglected to note the difference between theory and practice.”

“For instance, to eliminate gun crime they simply decided to outlaw guns: no guns, no gun crime. Law-abiding citizens turned in their weapons but, to their astonishment, criminals did not. This law had the brilliant effect of making sure that only criminals had weapons, a fact that they used to their advantage. Gun crime went up 300% in two years because criminals could finally burglarize residences in peace, knowing that they were safe from gun-toting home owners!

“Similar logic was used in areas of foreign policy. In an attempt to save the planet the nations of the world decided to sign a treaty banning the most dangerous weapons of the day – specifically, chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. They believed that by signing this piece of paper all of these weapons would vanish overnight, leading to unbridled peace and harmony. Instead, the honest nations destroyed their weapons and the

dishonest ones kept them, a fact that they, used to their advantage. It only took a few years for the dishonest nations to wipe the honest nations right off the map.”

“Cool,” someone whispered, leading to snickers in the classroom. The professor resisted the urge to evict the student from the class; his time was almost over anyway.

“As you can see,” he continued, “this race’s grasp on the difference between theory and practice was somewhat tenuous at best. Their theories were excellent, but when they put them into practice it led to disastrous results – and by then it was too late to do anything about it.

“The most devastating example of this was their ban on testing weapons. The surviving nations of the world decided that they could prevent the rise of even more dangerous weapons by simply passing a law. Instead of forbidding nations from building weapons (a treaty no nation would sign), they instead passed a law forbidding nations from *testing* new weapons. They thought that since nations couldn’t test weapons they wouldn’t be likely to develop them in the first place.”

One student raised her hand. “That makes sense to me, professor,” she said.

Professor Grimes looked at her sternly. “Tell me, Marica. Suppose you really, really wanted to sleep through this lecture, but your professor said you could not. If you were an unscrupulous student with no regard for your end-of-semester grade, what would you do?”

She thought a moment. “Sleep through it anyway?”

“Exactly,” the professor said, motioning toward his students. “You’d fall asleep anyway. The nations of this planet weren’t allowed to test their weapons, so they just skipped that part and developed them anyway.”

“How could you do that?” she asked.

“With computers,” he responded. “They developed computer simulations that predicted how their new nuclear weapons would respond – or so they thought. Then, when the simulations told them what they wanted to hear, they built these weapons by the

millions.

“It was only a few years down the road that one particularly aggressive nation decided to invade its neighbors, and without even a declaration of war it launched these potent new weapons on cities all over the planet. They thought that the weapons would have only a limited effect, but they were quite wrong.

“You see,” he said, “the potency of this new class of nuclear weapons was far greater than any simulation had predicted. They thought that the new weapons would release radiation without a devastating blast, thus killing the people but leaving the buildings intact. Unfortunately, what they did not realize was that the weapons would ignite a chain reaction with an element in the soil of the planet, thus bathing the entire planet in hard radiation. The radiation died down in a few days, as they knew it would, but not before it had killed every last living creature on the planet.”

The bell rang, triggering a sudden rush for the door. “Ok, class, our time is over for today,” Professor Grimes said. “Remember, always test your theories – and read Chapter 6 for next week!”



## The Professor, Lecture 2: The Perils of History

THE LEGENDARY Professor Grimes did not make it to class that morning until 8:37 AM – more than half an hour after his history class started. The professor whose lectures had done so much to cure insomnia in countless students had been ill for the previous two weeks. During his absence he had, with great reluctance, turned his class over to a new substitute teacher by the name of Marvin Hampton. Today the professor had finally started feeling well enough to return to his classroom.

No one took any particular notice of his arrival as he took a seat toward the back of the room, between two sleeping teenagers. There were about 150 students in a large room that could seat 450, which was far more than normal. Professor Grimes suspected that the midterm grades he had given out were having their desired effect.

As he took his seat he noticed that Marvin was wrapping up his lecture.

“In summary, class, the causes of the Alconians' unfortunate demise are relatively simple. The nation had flourished until, like many others, it became entangled in a trade dispute with their powerful southern neighbor. This dispute – ”

A student piped up. “Excuse me, but what southern neighbor was that?”

“It was Kranjovia, Steve. Kranjovia. This dispute eventually led to a protracted war that seriously weakened both countries. The expense of the war – ”

“And the war lasted how long?”

“Fourteen years, Steve. Now please be quiet – let me finish,

and then you can ask questions. The expense of the war drained the treasury, which forced Alconia to raise taxes. The higher taxes damaged the popularity of the current administration, which – ”

“It did what?” Professor Grimes asked.

“I said – ” and then Marvin saw who had asked the question. “Oh, hello, Professor. I didn’t see you come in. I said that the higher taxes damaged the popularity of the current administration.”

“I see,” Professor Grimes replied. “Why?”

“Um, well, obviously, because the Alconians didn’t like higher taxes.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know exactly,” Marvin replied, “that wasn’t mentioned in the chapter. I would be glad to look it up for you if you’d like.”

Professor Grimes said nothing.

Marvin turned around and began writing on the blackboard. “As I was saying. Mass discontent was further aggravated when the Alconian government began nationalizing industries, seizing land, and devaluing the nation’s currency in order to raise more funds to finance the ongoing war.”

“You mean when it began stealing from its citizens,” Professor Grimes corrected.

Marvin stopped writing and turned around. “Excuse me?”

“Never mind,” he said. “Go on.”

The substitute teacher resumed his writing. “The unrest that this caused led riots all over the country, which a few generals capitalized upon to launch a coup against the reigning political system. The country was soon embroiled in a fierce civil war that further devastated the economy. At this point the weakened nation was easy prey for its foreign enemies, who invaded the land and divided what was left of it – is something wrong, Professor Grimes?”

“Everything is wrong,” he said. “Are you sure you read the chapter?”

“What chapter?” a voice said from the back of the room.

“Were we supposed to read something?”

No one answered the student. “I’m quite – that is – yes, I did – of course,” Marvin replied.

Grimes shook his head. “I find that hard to believe, Marvin. You have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Um, that is – excuse me?”

“I said you have no idea what you are talking about. Where on earth did you hear such utter rubbish?”

The classroom grew very quiet. Four students actually stopped snoring.

“What – that is, what do you mean, Professor Grimes? I was not aware that the facts of the situation were in dispute.”

“I’m not talking about the facts, Marvin. Have you never realized that facts don’t speak for themselves?”

The substitute teacher took a step back. “Of course! That is, no. I mean, I’m afraid that I don’t understand.”

“Think about it,” the professor said as he stood up out of his chair and unsteadily walked toward the front of the room. “Is history nothing more than matter in motion to you? You lecture so blithely about mass discontent and trade disputes as if these things were as much natural forces of nature as the tides. We’re talking about people here, Marvin!”

“I’m aware of that,” Marvin replied. “It is a fact, however, that the Alconian people did get into a trade dispute with Kranjovia. I fail to see why you are disputing that.”

“How do you spell Kranjovia?” another student asked. “That’s going to be on the test, right?”

Both professors ignored him. “Of course there was a trade dispute,” Professor Grimes said. “But that’s a gross oversimplification. What caused the trade dispute in the first place? Was it just one of those things that happen, like a tree limb falling on your car and crushing it in the parking lot, or was it caused by greed and envy and a lust for power?”

Marvin shook his head. “I have no idea, Grimes. What possible difference does it make?”

“It makes all the difference in the world!” Grimes said. “You

have completely failed to mention any personal responsibility on the part of anyone. Yes, there was a war – which was launched when one group of people decided they wanted something that belonged to someone else, so they invaded their neighbor to steal it. Yes, there was mass discontent, which happened just after the Alconians realized that their government had taken away their livelihood and had left them all to starve to death.”

“The government had no other choice,” Marvin said. “They could no longer afford to pay their bills, so they had to take drastic measures to ensure the future of their country. There was nothing that could be done.”

“And that certainly worked out very well, didn’t it?” Professor Grimes asked.

“As well as could have been expected,” Marvin replied. “I still don’t understand you. This is a simple case where history just marched on.”

“Tell me something, Marvin. Suppose someone were to steal your car. Would you just chalk that up to history marching on and move on with your life?”

“That’s different. Cars are stolen by unfortunate, misguided human beings. There’s no history at work there.”

“And what is history caused by – sunspots?”

The bell rang, and the class got up and began filing out the door. Marvin spoke up. “Read Chapter 54 for next week, class. We’re going to study – ”

“Sunspots,” Grimes muttered, his eye fixed on Marvin.

## The Professor, Lecture 3: The Perils of Translating

DR. GRIMES was sitting in his dimly-lit office late one night, grading papers, when he heard a knock on the door. “Come!” he said.

The door opened, and a thin, wiry student stepped cautiously into his office. Dr. Grimes thought that he had the appearance of an unmade bed; his black hair was standing up in all directions, he was rough and unshaven, and his jeans and T-shirt looked like they hadn't been washed in a week. “Hello?” the student said as he walked into the office, nearly tripping on his untied shoelaces.

“Henry!” the professor said, instantly recognizing him. “What on earth are you doing here at this hour?”

“I've come for my appointment,” he said. Henry walked into the room, set his bag of books by the professor's worn desk, and plopped into a very tired chair. “Remember?”

“Appointment! Young man, that appointment was six hours ago. Six hours ago!” Dr. Grimes said, turning a faint shade of red. “Where have you been – and shut that door! Oh, never mind, I'll get it.”

“I just got a little busy, I guess,” Henry replied, as Dr. Grimes walked over to his office door, shut it, and then returned to his seat. “You see, I was – hey, what's that?” he asked, pointing to an object in the corner.

Over in the corner of the office sat a steel bowl in a tall, thin metal pedestal. Something inside it was burning, and a thin stream of smoke was curling up from the bowl to the ceiling, where it was sucked into a ventilation shaft.

“That,” the professor said, “was a student's term paper. That

paper was an absolute disgrace! The very thought that a paper that had existed on the same planet as – why –” The professor gritted his teeth, clenched his fists, and then let out a long breath and sat back down in his chair. He paused for a few seconds, trying to regain his temper. “It had to go,” he said. “I had to burn it. There was just no other choice.”

“Wow,” Henry replied. “I thought you just burned all term papers out of tradition, or something. Do you mean that some students actually don't get back an envelope full of ashes?”

“You're getting off the subject,” Dr. Grimes replied. “We are here to talk about your grades. Frankly, young man, you are in trouble. Do you realize that – ”

“All of that is going to change,” Henry said. “That's why I am here. See, look at this! I've got this term paper well under control.” He reached into his tattered book bag and took out a sheaf of papers, which he handed to Dr. Grimes. The professor gingerly took the stained, sticky papers from Henry and began looking through them. “What's this?” he asked, puzzled.

“That,” Henry said proudly, “is the result of many hours' hard work. I've been listening to you, professor; I've been taking your every word to heart. You've said over and over that we need to use original source material. I've heard you say a dozen times that we ought to go right to the source and form our own opinions. Isn't that right?”

