

Exo Red Chapter one

Coffee. The faint scent of coffee pulled him back into the waking world, but slowly. It was just enough for his consciousness to check some of the other inputs before sending out the alarms, auditory confirming the soft gurgling sounds were indeed the coffee pot. It was still mid brew by the sounds of it, no need to do anything foolish like check in on the eyes, nothing out there that needed seeing yet. His body was reporting the usual complaints and reminders that it isn't the years, it's the milage, although in his case, both shared blame equally. The coffee sounds changed into a more urgent sputtering signaling that it was probably safe for him to awaken and figure out what the world had in store for him today. Launch day. Shit. Probably should have stayed in bed.

Swinging his legs out of bed and to the floor brought another round of protests from his sore muscles and the peanut gallery of injuries that he carried from youth. Standing and stretching his back set his inner ear ringing with the sound of braking kindling as everything moved back into position, ready for another day of wear and tear. The only time Red felt old was in the morning, as though his body had spent the whole night thinking of things to remind him of in the only language it spoke fluently, pain. It always told stories of age and time.

Redwood Aquino was an Exo and Exo's didn't track time the same way as ordinary people. By his personal chronometer, he was 75. If tracked physiologically, he had the body of a man in his mid-forties thanks to the Re-Juvy treatments ten years ago. If you measured by his bones, they told a story much more ancient, in the story they told he was 475 years old. The fourth oldest human, so far. Somehow, his bones were tied to the motion of the sun and could tell how many times the earth had made the trip around, or the alignment of the stars whispered his true age to them in the darkness. Whatever the source of their wisdom, his bones were there to remind him of all the lost years, all the mistakes and follies, all the sins committed while he was present, and the rest committed while he wasn't. They sang to him in a low baritone of agony to compliment the soprano chorus coming from the more recent music of his flesh. His bones sang the sad song of his true age.

He poured the first cup of coffee without looking back at the bed, he knew she was gone, he also knew this was the best thing and the best way to do it, but it still hurt knowing that he would never see her again. Most people grow out of their puppy love phase early in their twenties, but after 450 years, Red still had issues. He probably would have made an ass of himself and started declaring his love for her and calling command to cancel his flight, which would have resulted in the Agency hauling him to the elevator base beaten, bloody, and restrained. No, even though Mavi was 440 years younger than him, she was far more mature, and gracefully avoided anything that could have ruined an otherwise pleasant episode in each of their lives. He generally tried to not become involved with his temporal companions, but it happened from time to time, and in Mavi's case, he was pretty sure it was she that was taking advantage of him. Temporal companions are important for long haulers like Red. That was the job he worked, one for twenty. One year working on an alien ship and when you get back, twenty have passed at home. Twenty years of tv shows, technical advancements, music genres, politics, changes, changes, changes. The world spins on whether you are watching it or not.

Twenty to sixty years wasn't bad, you recognized stuff when you get back, it had changed somewhat, but you knew what everything was for and what it was doing. It was cool to time skip

into the future, to see the changes, to be able to watch the next 7 sequels to that movie you liked before you left, and the reboot, all the great books that had been written just waiting for you to come back and read them, an endless fascination with all that was new.

At eighty it started to get harder. People started dying, friends, family, celebrities, leaders, those that hadn't died were old, so very old. The music sounded off, there was something just not right about it. One had a hard time laughing, the pop culture references at the heart of most humor were lost on someone that hadn't spent their whole life immersed in that era's media. It became hard to find a good meal, the culinary whims shifted to an unfamiliar flavor pallet that no longer harkened back to the remembrance