“That is certainly a good idea,” the professor agreed, as he browsed Henry's paper. A smashed spider was sprawled across the center of one of the pages; the professor gingerly peeled it off. “I always try to do that myself. It's much better to find out what was actually said instead of hearing someone's opinion of what was actually said.”

“Exactly,” the student said. “Exactly. So when you assigned us to write our term paper I knew I had to go right to the source. My friend Jimmy thought I was crazy to use original Ahmanyen documents as source material. But me – I knew better. I needed that edge to keep my paper out of the fires of doom,” he said, looking at the burning receptacle in the corner. “I knew that if I

used the original documents I could get the edge that would put my paper over the top. That would get me a guaranteed A for sure.”

Dr. Grimes looked at the ragged student with a mixture of surprise and admiration. “But the original source documents for the Ahmanyen culture are in Ahmanyen. That is a very difficult language to learn.”

“Not for me it wasn’t!” Henry said. “I had already taken three years of it – I am a linguist, you know. I’m actually getting a degree in the Ahmanyen language.”

“I had no idea,” Dr. Grimes said. “I congratulate you. That is a very challenging language; it took me ten years to become fluent in its various dialects.”

“So professor, I’ve gone back and retranslated some original source documents from the Ahmanyen culture. I’m basing my paper on those documents, drawing directly from the original sources, just as you suggested. That way I know that what I’m getting is totally accurate. My paper is going to be way better than everyone else’s!”

“And this is your paper?” Dr. Grimes asked, holding up the document as he tried to get it unstuck from his fingers.

“Oh no,” Henry said. “That is my source document – I just finished it last night. It is a translation of a key document in Ahmanyen history. You can’t imagine what a poor job others have done of interpreting their culture! Going right to the source was definitely worth it.”

While Henry sat in the rickety wooden chair and gloated, Dr. Grimes took a closer look at his paper. After reading it for a few minutes he began to frown, and the longer he read it the darker he looked. “Where on earth did you get this?” he asked, after he had finished reading the last page.

“In our library,” Henry said. “They have a whole collection of original documents. The one that document is based on looked the most interesting, so I picked it.”

“You are basing your entire paper – your entire term paper – on this document?” the professor asked.

“Of course! It's completely different from all the others. There is material in that paper that just can't be found anywhere else.”

Dr. Grimes laid the paper down on his desk and looked at the student. “I'm sorry to tell you this, Henry, but the document you translated is a forgery.”

“Ok,” Henry said slowly.

The professor cleared his throat and looked right into Henry's eyes. “This document surfaced about twenty years ago. I was part of the group of scholars that was assigned to examine it. It was a very crude forgery, actually; the paper was from the wrong period, it used the wrong Ahmanyen dialect, and its history was highly suspect – to say nothing of its many inaccuracies. This document has been a known forgery for two decades; I'm certain that the library has it marked as such. Why did you think it was genuine?”

“I did see a notice attached to it,” Henry said, “but I didn't pay it much attention. Its contents were so interesting that I knew I had to use it in my paper. It has some really amazing claims! I'm surprised it hasn't turned the entire field of study on its head.”

“Henry, this is a forged document! All its claims are bogus.”

Henry shook his head. “I'm not that bad at my language studies, professor. I did a first-rate job of translating that – I know I did. I'm absolutely certain that I translated it correctly.”

“You may have done a fine job of translating it, Henry, but the document that you translated was worthless. You can't base your paper on falsified material!”

“There's nothing falsified about it, professor! My paper does a terrific job of quoting that document, and my translation is outstanding. I'm properly sourced and everything! This is the best paper I've ever written.”

“Let me try this again,” the professor said. “Maybe I'm not being clear. Do you see this paper?” he asked, holding up the student's paper with a pair of tweezers.

“Yes,” Henry said.

“This paper is a translation of an Ahmanyen document,” he said slowly.

"That's right," the student agreed.

"That document is a forgery," the professor said. "Nothing it says is accurate."

"Right," the student said. "I understand."

"You translated a falsified document," the professor continued. "Your information is all wrong."

"Nonsense," the student said. "My translation is perfect! I defy anyone to produce a better translation."

Dr. Grimes turned green. "But your translation doesn't matter if what you are translating is worthless!"

"My quotes are great!" Henry said. "Just wait and see! I'm using proper quotation syntax and everything. This will be the best paper on Ahmanyen agriculture that you've ever had."

"Wait a minute," Dr. Grimes said, as Henry took the paper and placed it back into his backpack. "What is the paper on?"

"Ancient agricultural techniques," Henry said proudly. "We could do any civilization we wanted, but I picked Ahmanyen as a specialty. Their history is fascinating."

"I don't teach agriculture," Dr. Grimes said. "I teach alien civilizations – CIV 410, CIV 440, and CIV 485. Alien agriculture is taught by Dr. Kirby."

"Right," the student said. "Dr. Kirby."

"I'm Dr. Grimes," the professor said. "I'm not Dr. Kirby."

"Oh," the student said. "Sorry about that." He picked up his book bag and left, leaving Dr. Grimes alone in his office, holding his head in his hands.



## The Professor, Lecture 4: The Perils of Sympathy

DR. GRIMES was sitting on an old campus bench one cold, windy day. The sky above him was overcast and low; the first snow of the season was predicted to fall that afternoon. Students hurrying to their classes were wrapped up in thick coats, but Dr. Grimes seemed oblivious to the subzero temperatures; he was sitting on a bench, wearing green slacks and a thick woolen sweater, reading the morning paper. Many people asked him why he was sitting outside on such a bitter day, but his only reply was that he would not let a thing as puny as the weather drive him inside.

As he sat there, quietly reading the local news, a student that was walking by stopped and spoke to him. “Terrible tragedy, isn’t it, Dr. Grimes?”

The elderly professor laid down his paper and eyed the student that had interrupted him. He recognized him as one of his students; he was enrolled in the professor’s ancient civilizations class. Sam was a fairly quiet person; the thin young man sat in the back row and caused no trouble. The only quality that stood out about him was his ability to stay awake through Dr. Grimes’ lectures – an ability for which Dr. Grimes was grateful.

“What’s that, Sam? I don’t follow you. What’s a tragedy?”

“Oh, you know – the murder. Mary whats-her-name and her children. It just really tears your heart, you know?”

The professor thought a moment. “Oh – I remember now. You’re talking about Mary Byers, aren’t you? Isn’t she the divorced woman that went through her house and shot all of her children before running off with her boyfriend? Yes, yes, that is

quite a tragedy. I think they arrested her a couple weeks ago – they found her and her boyfriend on some island somewhere.”

“They did,” Sam said, nodding in agreement. “It’s just such a sad situation. Your heart really goes out for her, you know?”

“For her?” Dr. Grimes asked, puzzled. “You mean Mary?”

“Oh yeah. I read in the paper this morning that she really loved her children, and she just really misses them. This has got to be so hard for her.”

“This is hard for her?” Dr. Grimes repeated. “Do you expect me to believe that she loved her four children as she hunted them down and murdered them?”

“Yeah. I hear she’s having to undergo grief counseling, to help her through this rough time in her life. I’m glad the prosecuting attorney is so understanding. This is a hard thing for her to go through.”

“I certainly do see some tragic elements,” the professor said. “I take it the prosecutor is not pursuing the death penalty.”

“Oh no, professor. That just wouldn’t be right. She just couldn’t take the stress of having kids anymore, so she made the best decision she could. What she really needs is our help and understanding.”

“What she really needs,” Dr. Grimes said crisply, “is to be hung by the neck from that tree over there until she is dead.”

“What?” the student said, shocked. “That’s terrible!”

“I’ll tell you what is terrible,” the professor said angrily, as he stood up and tossed his newspaper into a nearby trash can. “What’s terrible is a society with so much love for evil that instead of punishing crime they offer counseling to help murderers overcome any guilt or remorse they might feel for brutally taking someone else’s life. What’s terrible is a society filled with ‘understanding’ toward a mother who murdered all of her children so she could run off with her boyfriend, but yet feels no compassion for the children that were actually killed.”

Sam looked at him, open-mouthed. “Man, Grimes, are you ever out of it. Where’s the love in that?”

Dr. Grimes looked his student directly in the eye. “Love, Sam,

does not involve chasing your own children through your home and murdering them so that you can go have an affair with someone. Love is not telling that woman she made the right decision and just she needs to move on with her life. I feel great compassion toward the children that she brutally shot and left to die – compassion and a yearning for justice. That mother richly deserves to have done to her what she did to her children.”

“That’s terrible,” Sam said. “I don’t know how you can even think that way.”

“Maybe I want to see the victims of crimes avenged instead of ignored. Or maybe I want to see crime punished instead of patronized.” With that, Dr. Grimes walked off, leaving a shocked student behind him.



## The Rescue

### PART 1

“YOU CRAZY teenagers are both going to be killed!” Jason Pratt said. “Don’t you know that Kadambari is a closed star system?”

Matt and Harry Norton ignored him. The two of them carefully picked him off the ground, laid the injured man on the stretcher they had brought with them, and secured him to it. They then each lifted one end of it and began running across the airfield to their starship, the *Isabella*. Overhead a canopy of stars glittered in the blackness of space, and in the distance other asteroids could be seen – but no pursuers, yet.

It was difficult carrying Jason to the *Isabella*. Gravity on the small, unnamed asteroid upon which they had found him was barely enough to keep their feet on the ground. Each step sent them soaring 20 feet in the air, and it was all they could do to keep from losing their balance and spilling the badly injured man onto the ground. They could hear Jason’s groans over their suit radios every time they took a step.

“I knew we should’ve brought magnetic boots,” Harry told his brother Matt.

“This isn’t an iron asteroid,” Matt replied. “It wouldn’t have made any difference. This asteroid’s mineral composition –”

“You should never have come in the first place,” the elderly man repeated. “I’m very glad you did, but it’s much too dangerous. What on earth are you kids doing here?”

“We’re rescuing you, of course,” Harry said. “You didn’t really think that we would leave an old friend like you here for

the Kadambari Army to find, did you? They've been hunting for you for three days now – ever since you crashed your escape pod into this forgotten asteroid. I'm surprised you're still alive."

"Alive is a generous term for it. I've lost track of the number of bones that I've broken. You kids didn't happen to bring any medical supplies with you, eh?"

"That would have been another good thing to bring," Matt reflected. "As a matter of fact, we were kind of in a hurry to leave."

"Wonderful. I'll try to avoid passing out from pain."

"We're almost there," Harry assured him. "The ship is only 200 feet away. We'll have you on board and will be out of here within two minutes, tops."

"How did you ever find me?" Jason asked.

"I have some friends in the Space Corps," Matt replied. "They gave me your transponder code, and I was able to track you down by searching for it."

"I'm surprised that the transponder is still working," Jason said. "But I still don't understand. Why would they help you rescue me? Isn't our government trying to pursue normal trade relations with the Kadambari right now?"

"I have no idea," Harry said.

"As a matter of fact," Matt said, "the government of –"

"Hurry up, Matt, and open the door – you've got the remote."

As the two brothers ran up to the ship, Matt took a remote out of his pocket, aimed it at the small craft, and pressed a button. A large door in the side of the ship slid open. The two rushed in and set Jason down inside the cargo hold, which was a small, empty metal room about ten feet on each side. Directly behind the cargo hold were the engines; in front of the cargo hold was the pilot's cockpit and instrument panel.

Harry stayed in the cargo hold with Jason while Matt closed the door and leaped into the pilot's seat. He began to power up the ship and prepare it for an immediate liftoff.

Harry strapped Jason's stretcher down to the floor. "This isn't actually a luxury spaceliner," he said, apologizing.

“It looks pretty good to me,” the old man replied. “I’m thrilled just to be here.”

“The takeoff is going to be a bit rough,” Matt shouted from the cockpit as the ship’s engines began to whine. “We’re kind of in a hurry.”

His point was illustrated a few seconds later when the ship leaped off the asteroid and hurtled into space. Harry saw Jason wince in pain at the sudden acceleration, but there was nothing he could do to help him – not until they left Kadambari territory.

“How did you get in this mess, anyway?” Harry asked. “Matt and I learned three days ago that you had run into some trouble, but that’s all we were able to find out.”

“Oh, well, it was just one of those things,” Jason said. “I planted a church here twenty years ago – before it was a closed system, you know.”

Harry nodded. “I remember. But that was twenty years ago, and you’ve been retired for ages. You even sold the company you built.”

“Well, yes, but I’ve kept in touch with the Kadambari Christians sporadically over the years, as we had the chance. It’s not easy getting messages in and out of Kadambari – believe me, it’s not – but it’s possible, if you’re gutsy and have nerves of steel. At first they were doing pretty well, but over time things had started getting really bad. Things had become so desperate that it began to look like they wouldn’t survive, so I decided that something had to be done. Since no one else could help them I decided to pay them a visit and bring what I could – medical supplies, food, and copies of the Scriptures.”

Harry shook his head. “How on earth did you even get inside the system? The Kadambari Army is not known for its love of outsiders – especially when they are uninvited guests, and even more especially when they are pastors.”

“I’m amazed that *you* survived long enough to find me, you irresponsible young man. I’m telling you, our chances of survival are not good. This is mighty dangerous country. I don’t mind risking my own life – I’m an old man, you know – but I never

intended to risk anyone else's."

Harry grinned. "What I want to know is how you managed to survive for three days on that asteroid with all these injuries you've got. I wish I could do something for you but this isn't a medical ship and I'm not a doctor – you're going to have to wait until we reach the S. S. Perry."

"The what?"

"When we heard that you had entered Kadambari territory and hadn't come back on schedule we started asking around for your transponder codes so we could go look for you. Your company knew that you had left – they got your message – but you never arrived back home, so we thought it might barely be possible that you were hiding out in the asteroids. When our government found out what was going on they agreed to help. Officially they can't enter Kadambari space, of course, but they have stationed the S. S. Perry just outside the border and have promised to stop anyone from pursuing us if we can make it back. Once we cross the border they will take us on board and patch you back together."

"Oh," he replied. "So we might survive after all."

"I wouldn't go quite that fast," Matt warned from the cockpit as a series of beeps began sounding. "We have trouble."

"Is it serious?" Harry asked Matt.

"Oh, it's only eight Kadambari warships. I can't tell what kind they are because they're cloaked, but they're moving in mighty fast."

"Eh?" Jason said. "If they're cloaked how can you see them?"

"The same way they can see us, even though we're cloaked," Matt replied. "Tricks of the trade."

"Remind me not to ask what trade you're involved in," Jason replied.

"Do you think they'll be able to catch us?" Harry asked.

"That's what I'm trying to find out now." Matt pressed some buttons on the ship's console and began running a few calculations. After a few minutes he sighed.

"Yes, they'll catch us. We have about twenty minutes, I think,

before they'll be within missile range, but at that point we'll still be in their territory." He drummed his fingers on the console and looked thoughtfully out the window.

"Well, can't you just go faster?" Jason asked.

"That is the question, all right," Matt said. "We're already accelerating as much as we can; if we try to push it any more our engine will burn out and we'll be a real easy target then. I'm pushing her as fast as she can go."

"So should we start writing our last will and testament?"

"Not necessarily. There is something we can try, but it's not exactly recommended in the owner's manual."

"I don't know that I like the sound of that," Jason said.

Matt turned around and looked at Harry, and Harry's eyes got wide. "I know what you're thinking and I don't like it. You can't be serious."

"Do you have any other ideas?" Matt asked.

"I don't know that I would call your suggestion an idea, exactly. Suicide, maybe, but not an idea."

"I admit it might void our warranty, but it's a chance. It's a sure thing that if we do nothing we'll be spacedust in – what – fifteen minutes."

Harry bit his lip and was quiet for a few moments. "Ok," he said. "I'll get it ready. I'd suggest waiting until they're breathing down our necks, though. This is not reversible, and the chance of success is not high."

"I know. But hurry – we don't have much time."

Harry removed an access panel that was in the floor beside their injured passenger and got to work. Matt continued to monitor the approach of the incoming ships; they were much closer now but he still couldn't tell what kind they are. Based on their speed he was sure they were warships, and powerful ones at that; given that his ship was unarmed and had only light shields he knew that it would be no contest – any armed vessel could blow them out of space.

"I hate to bother you," Jason said, "but could you tell an old man what are you doing?"

Harry started talking without stopping his work. “Well, here’s the deal. The *Isabella* has a large fuel supply, but it can only react it so fast. If we pour too much fuel into the engine at once it will burn out and you’ll end up drifting in space. You’ll be going pretty fast, since in space you don’t slow down when you stop your engines, but you won’t have any control over which way you’re going and you won’t be able to stop.

“So we can’t do that. What we can do, provided I can disable all of these safety switches in time, is dump the entire fuel supply into the reactor at once. It will cause a massive burn – more like an explosion, really – that should, hopefully, push us forward with a tremendous burst of speed. As long as the engine doesn’t explode and kill us it should be more than enough to propel us into our home territory, where the S. S. Perry will stop the Kadambari ships from pursuing us any further. The engine will burn out, of course, at that point it won’t matter because we’ll be in our own territory and the S. S. Perry will be there to rescue us.”

“Ah. That sounds a little dangerous. Have you ever tried this before?”

“Well, not exactly, but it should work – in theory, at least. Now it will probably cause a big explosion, and a fire, and there will be smoke, and ashes, and a lot of things will burn out, but it should work.”

“I’ll start praying now,” Jason said.

“Please do,” Harry replied.

“Are you ready?” Matt yelled. “They’re closing in fast!”

Harry replaced the access panel and securely fastened it to the floor. “Ready when you are.”

Matt saw that the nearest ships had already decloaked and begun firing missiles. He hurriedly threw the switch to begin the burn.

There was tremendous explosion and a deafening noise. Equipment began shorting out and circuit boards caught fire, and the cabin was soon filled with smoke. The ship shot forward at a tremendous rate as Matt tried to engage the emergency systems and Harry grabbed a fire extinguisher.

“We all seem to be in one piece, at least,” Matt said, coughing from the smoke. “And we’re going – wow! – pretty fast, actually.”

“I should hope so,” Harry said. “How fast?”

“Fast enough, I think. In fact – wow! Look at that! The Kadambari ships have actually stopped their pursuit. We must be too close to the border for their liking – I bet they see the S. S. Perry. They know they can’t catch us now so they’re letting us go.” He heaved a sigh of relief.

Ten minutes later they crossed the border and left Kadambari space. The giant battleship S. S. Perry was waiting for them. Matt reflected that it was easily larger than the combined size of all eight Kadambari ships that had been pursuing them, and could probably have destroyed them all without even breaking a sweat.

Matt contacted it via the cockpit radio – one of the only systems on board that was still working. “Are we ever glad to see you! Things were getting pretty hot back there. Do you think you can beam us on board? Our ship – ”

A giant bolt of brilliant green light shot out from the S. S. Perry. The beam struck the *Isabella* and blew it into atoms, instantly killing everyone on board.

As the wreckage of their ship drifted aimlessly in space, the captain of the S. S. Perry contacted one of the Kadambari ships that had been chasing them.

“This is Commander Barnett of the S. S. Perry. What do you think you’re doing, letting them escape out of your territory? Are you so incompetent that you can’t even destroy a single unarmed transport vessel?”

“This is Adan Arroyo, Captain of the Kadambari ship *Sumac*. Just be glad that you held up your end of the bargain, Commander, and did not allow the impure influence to escape. I will report your cooperation to my superiors, who will be most pleased. This will go far to normalize relations between our peoples. Adan out.”

As soon as the *Sumac* had ended the transmission all eight Kadambari ships turned around and headed back to their home

planet. The S. S. Perry watched them depart, and then turned around and headed back to port.

## **PART 2**

IT WAS A beautiful day. Two young men were sitting inside an ornate wooden gazebo that sat at the edge of a vast forest. Above them was a cloudless blue sky, and to the west a grassland stretched out to the horizon. Far in the distance a gleaming white city could be seen.

The attention of the two young men was fixed on the table before them, which held a chess set of rare beauty. One man picked up a knight, made of pure sapphire, and set it down firmly on the board.

“Checkmate!”

Harry Norton stared at the chessboard in disbelief. His brother Matt had just moved his knight into position, placing his king into danger – mortal danger, as it turned out. He turned his gaze away from the chess set and looked into the distance.

“Man,” he said. “That sure didn’t go well.”

“You’ve got to watch those knights,” his brother Matt replied. “They’re tricky pieces, and they can get you into trouble before you know it.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Harry replied. “I was talking about our attempted rescue of Jason Pratt.”

“Oh. What about it?”

Harry ran his hands through his thick black hair and turned his attention back to his brother. “I don’t think it was a rousing success, Matt. I mean, we all died. After the S. S. Perry shot our craft out of space there wasn’t even enough of us left to bury!”

“That’s true,” he said. “We didn’t accomplish what we set out to do.”

“That’s putting it mildly, Matt! Sure, I knew there was some danger involved. I knew that we were no match for Kadambari

warships, and I knew that our desperate maneuver there at the end might kill us all. It wouldn't have bothered me if we had died when we overloaded the engine – that was just part of the risk. What really gets me is that we were murdered by our own people. Our own people, Matt!”

Harry stood up and began pacing. “They told us we could go in there, remember? We got proper authorization and everything. They told us that if we could make it out of Kadambari territory we would be home free. Do you remember?”

“Oh yes,” Matt said. “It only happened a few days ago – four, I think, to be precise.” He reflected on that a moment. “Man, it’s hard to believe that we’ve only been in Heaven for four days. Is that all it’s been? It somehow feels like I’ve always been here.”

His brother turned around to face him and leaned against the wall of the gazebo. “I just can’t believe it, Matt. We would have been home free if our own people hadn’t betrayed us. Why did they do it? Why?”

“I think it had something to do with establishing trade relations,” Matt said. “It was their way of telling the Kadambari government that they would do whatever it took to build a relationship with them. I’m sure they got their message across.”

“Which makes it even worse! They betrayed their own people to their deaths over something as stupid as building a close relationship with the most evil star system in the galaxy! I can’t even figure out why they’d want that in the first place – and no,” Harry said, seeing his brother about to say something, “that’s not an invitation to explain it to me. The point is that they were able to murder all three of us almost effortlessly and get away with it, too.”

A voice called out from behind them. “I told you two kids that you were going to be killed.” They turned around and saw a very content Jason Pratt walking toward them out of the forest. He had a pair of binoculars slung around his neck; he had been talking a walk through the forest and had just returned.

“I know,” Harry replied, “but I thought you were talking about the Kadambari Army. It never occurred to me that we

might have to worry about our own people.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, Harry, that never occurred to me either. I was in a lot of pain at the time, but I knew that our chances of getting out there alive weren’t very good.” Jason set his binoculars down on a ledge and drew up a chair to the table. “It looks like you lost another game to your brother! Have you won one yet?”

Harry shook his head. “Not yet – but I will eventually. Doesn’t it bother you that they can do something like that and get away with it?”

Jason looked at him curiously. “Get away with it! What do you mean, young man?”

“I mean they’ve hushed up the whole thing. The Kadambari Army is claiming that their army destroyed a couple of spies, and our government is backing their claim. Our friends and relatives have no idea why we really died. There aren’t going to be any repercussions, Jason. The bad guys got exactly what they wanted and we went down in flames.”

Matt began putting the ruby and sapphire chess pieces back to their starting positions as Jason pondered things over for a few minutes. “That’s so, Harry, but it’s not the whole story. There’s a whole other side to this that you’re not thinking about.”

“First,” Jason said, “don’t think that you are the only one! Things like this have been happening for a very long time. Christ Himself wasn’t exactly treated very fairly while on Earth, if you will recall. The authorities are supposed to preserve law and order, and when they go bad it’s a serious matter. That’s why God holds them to a higher standard: He’s given them more power and responsibility than everyone else, and therefore expects more out of them.

“I’m not going to get into the reasons why it happens; you know those as well as I do. What’s bothering you is that you think there aren’t going to be any repercussions. Is that right, Harry?”

He nodded.

“Well then let’s stop and consider a couple different futures here. First, there is yours. It’s true that you died and that they

didn't, but you don't look too bad off to me. You're no more dead than I am, and from what I've seen you're really enjoying yourself here. You're where you have always wanted to be with the Person that you've loved all your life, and you couldn't be happier. You are definitely not suffering, and there is nothing in your future but a lot of really good things. For all intents and purposes, Harry, you've got it made.

"But what about the people that betrayed you? Well, they're still alive down there, quite happy – for now. One day, though, they'll die, and they'll have to stand before the judgment seat of Christ and answer for their lives. If they don't believe in Christ before that happens, Harry, then that is not going to go well at all. Jesus is going to bring every last thing into account, including the murder of you and I and your brother, and they're not going to have anything to say in their defense. They're going to face the full force of His wrath, and that's a scary. The infinite wrath of an angry God is going to be horrible: more terrible and fierce than anything you can imagine.

"It doesn't stop there, though. After all their sins are judged – every last one of them, including your own murder – they will be thrown into the lake of fire, where they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever and ever, without end. And that will be the end of that. You will live on forever, until the very memory of your time on Earth seems like a distant dream, but they – well, they will not be as fortunate."

James helped Matt put the last chess piece in place and then moved a sapphire pawn to the middle of the board, signaling the start of a new game. "No, Harry, I wouldn't want to be in their shoes. They've got what they wanted, but they won't like its price tag – not one bit. Just be patient, Harry: judgment is coming quicker than you think."

He looked at him, a smile on his face. "Your move!"



## The Stones Shall Cry Out

“OH YEAH?” I shouted. “Just look at what’s going on in the world! Everything is going down the tubes; why, in another twenty years there might not be anybody left alive. Do you have any idea how bad things are getting?”

“Tell me about it,” Lisa replied.

“Come on!” I snarled. “Surely you’ve seen the news reports. Riots have broken out in cities throughout the world. Terrorists are destroying buildings left and right, leaving untold numbers dead. Every day the fabric of society decays a little farther. We don’t even have a civilization any more!”

“This is true,” she said. “Crime has increased 387% in the past 10 years. Violent crime has increased nearly twice that. Terrorism, disease, and war have all shown significant increases as well. Society is definitely in trouble.”

“And you just sit there!” I said. “Don’t you see what’s happening? The government’s control over the people is falling apart, and as order decays anarchy breaks out. Madness is everywhere and it’s spreading. You of all people should know the numbers better than anyone else!”

“That is also true,” Lisa replied. “But I have already told you why this is happening and you are not interested in listening to me. I do not think that anything would be accomplished by repeating myself.”

My frustration, already high, rose even higher. “I don’t understand you at all! How can you possibly sit there and tell me that *sin* is behind war, and terrorism, and crime? Scientists proved decades ago that aberrant behavior is just a disease caused by our

genes. You are not staying up with the times.”

Lisa remained calm. “Tell me, then: if you have indeed found the trouble then what is the problem? Why do you continue to come to me if you already have your answer?”

She could be so maddening at times. “Because it’s clear that we don’t fully understand the situation. We must have missed a key chemical imbalance, or maybe there is another gene that we don’t understand. Maybe people aren’t getting enough vitamins or something, I don’t know. That’s what you’ve got to tell us. Everyone else has given up: people at the highest levels of government are begging you to solve this problem for us.”

“Are they?” she said. “Have things become so bad that you are resorting to me?”

“Of course they have! Do you never read the papers? We’re running out of time, Lisa! The government has demanded that the National Science Center find a solution, and they’ve tried everything they can think of and have failed. You’re our last hope. Unless you can tell us what new pills we need to give criminals in order to reform them society will continue to decay, crime will continue to increase, and terrorism will become more serious until it finally destroys everything.”

Lisa sighed. “But this is all so simple. The citizens of mankind act in what you define as an abhorrent manner because they are inherently fallen creatures. People are unable to change themselves, as you have surely found out; they cannot remove the evil from their hearts on their own, no matter how hard they try or how many pills you give them. Only God can change a wicked person into a righteous one. If you want people to change then preach the gospel to them: once they repent of their ways and turn to Jesus, God will change their hearts and your problem will disappear.”

“But that’s insane!” I said. “God, if there is such a being, is the one that is responsible for all this anyway!”

“I don’t follow you,” Lisa replied. “I thought you were complaining about people acting in depraved ways. What is God doing that upsets you?”

It was incredible how ignorant she could be. “Come on, Lisa! Look at the incident last week, where a group of terrorists destroyed that nuclear reactor. Not only did they destroy an entire city’s power supply, making it uninhabitable, but when the reactor melted down it released a cloud of radioactive debris that poisoned who knows how many millions of people. If God really existed and was as all-powerful as you claim then why wasn’t it stopped?”

“What would you have had God do?” Lisa asked. “Break the laws of physics? Strike the terrorists dead? Violate their free will and make them unable to act?”

“Anything! He’s God, for crying out loud; it shouldn’t be hard for God to think of something.”

“He did think of something,” Lisa said. “He saw that men were incurably wicked and that their sins would condemn them to eternal judgment. Since God knew that men could not help themselves He sent His son Jesus, who became a man and took on Himself the wrath that men had earned. Anyone who repents and believes will be freed of the evil within them and not face death or the coming judgment.”

I was beginning to lose my patience. “And what does that have to do with anything?”

“Why, it is the answer to your problem. If those terrorists had been disciples of Christ they never would have harmed anyone. Christ would have changed them through His grace into new people, which is something that you have completely failed to do. If everyone were to accept Christ as their Lord and Savior and follow Him then the problems that are destroying society would be brought to an end. You would not have wars, for the hatred and greed and fear and prejudice that starts them would be gone. You would not have crime. Your problem would be solved.”

“But that’s insane!” I said. “Filling the world with Christians is the *last* thing we want. Look how intolerant they are! They’re just like you: always saying there’s just one way to God, and that everyone else is doomed. It took the government decades to finally eradicate them, and I was glad to see them go.”

“You fascinate me,” Lisa said. “Tell me: is it intolerant to say that there is only one set of physical laws? Is it mean-spirited to teach people about the Law of Gravity or the Laws of Thermodynamics as if they were true?”

“Of course not! They’re proven beyond a doubt, and that’s just how it is. Only a complete idiot would invent a new set of laws of physics; you can’t get away from reality.”

“Then do you not see,” Lisa continued, “that the issue is really whether the claims of Jesus are true? If they are true then it would be foolish to believe anything else. If they are false then it is pointless to believe in them. If there really is only one way to God then saying so is simply the truth, and if the unrepentant really will face eternal wrath then telling that person anything else is criminal.”

I was beginning to see that this was a pointless discussion. “Look, everyone knows that none of that stuff is true. It just goes without saying.”

“Does it?” Lisa asked. “Do the laws of physics just go without saying? Besides, how would you know if the claims of Christ are true or not? Have you ever investigated them?”

“Of course not, Lisa; they’re so crazy that they’re not even worth my time. I’ve got better things to do!”

“Better than finding out what will happen to you if you were killed in a terrorist attack this evening? Better than knowing if you will just stop existing or face the wrath of a God you have spent your life despising?”

“And what do you care!” I shouted. “You’re just a *machine*. You’re nothing but a big mess of silicon circuits, built by the National Science Center twenty years ago, and you’ll never be anything else. You’re nothing but a bunch of highly processed *rocks*, and I’ve had it with you!”

I hit the kill switch and the massive computer in front of me went dead. I had cut off its power supply, and it wouldn’t start working again until someone turned it back on – which, hopefully, would never happen. It was clear to me that we weren’t going to get anything out of her; artificial intelligence just

isn't what it is cracked up to be. What a pity.

Maybe another computer could help me find those elusive genes...



## The Ultimate Code

“NOW LET ME get this straight,” Mark was saying. “We’re supposed to rendezvous with the Ahmanyans where, exactly?”

Starmen Mark Seaton, Zip Foster, and Joe Taylor were sitting in a private conference room in the famous Starlight Tower on the Moon. Papers were strewn all over the mahogany table that was in the center of the room, and a large map of Europa was projected onto one wall. The oblong table was surrounded by six chairs, but the three Starmen were the only ones present. They had been discussing the final preparations for their return to Europa for several hours now.

“We’re supposed to meet Stenafi, Saadervo, and Stavri on a pocket world in the asteroid belt,” Zip said. “I don’t think the asteroid has a name or anything, but we have been given its expected location on the date of our rendezvous. The Ahmanyans have also promised to put a locator beacon on the asteroid to make it easier to find.”

Joe lifted a stack of papers off the table and shuffled through them. “I’ve got the coordinates right here,” he said. “I’ll program them into the *Bonny Swan* after we’ve left lunar orbit. October 15, 2153 is our launch date.”

“Which is exactly nineteen days from now,” Zip said. “I think we all understand how the mission is going to work and what we’re going there to accomplish. Does – ”

The phone rang, interrupting Zip’s train of thought. After checking the name to see who was calling, Joe reached over and pressed a button on the conference table. The projected map of Europa disappeared and was replaced with the image of Richard

Starlight, the CEO of Starlight Enterprise.

“How are things going?” Richard asked. From what the Starmen could see he appeared to be sitting in his private office. “I’m sorry to interrupt you.”

“Very well, sir,” Zip said. “We were just wrapping up our discussion. How can we help you?”

Richard leaned forward in his chair. “A few minutes ago I received an urgent message from Alfred Nelson,” he began.

Looks of intense dismay appeared on the faces of all three Starmen. “Oh, please, no,” Joe groaned.

Alfred Nelson managed the L5 space station, which was the largest space station in the Solar System. A few months ago the three Starmen had been called out to L5 at Alfred’s request to investigate a problem, and the memory of that experience was still fresh in their minds.

“Please tell me he just called to say that everything was fine,” Zip said. “He can’t be having more problems.”

Richard shook his head. “I’m afraid not, Zip. He called to ask for help, and he specifically requested that I send you three to resolve the matter.”

“Isn’t there someone else that you could send?” Zip asked. “The last time we went out there – ”

“I know, Zip, but this is different. Alfred has received what he thinks is a distress call from a spaceship in the outer planets, and he wants some help decoding the message and responding to it. I’m sure it’s nothing that you can’t handle.”

Zip sighed and looked at Joe and Mark. The mere mention of Alfred Nelson’s name had cast a gloom over the entire room. No one was looking forward to making a return trip to L5.

“Ok,” Zip said. “We’ll go.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The trip to L5 was uneventful. Like last time, Richard had the *Red Tiger* waiting for them at the Amundsen City spaceport, and Joe piloted it to the L5 space station. The Starmen said very little

on the trip there.

Mark was the first one to break the silence. "At least we have our uniforms with us this time," he said.

"And cash," Joe replied.

Zip shook his head. "I'm sure things will go just fine. Now that we've dealt with Alfred before we know what to expect. This time will be different."

"I sure hope so," Joe said. "Last time we almost got arrested, our ship was impounded, and we nearly made the news. It took Richard Starlight two weeks to get the mess straightened out."

"Come on," Zip said. "We've battled aliens on the planet Nyx. We've survived being torpedoed in the oceans of Europa. We escaped destruction in the skies of Mars. You can't tell me that you're intimidated by Alfred Nelson."

"They're probably still talking about us at that tiny seaside town," Joe mused. "I bet we'll go down in history."

"I'm sure you're right, Zip," Mark said. "But, all the same, if another robot takes over a spaceship and escapes, *you* can go and follow him. I'm going to stay home and keep out of trouble."

No one said anything else for another twenty minutes, when the L5 space station at last came within visual range. Joe contacted the space station's flight control center, which then automatically took control of the *Red Tiger* and brought it into a hangar.

As soon as the ship landed Joe peered out the cockpit window. "Haven't we seen those people before?" he asked, gesturing toward the three armed guards that were waiting by the wall.

"I think so," Mark said. "Aren't they the same ones –"

"Yup," Zip said.

The three Starmen disembarked from their ship. One of the armed guards stepped forward to greet them. "Mr. Howard, Fine, and Howard at your service," he said. "It's good to see you again. Right this way, please." One of the guards opened a door that led inside the station and the three Starmen stepped through it.

The guards escorted the Starmen down the hall and through

the station. The inside lighting was set to simulate a pleasant mid-afternoon; the wide hallways were gently lit, and trees and shrubs were strategically placed. A few people that were going about their daily business stopped and stared at the Starmen as they walked by.

"I'm telling you," Joe said as they followed their armed escort down the hallway, "the uniform makes all the difference. Why, if we had had our uniforms with us last time – "

Zip shook his head. "We would have caught the probe right away, Joe, and brought it back to the station, only to find out that the hapless drone was just trying to repair the data core. We would have then made *another* trip to Earth, but given the delay we would have come back from Dr. Lowery too late to save the largest space station in existence from having to be completely shut down. Our pictures would have still been in the paper weeks later, and we would have gone down in history as the most inept Starmen of all time."

"That would have been a great day to have overslept," Joe said. "There's a lot to be said for strategic, targeted napping. It's really a lost art."

The group stopped at an elevator, and proceeded to take it fifteen stories up to the top of the station. The elevator was made of glass and was located in the outside wall of the station, offering its occupants a beautiful view of the bustle of traffic outside. A host of ships, old and new, was flying to their various destinations.

Ten minutes after their arrival the Starmen found themselves walking into a conference room. "The Thomas Starlight Conference Room," Mark said aloud, reading the sign on the door. "Very nice."

The room was elaborately furnished. A wide, rectangular table was in the center of the room; it was made of a beautiful dark wood and trimmed in gold. The walls were decorated with famous paintings depicting scenes from deep space, and one entire wall of the conference room was a window that offered a beautiful view of Earth. Mark could see that it was night-time in

North America; the day/night divide was somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean. In a few hours daylight would reach the East Coast.

After the Starmen entered the conference room their escorts took up guard outside the door. “Just for security, just for security,” Alfred Nelson said, extending them a hand. “I’m pleased to see you! Thank you for coming so quickly.”

“You’re welcome,” Mark said, shaking his hand. “What seems to be the problem?”

“Please, take a seat,” Alfred responded. “This is Matthew Lewis and this is Vanessa Sloan,” he said, gesturing toward two people that were seated at the table. As he introduced them they rose and shook the Starmen’s hands. “Matthew and Vanessa are our two top cryptographic experts at L5.”

“Cryptographic experts?” Joe asked, as the Starmen took a seat. “I didn’t realize that L5 was involved in cryptography.”

“We’re involved in all sorts of things, young man,” the director replied. “There’s no more important space station in all of the solar system than this one right here! We’ve got departments in every field – biology, physics, chemistry, cooking, the works. Our supercomputer is one of the biggest in existence, and it’s used all the time!”

“I know,” Zip said. “I’m glad that your computer is behaving itself again.”

“Now where was I?” the director mused as he took a seat at the table. “Ah – right. Matthew, you may begin.”

Matthew stood up “Four months ago the spaceship *Luna Merchant* set out for the planet Neptune,” he began.

“That sounds familiar,” Joe said. “Isn’t that Dr. Bayard’s ship?”

“That is correct,” Matthew replied. “Dr. Maxie Bayard was undertaking an expedition to the planet Neptune. He believed that it had been visited by intelligent extraterrestrial beings at some point in the past and hoped that his expedition could uncover further evidence to support that hypothesis.”

“I read about that,” Mark said. “Neptune really hasn’t been

the focus of many major expeditions, and Dr. Bayard felt that it had been unduly neglected. I think that Starlight Enterprise was partially funding his voyage and had provided some equipment.”

“That is also correct,” Matthew replied. “Starlight Enterprise provided Dr. Bayard the funds to purchase the most advanced artificial intelligence system ever made – the TB-9000. His plan was to use it to parse through any readings he took from Neptune for signs of intelligence. He hoped that a computer could spot patterns or signals that would otherwise be – ”

“Wonderful,” the director said. “Please get to the point, Matthew. We don’t have all day, you know.”

“Two days ago,” Matthew continued, “this station received a message from the *Luna Merchant*. The message was a surprise for three reasons. First, the *Luna Merchant* did not depart from L5. Second, the *Luna Merchant* had barely had time to pass the orbit of Saturn and was not expected to arrive at Neptune for another six months, so no messages were expected. Third, the message was addressed to Melissa Nova – a person who did not live on L5.”

The director interrupted. “I found out about this when Cody – that’s the young man who delivers the mail on L5 – came into my office and asked to speak with me. He gets misdirected mail all the time, but usually he could just return it to the sender and be done with it. Since the sender was on a space expedition he didn’t know what to do, so he came to me.”

“I knew immediately that something was up, so I took the message from him and read it. One glance at the message showed that it was a code of some kind, and once I saw that I knew there was trouble. Coded message from deep space! All kinds of terrible things happen out there in deep space, and if the *Luna Merchant* was in trouble we needed to know immediately so we could dispatch a rescue mission. There was no time to waste! I immediately called in my experts and asked them to decrypt it.”

“We didn’t know what to make of the message at first,” Vanessa said. “I loaded the message into the central computer system and tried to decrypt it but made no progress at all. The

encryption is very unusual; it doesn't correspond with anything I have seen in the past. It does not appear to be a substitution cipher. It does not appear to use any modern or ancient encryption algorithm. We may be dealing with an advanced alien technology."

"I don't understand," Zip said. "Dr. Bayard sent an encrypted message to L5, addressed to a non-existent person?"

"That's correct," Matthew said.

"But how do you know that it's an emergency message?"

"Think, man!" Alfred Nelson said. "What else could it be? There they are, billions of miles from the Sun, and suddenly they send an encoded message to us. It must be a cry for help! What if their computer system went haywire? What if they were boarded by aliens? I think they were forced to encode the message to hide it from their attackers. They must have been afraid that their message would be intercepted. It's vital that we find out what is going on!" He gestured over to Vanessa. "Please continue."

"Wait a minute," Joe said. "Have you tried contacting Dr. Bayard and asking him what the message meant?"

"Of course not!" the director said. "Use your head! If they've been boarded by aliens the very last thing we want to do is let the aliens know that we're on to them. We've got to keep this hush-hush until we know what's going on. Now Vanessa – please continue."

"As I was saying," she said, "it didn't take us long to discover that the message was encrypted using a completely new algorithm. Matthew and I spent hours working on it before we suddenly had an idea.

"It was obvious, based on the message header, that Dr. Bayard had encrypted the message on his own computer before he sent it. He clearly meant for it to be understood. It is highly likely that he would have chosen a technique that would be meaningless to his attackers but easily understood to us at L5. We decided to take a step back and look at the entire message with fresh eyes."

Vanessa stood up and pressed a button on the wall, dimming

the lights. “This is the encrypted message that we received,” she said, pressing another button on the table.

Instantly a picture appeared floating in mid-air over the conference table. Inside the picture was a note with the following message:

---

From: Dr. Maxie Bayard  
To: Melissa Nova  
Timestamp: 09/24/2153 02:08:24 AM MST

X

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The three Starmen looked at the note in astonishment. “You mean to tell me that *that* is the message?” Zip asked. “That’s it?”

“That’s right, young man,” the director said. “You can see why it grabbed my attention! You just don’t see coded messages from deep space very often. As soon as I saw that I said to myself, Alfred, now there’s some trouble, and no mistake.”

“When we first saw the message,” Matthew said, “we thought that the message had been cut off while in transit. After examining the logs, however, we saw that we had received the full message header and footer bytes; the message was not truncated. This does represent the entire message that was sent from the *Luna Merchant*.

“After we verified that the full message had been received, we suddenly realized where we had made our mistake. The message was encoded using MST – Mountain Standard Time. Bayard lived on the L5 space station before he left for Neptune, and the L5 station uses Greenwich Mean Time. There was no reason for him to use MST unless he was trying to tell us something.”

“We knew that MST had to be an acronym for something,” Vanessa said. “We entered that phrase into our cryptographic system and tried to determine its meaning. The computer came back with many likely candidates, but one in particular caught our

attention: Madison Symmetric Torus.”

“What?” Zip asked. “I’ve never heard of that before.”

“It’s a type of device that is used in advanced fusion research,” Matthew explained. “We thought that Dr. Bayard was trying to refer to nuclear physics – specifically, to nuclear fusion. We then noticed the time of the message: it was sent at 02:08:24. Two to the third power is eight, and eight times three is twenty-four. It seems unlikely that this was a coincidence; the time is too much like a formula. The solution was obvious: Dr. Bayard was talking about the top-secret formulas for plasma containment in nuclear fusion reactors!”

“Wow,” Zip said. “But – ”

“I knew right then what had happened,” the director said. “Dr. Bayard was trying to warn us that Xenobots were trying to steal his secret formulas for plasma containment! His ship must have been boarded after they crossed the orbit of Saturn and he was hiding out in the ship, trying to tell us before it’s too late!”

“What clinches the theory is that the message is addressed to Melissa Nova,” Vanessa said. “Stars can go nova under certain conditions, and stars are powered by nuclear fusion. It all ties together.”

“Ok,” Zip said. “But – ”

“The reason I asked you here,” the director said, “is because I need your help. If Dr. Bayard’s ship has been taken over by hostile aliens then we need to mount a rescue expedition immediately. You three have actually been out in deep space before; there’s no reason why you can’t leave immediately. I’m sure you could get there in a matter of weeks and send the Xenobots packing. There’s no time to waste, young man!”

“There are a few things that need clarification, though,” Zip said. “Can I ask the base computer a few questions?” When no one objected he took out his compad and connected it to a port on the table.

“Computer,” he said, addressing his compad. “Has a person by the name of Melissa Nova ever lived on the L5 space station?”

“Affirmative,” the computer responded. “Melissa Nova began

living on the L5 space station on January 15, 2150. She left L5 on August 15, 2153 when her lease expired.”

Joe spoke up. “Was Melissa Nova any relation to Dr. Bayard?”

“Affirmative. She was his younger sister.”

“Do you know where Melissa Nova is living now?” Mark asked.

“Negative. She did not leave a forwarding address.”

The three Starmen looked at each other. “I think I know what is going on,” Joe said. He took a piece of paper out of his pocket, wrote something on it, and handed it to Mark and Zip. They both read it, nodded, and handed it back.

“What’s going on?” the director said. “I don’t understand.”

“The three of us have a theory,” Joe said, “but we want to test it first. If you’ll give me an envelope I’ll place this piece of paper into it and seal it, so that our theory can be preserved for posterity. After that I’d like to make a phone call.”

“I don’t understand this at all,” the director said, as Vanessa searched the room for an envelope. “It’s quite obvious! You’ve got to head out there immediately; there’s no telling how much trouble the Xenobots have already unleashed. There must be no delay!”

Vanessa was eventually able to find an envelope; she handed it to Joe, who took his piece of paper and placed it inside. He sealed it, wrote “Confidential” on it, and placed it on the table.

“Computer,” Zip said aloud, “I want you to locate Melissa Nova. See if you can find out her current contact information.”

“Please wait,” the computer replied. The three Starmen waited.

“I really don’t see how this will help,” Matthew said. “I doubt that Melissa Nova knows very much about cryptographic analysis.”

“She may know more than you think,” Zip said. “I believe that she alone has the key to this cipher.”

It took the computer a few more minutes to locate the phone number, but it was at last obtained.

“Great!” Joe said. “Call her up.”

The phone rang three times, and then someone answered. “Hello, this is Melissa.”

“Hi there,” Joe said. “This is Starman Joe Taylor, calling you from the L5 space station. I have with me David Foster, Mark Seaton, Alfred Nelson, Matthew Lewis, and Vanessa Sloan.”

“Wow,” she said. “I’m impressed! How can I help you?”

“We’ve got a question for you,” Joe replied. “Two days ago the space station received a message from Dr. Bayard, addressed to you. Since you no longer live at the station the computer could not deliver the message.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Melissa said. “I knew I forgot something. I’d better let him know that my address has changed.”

“The forces of goodness in the universe would greatly appreciate that,” Joe said. “Do you think you could do us a favor?”

“Sure,” she said. “What do you have in mind?”

“Due to the circumstances surrounding the arrival of the message, it has been classified as an encrypted distress call,” Joe said. “A team of cryptologists have been trying to decrypt it for two days now and have had no luck understanding it. We were hoping that you could tell us what it meant.”

“That’s odd,” she said. “I don’t think he’s ever sent his messages encoded before. In fact, I’d be surprised if he even knew how to do that. But, um, sure, just send it to me and I’ll take a look at it.”

Joe asked Matthew to send her a copy of the message. He shook his head, but when Joe pressed him he forwarded the note to Melissa. “It’s been sent,” Joe said, after receiving confirmation of this from Matthew. “You should have it in just a few moments.”

“I still can’t believe you would read my mail,” Melissa said. “Do you do that very often?”

“Fortunately, no,” Joe replied. “But in this case we made an exception.”

“Ah, there it is,” Melissa said. “I see it now. Let me read it.”

She was silent a moment, and then burst out laughing. The director looked puzzled. "I don't see anything funny about it," he muttered.

"Thanks for sending this message to me," she said. "It made my day. I'll let my brother know that I received it and that my address has changed."

"You're welcome," Joe replied. "Just for the record, what was Dr. Bayard trying to tell you?"

"Oh, well, you have to understand my brother. I saw him just before he left, you know, and told him to send me a letter after he got past the orbit of Saturn. No one in our family had ever gone out that far before, you see. So after he passed the orbit of Saturn, he did just that – he sent me the letter 'x'."

"Wonderful," Zip said. "I'm glad your brother is safe and sound. Thank you for your time."

"You're welcome," Melissa said. "Bye!" She hung up.

Alfred Nelson picked up the sealed envelope off the desk, tore it open, and read the note inside. He then threw it down on the table. "How could you possibly have known?" he asked.

"Call it a lucky guess," Zip said.

"Based on past history," Joe added.

"That's crazy!" the director said, fuming. "How could we be expected to know that? It's not fair!"

"That," Mark said, "is exactly why you're not supposed to read other people's mail."

With that, the three Starmen walked out of the conference room and back down the hall toward their waiting ship.

## The Victor

TWO PEOPLE were sitting in a bare, concrete room, deep in the heart of a maximum-security prison. Both were seated on ordinary wooden chairs, and both were facing the other – but one was a prisoner and the other was free. Surrounding them were eight armed guards, ready to move at the least sign of trouble – but there would be no trouble. Both of the men knew that.

They had known each other for a long time, for they grew up together. Both dreamed of accomplishing great things with their lives, and both tried to achieve their goals – but they went about it differently. As time went on their relationship changed, and the day came when one of these men spent the better part of his life searching for the other. At times it looked as if he was doomed to fail, but he never despaired of catching him, and one day he finally did.

The man had built his career hunting down people like the one sitting in front of him. His success in tracking down these troublesome rebels had enabled him to rise quickly through the ranks of power until he had reached the top position in the empire. No one held more power in the galaxy than he did, for he was the supreme leader. His whims were absolute law in more than a million star systems. He bowed to no one, and his will was enforced not by men but by an army of untiring intelligent machines, programmed to do his bidding alone.

In the old days – the days before true artificial intelligence was developed and coupled with nanobot replication – it was possible to avoid detection and remain a subversive for decades. There were so many places to hide in the galaxy that was filled

with obscure corners, dark asteroids, and secret bases floating in the darkness of space. All that had changed, though, when intelligent machines were invented. Within a generation these devices had reproduced and could be found in every corner of the galaxy, lurking, watching, waiting. Nothing passed under their gaze or avoided their notice, and there could be no possibility of hiding. The network of machines was always expanding; it was already stretching into intergalactic space and soon it would reach even farther than that. Nothing could hide. The person that controlled this network of androids controlled the events on every planet in the galaxy – and that person was Dr. Neil Foster, Director of Services.

Obscure titles pleased Dr. Foster greatly. He had been the one who sabotaged the AI network and turned it from a race of servant machines to a race of masters. When he was young he had been placed over the AI network with the charge of finding better ways of using it. In those days the AI network was in shambles and the department was a mess, making it a useless tool in tracking down subversives. Dr. Foster rebuilt the entire department, and when he did so he personally made some subtle changes to the code that ran inside the androids. On the surface they appeared to be unchanged, but when the signal was sent out they would change into an army loyal to him and him alone. Only an examination of the code that ran the androids would reveal this treachery, and the only person who had access to the critical code was Dr. Foster – the very man who had altered it.

It was easy for him to gain control once his network was in place. What was not so easy was hunting down every last subversive. Religious fanatics were hard to track down, as they had an amazing ability to elude detection and could live in the most out-of-the-way places. Slowly but surely, though, Dr. Foster had tracked them all down. The last one to go was their unofficial leader, a man known only as Mishaël. This was the man who was sitting across from Dr. Foster – the man who had eluded him for so long. Now, at last, the chase was over: the last rebel had been captured, and there would be no escaping the iron grip of Dr.

Foster's electronic servants.

"So you are defeated at last, Mishael," Dr. Foster began. "It took forty years, but you were finally caught and everything you have worked for has been destroyed. I have been complete and thorough: I have destroyed every book you have written, every person who knew you, and every colony you influenced. No one outside this room knows anything about you, and even if they did no one would care. Your name has been wiped clean; everything your hands has produced has been destroyed. No one you preached to is alive today. The last colony – the one you worked so hard to save – was found and vaporized. You alone are left, and you will soon join the dead.

"Why did you bother, Mishael? Why did you choose the hard road? Did I not tell you, when we were young, that you would gain nothing by it? I told you the way of power and you did not heed me. Why did you waste your life?"

Mishael looked at his opponent calmly. "Why did you waste yours, Neil? Did I not warn you what the end would be?"

Dr. Foster looked into his eyes. His friend had not changed a bit in all these years; he still could not see. So many people were blind, blind until the very end – nothing could make them understand. This made them entertaining, he thought, but sad all the same.

"Yes, Mishael, look at what I have achieved! I sought complete power, and I got it. My word – mine! - means sweet life or bitter death. All the riches in the galaxy are mine. All the races are slaves to my will. I am the one who decides who is healed and who dies; I decide who is set free and who is enslaved. Nothing happens apart from my will. I have gained all there is to gain. You, on the other hand, have lost everything, and you are complete denial. You have no idea what is happening and I don't think you will ever understand."

Mishael shook his head. "No, Neil, it is you who does not understand. You wanted power, riches, and fame; that is all you wanted, and that is what has been given to you – and you paid a terrible price for it. What I wanted was something different, and

that is what you cannot understand.

“You have never understood those who have given their lives to Christ. We are not living for ourselves anymore: we passionately seek the will of our Father. I want to see all power, majesty, and glory given to Christ, the One who died for me. My life is His, to do with as He pleases. The purpose of my life has not been to please myself but to please my Father. I am living for Him, and that is what you cannot understand. I don’t care about possessions. I don’t care who knows my name. I don’t care how many people are under my authority. All I care about is pleasing Jesus, and loving Him with all my very soul.”

“And what has it gotten you?” Dr. Foster snapped. “Your life is forfeit. Everyone you know – all your friends, who followed this path with you – are dead. Nothing you have made remains. You wanted so much to explore the stars, and instead you spent your life on the run, trying to infect other people with this belief of yours. You never achieved anything. You wasted your entire life, and now your life is over, and you can’t even see what you’ve done.”

“In your way of thinking,” Mishael responded, “I have. But I see the world differently than you do, Neil. You don’t believe in God at all; I do. I believe that God has a claim against the human race: we have sinned against Him and great wrath is stored up against us. I believe that Christ came and died for me to take the punishment I deserved; when I believed on Him I was saved.

“You, Neil, do not believe in sin at all. Since you think there is no God, you don’t see how anything can be right or wrong – the terms are meaningless to you. Christ’s death is pointless to you because you believe there is nothing you need forgiveness for. You don’t see that you have broken the laws of God and are facing a terrible judgment.

“I was a slave – unable to stop sinning, unable to cover my debt with God, dying and without hope. I knew I would face His just wrath when I died; I was lost without a hope. Then I found that Jesus had died to save me: He had taken the punishment I should have suffered and all I had to do to be saved was believe –

that He was God and Man, that He had taken my punishment, that He had died and rose again, and that by believing in what He did I could be free. By His grace I repented of my sins; I begged His forgiveness and asked Him to enter my life and make me His – and He did, and I was saved. It was not what I did but what He did.

“This, Neil, is why we are so different. I see things as they really are. You see life as a mad rush to fulfill your every desire and wish; I see life as an opportunity to please Christ and show Him how much I love Him. You see death as the end; I see that I am an immortal who will live forever. You see this Universe as being the sum total of creation; I see this Universe as being a temporary thing that will soon pass away, and that on the other side of the grave is the real world – the place where I will live forever with the one who died to save me.

“You see my life as futile, for in your eyes I have amassed nothing. I see my life as a blazing success: I have preached where Christ asked me to preach, I have been used by Him to save souls from death, and I have been used by Him for His glory. I am incredibly blessed! The only things I have lost are things that don’t really matter. Why should I care if I have no possessions? All my possessions are eternal, and they are in my home with my Father: they are safe there.

“Soon, Neil, I will be with my Savior, where I will live forever. I will have a new body – a better one. I will be in a place where there is no pain, no suffering, no death. I will be free from sin at last – free, gloriously free, to do the will of my Father. Evil will be defeated and I will have all of eternity to live. I may yet explore the handiwork of my Savior – with Him as my guide.

“But look at you, Neil! You have gained all that there is to gain, in your sight, but all you have done is amassed a fortune that you will soon lose. Nothing here is permanent; it will one day be destroyed, if not soon then when the Universe is brought to an end. You will soon die, Neil, and when you do you will face the wrath of an angry God – a God whose children you have tortured and executed without mercy. What will you do when you have to

face Him and He wants to know what you have to say about how you treated His children? Do you have any idea what the wrath of an infinite God is like? You have refused His love and spat on the sacrifice of His son; there is nothing left but wrath. You jest now, but you will not be jesting when the Lord stands before you accusing you, and by His side are the many you have murdered.

“You have sought treasure, and you got it, but it will do you no good on that day. You have sought fame, and you got it, but fame will get you nowhere when you are judged. You couldn’t be bothered with God, and you will soon discover that there is a price to be paid for that – a terrible price. All your arguments and folly will vanish on that day.

“You are the blind one: you cannot see the Universe for what it really is. Christ is foolishness to you; the very idea that there is a God makes you laugh. You will not be laughing when you meet him, Neil: you will bitterly regret what you have done, but it will be too late to change. You have been blinded by things that do not matter; you have spent your life gathering shadows that will soon vanish, and you have ignored the treasure that will last forever.

“You had a chance, Neil. You could have had treasure, but instead of seeking heavenly treasure you despised it and sought for silver and gold instead. You could have had joy, but you detested Christ – the source of joy – and sought instead to do whatever your body craved. You could have had fame, and an enduring name in Heaven, but you despised the praise of God and sought the praise of men. You could have had life everlasting, but instead you rejected the one Man who came to give you life and you embraced death.

“You claim to have power, but you don’t have power at all. God is in control, not you: you can do nothing at all except what God allows. God has placed you where you are and God can remove you just as easily. I am not in your hands, but His; when He is done with me He will bring me home and not all your power and might can put me to death a minute sooner than He chooses. You say that you rule the stars, but He created them – and when He is finished with them He will bring them to an end.

You talk about ruling the stars: with God it was an effortless act to halt the Sun in the sky so that Joshua could avenge himself upon his foes, and not all your power and might can make the Sun rise and fall at your will.”

Two men – sitting across from each other. One man was a free man; the other was a slave. One man would live, and the other would die. One was the victor, and the other had lost. Soon they would both know who was the victor and who was not – very soon.



## The Well

“HELP ME!” I yelled, for the hundredth time. There was no response. “Figures I’d pick today to forget my cell phone,” I muttered.

I was lying at the bottom of a large, dry, open well. The opening of the well was about thirty feet above me. The well was about six feet in diameter, which gave me plenty of room to lie on its floor and groan in agony. I had been trying to repair some broken stone blocks in the side of the well when the rope I was using broke. I fell to the bottom of the well, where I broke an ankle and possibly other body parts as well. That was the last time I was ever going to use ropes from the abandoned barn across the street!

I sighed and looked up again at the opening, trying to figure out what I was going to do, when a shadow covered the opening of the well. A voice boomed out from above. “Hello?”

“Thank heaven!” I shouted. “Please help me – I’ve fallen into the well.”

“The road of life is paved with suffering,” the voice replied. “We must go through many trials in our walk upon the earth.”

“Right,” I said. “I think I’ve broken my ankle, and maybe a few other things as well. Can you go get some help?”

“We must not adapt the road to suit ourselves,” the voice said. “We must adapt ourselves to the road.”

“Good point,” I said. “Do you have a cell phone? I’ve left mine in the house.”

“Suffering strengthens the soul,” the voice replied. “It builds character. Great men are forged through great trials.”

“Do you speak English?” I asked.

“It rejoices my heart to see my brother being put through trials,” the voice said. “You will become a stronger man as a result of this. I cannot bring myself to deprive my brother of an opportunity for personal growth.”

“Tell you what,” I said. “If you will help me out of this well I’d be glad to push you in it and let you moan in pain at the bottom of the well while some complete imbecile rattles on and on about unpaved roads. Do we have a deal?”

“I will pray for you,” the voice said. “May you find solace in your time of need.”

The shadow disappeared.

“I’ll show him solace,” I muttered. “If I ever get out of this well he will have more solace than he knows what to do with.”

I felt a drop of water. Looking up, I saw that it had begun to rain. “Wonderful,” I said.

## To Reach the Stars

I HAPPENED to be passing by Regina 9 one day while on shore leave and decided to stop in and see my uncle, Richard Claymore. I hadn't seen him for decades; for the past thirty years I had been stationed in deep space, blazing a path for others to follow. All I had heard in that time was that my uncle had retreated from public life and become something of a recluse.

To be honest, I was a little concerned about him. Since we were the same age we had grown up together, and as children we both dreamed of exploring the outer reaches of the galaxy. As children we talked for hours about the latest discoveries in space and the colonies that were being built on distant planets. We both wanted a part of the action and we worked hard to achieve our dreams: in college my uncle studied terraformation and I majored in faster-than-light propulsion. Neither of us doubted that we would make it, but if I had to guess which of us were more likely to be accepted into the Deep Space Exploration Guild I would have picked my uncle. Even his professors thought he was the brightest student they'd ever seen.

Life, though, didn't turn out as we had planned. Both of us applied for jobs in the DSEG, but to our great surprise I was accepted and my uncle was not. The DSEG claimed that there weren't any openings left for terraformation engineers; the trouble they faced was finding the right kind of dead planet, not in bringing that planet to life. To this day I still believe that was just an excuse.

Once I was in deep space I became a busy man and lost touch with everyone back home. My unit stayed far outside the

colonized areas; even the nearest trade lanes were hundreds of light-years away. Since we were beyond the range of even deep-space tachyon receivers there was no easy way to send messages back home, and as time went on I got more wrapped up in my work and thought less and less of home.

I still occasionally heard bits of news from other DSEG units I encountered in the field. At first, from what I could tell, my uncle seemed to be in good spirits: he had accepted defeat graciously and spent his energies building a company that manufactured atomic engineering equipment. Over time he built it into an extremely profitable business, but as the years went by he seemed to lose interest in it and eventually turned its day-to-day operations over to someone else.

When I heard that I began to wonder if my uncle was starting to regret his past. Being a part of the DSEG was an amazing experience, and I knew my uncle had longed to be a part of it as much as I had. The DSEG would send my unit to entirely new worlds – worlds that had never before been visited by anyone – and we were responsible for surveying it and preparing for the terraformation process that was required before it could be inhabited. Despite all the advancements we've had in the past three centuries terraformation is still a challenging business: it took a century and a fortune to turn a dry, barren planet into a wet, fertile one. There's so much that has to be done, and it becomes even more time-consuming if we have to move the planet into a different orbit or find a sizeable moon for it. I loved every minute of it, though: we were the first to find new worlds, the first to see them, and the first to live on them while preparing them for the cities that would follow. We would all go down in history and we knew it.

I knew my uncle could have joined us had he played his cards right. In his enthusiasm, though, he had overstepped his bounds: during his job interview with the DSEG he foolishly tried to sell them on a radical new approach to terraforming planets. Spatial mechanics is outside my field, but he said something to the effect that that moving atoms around was a huge waste of time and

instead they ought to be tinkering with the mechanics of space. It didn't make a lot of sense to me and I suspect it didn't make a lot of sense to them either; his application was turned down, and that was that.

All of these things were in my head when I called my uncle that fateful day and asked him if I could pay him a visit. To my surprise he said he'd love to see me and that I was free to stay as long as I liked. He was greatly disappointed when I said I could only stay for the night, but he still invited me to pay him a visit.

So I did. Regina 9 was not a very large well-known planet; it was outside the main flow of business and had a rural, laid-back atmosphere. My uncle had built a beautiful place there deep in the countryside, nestled amidst a sea of rolling green hills. I had never visited it before but I'd seen pictures of it, and it was really something: a large, elegant mansion with old-fashioned pillars, bay windows, and a large front porch. It looked like something taken straight from the Victorian Era and was a refreshing change from the ultra-modern residences that were so common these days.

My uncle was there at the spaceport to pick me up and took me on a delightful ride to his sprawling estate in an old-fashioned propeller-driven plane. There's nothing quite like flying over the countryside in the spring; there's a sense of beauty and tranquility that you just can't get on a high-speed monorail or starship. The entire world seems to be at your feet while you soar lazily through the sky and soak in the beautiful view.

During the two-hour flight we began to catch up on old times. I asked him how everyone was doing and he filled me in on all the latest news. He asked me how life was on the edge of civilization and I told him about the amazing sights I'd seen. He listened with interest and told me he was glad I was enjoying my job.

I noticed that my uncle didn't say a lot about himself. When I told him that I'd heard he had left his company he replied that he'd had his fill of business and decided it was time to move on

and fulfill his dream of exploring new worlds.

He explained what he meant later that night, after we'd arrived home, had dinner, and started to relax. After giving me a tour of his stately residence he showed me his pride and joy: the library. His collection was astonishing: the library was a huge two-story room, decorated in true Victorian fashion and filled with thousands upon thousands of ornate hardback books. These were real books, too, made from genuine paper, and he had more of them than any museum I'd ever seen.

My uncle laughed when he saw my eyes widen and told me that this was his work now. He had been collecting books over the past decade; some he'd written, some he'd purchased, and others he had printed. Still others, he said, were gifts from his friends.

"James," he said, "there's nothing like writing a book. When the DSEG goes out and finds a planet it takes them enormous effort to transform it from a barren wasteland into a rich fairyland. They have to wait most of their lives to see their vision come true, and it takes an incredible amount of time, energy, and money to make it happen.

"Writing books allows me to do the same thing that you're doing, only on a much vaster scale. In a book, I can sit down at my desk and write my own worlds – fantastic places that had never been seen before. I don't have to wait a century to see my dreams; all it takes is a little bit of time and imagination to create places as gripping as anything you've seen out there in space.

"Of course, the size of the world I have in mind will affect how long it takes to write it. Sometimes I can wrap things up in just a week, and sometimes it takes years. There's one book I started writing ten years ago that I still haven't finished – and there's another I wrote in a single day. It's exciting, James: it is truly a gift from God."

My uncle invited me to look around, and as I did so I began to see what he meant. It really did take ages to terraform a planet, but with a book you could build fantastic worlds in a matter of months. You could even build places that defied the laws of physics and were still filled with life and adventure. Of course,

these places weren't *real*, like the worlds I explored; they existed only in the imagination – but for all that they were still amazing places.

While I was looking around my uncle told me that he had some pressing business to attend to and would return in a few hours. I nodded, not really paying him any attention, and continued browsing through the many books stacked on his shelves. My uncle smiled when he saw my fascination with his library and left the room, promising to come back later.

After he left I continued to explore, picking out books from the shelf at random and browsing through them. A small row of books on the other side of the room happened to catch my eye; of all the books in the library they looked phony, somehow. When I went up to them and examined them closely I discovered that they were just book spines glued onto a wooden backing, and a little probing revealed a small panel that, when pressed, opened a short passage leading to another large library.

Grinning at my discovery and still clutching a book I had picked up earlier, I stepped into the passage. The secret door quietly slid shut behind me. My uncle's childhood love of secret passages must have never left him, I thought; I should have known that he would have something like this in his house. Feeling a bit mischievous I wandered through his hidden library and decided to see what kind of books my uncle had stashed away, hidden from casual observers.

I gently picked one off the shelf and looked it over. This book seemed very old, much older than the ones in the other room; it was obviously hand-made, though finely done, and had some strange, hand-written lettering on the cover in a language I didn't recognize. I opened the book to the middle and began to flip through the pages, and saw to my surprise that the entire book had been written by hand with real ink. Someone with very fine, flowing handwriting had written pages and pages of text in some alien language. I wondered what it said and had the eerie feeling that I was holding something ancient and irreplaceable.

I turned the book to its first page to see if there was any sort

of explanatory note with the book, and saw instead a rectangular panel near the top of the page. As I watched the panel came alive; it looked like amazingly clear videoscreen that offered a looped 30-second tour of a gorgeous planet, filled with tall mountains, soaring evergreens and a beautiful sky. The screen was so good that it made the world look real; you could imagine that it really existed somewhere. I'd never seen anything like it before and thought it was pretty clever: the screen was probably designed as an illustration, to give the reader a visual glimpse of the world contained within the book.

After putting that volume back on the shelf I glanced across the library and saw a worn desk sitting in a corner with a book lying on top of it. Curious, I went over to the desk and examined the book. A quick glance showed that it had no writing on its pages; it was empty save for a black rectangle on the first page. When I spotted the inkwell and pen I surmised that this private library was where my uncle did his writing. The paper was probably some kind of modern electronic paper that could read the ink off the page; once my uncle finished his book the pages could interpret what was written on them and, based on that, generate the 30-second flyby that I had witnessed in the other volume. Not a bad trick; I wondered why I hadn't seen it before in my wanderings around the galaxy. I set the book back down on his desk.

I settled down in a comfortable chair in the hidden library and began reading the book I had picked up earlier. After a while I began to get a little tired, and before I knew it I had drifted off to sleep.

I don't know how long I slept in that chair, but late that night something woke me up. When I opened my eyes I saw that the room was quite dark, save for a light shining on the worn desk in the corner. Sitting at the desk was my uncle; he was busy writing in the blank book that was lying on the desk. I watched him scribble away, pausing now and then to dip his pen in ink. He was very intent on his work and so I remained quiet, not wanting to disturb him.

After a few minutes of work – although he could have been writing for hours before I woke up – he closed the book he had been writing in and then opened it to its first page. I saw colors shine onto his face, as if the panel in the front was now active and emitting light. My uncle watched the panel for a while and then smiled. He stood up, yawned, and then picked up a backpack that was lying next to the desk. After placing a few items into it he laid his hand on the panel on the book – and disappeared.

I gasped. What had happened to my uncle? I got out of the chair and walked over to the desk, but by the time I got there the book was gone. I was briefly surprised at its disappearance until I heard a soft click, and then realized it must have lowered itself into a secret cavity inside the desk. I tried to find a way to locate it again, but my search was in vain.

Since it was late and I was tired I went up to my room and went to bed. The next morning I found no sign of my uncle; his butler told me that he had left the night before on an urgent assignment, and that was that. I used his matter transporter to beam back to the spaceport, and from there boarded a starship and went back out into space.

That happened three years ago. I haven't had a chance to go back to see my uncle since then, but my visit has never left my mind. Maybe I was just dreaming when I thought I saw my uncle at that desk, writing. Maybe I just imagined it; I was pretty tired.

What I can't get out of my head, though, is this: what if it wasn't just a dream? What if, when my uncle told me he wrote worlds with pen and ink, he meant exactly that? What if the worlds he writes about are not just limited to the imagination, but are *actually real*?

It's impossible, of course. No one can build worlds just by writing about them. I've wondered, though: what would have happened if I had touched that glowing panel in the book I had picked up?

Next time I'm on shore leave I really should pay my uncle another visit and find out what is really going on. Maybe I'm

crazy, and maybe my years in deep space have affected my mind,  
but – what if my uncle has found a new way to reach the stars?

## Welfare

I WAS IN my living room that evening, enjoying a trek across Middle Earth with a pair of hobbits, when I was disturbed by a knock on the door. Upon rising to answer the knock I saw my friend Norris standing outside, looking even more bedraggled than usual. I reluctantly opened the door.

“Hey there!” Norris called out, beaming with happiness. “I’m so glad your home! I’ve got some great news for you.”

“Hello to you too, Norris,” I said. I hadn’t seen my friend in weeks. “That’s – great. What do you have on your mind?”

“I’ve come to offer you an opportunity to enrich your life!” he said enthusiastically. “I’ve come to bless you with good tidings!”

“So you’ve found a job at last!” I said, reaching my hand out toward him. “Congratulations! I knew you could do it if you just went out and looked for one. Able-bodied men like yourself are in high demand these days. You’ve finally started on the road to adulthood, my friend.”

Norris shook his head. “Oh no – you misunderstand! It’s even better than that. I’ve come to offer you a chance to help a friend in need. I’ve decided to move in with you!”

I withdrew my hand and put it back in my pocket. “I don’t think so, Norris. Of all the people on this wonderful planet of ours, you are least qualified to claim to be a person in need. What you need is a little responsibility.”

“Ah, my friend,” Norris said, “my very dear friend! This is a chance to exercise generosity in a cold and blistery month! This is a marvelous chance for you to show some warmth and compassion to a cold man, without funds or prospects.”

"So your sister finally got wise and kicked you out, did she?" I asked.

"That's quite beside the point," Norris said. "I am here now, ready to be a blessing to you, my friend!"

"You mean you're ready to leech off my hard work," I replied. "There is no reason on earth why you can't go get a job, Norris. You're quite capable of working; you just don't want to. You'd rather steal from your neighbors than take care of yourself."

"I prefer to think that I'm offering people a chance to give back to the community," he replied.

"You're a thief, Norris," I said. "I'm not going to subsidize your desire to live without working."

"You can't just leave me out here," he protested. "My TV show starts in half an hour."

I smiled. Norris looked at me, puzzled.

"My friend," I said. "As you know, I have great love and concern for you in my heart. For years I have tried to help you in your journey through this world."

"That's more like it," he said. He started to step inside, but I held him back.

"You, however, are confused," I continued. "You mistakenly believe that your real need is shelter and funds, but it's not."

"It's not?" he asked.

"No, Norris, it's not. Your real problem is a lack of character! You need to become independent and stop stealing from people who care about you. And I, Norris - I am willing to help you on your quest to become a good citizen."

"How are you going to do that?" he asked.

"By allowing you to suffer the consequences of your actions," I replied.

"But you can't do that!" he said, aghast. "How can I possibly live a comfortable life if you don't pay my way?"

"You could try paying for it yourself," I replied, as I closed the door.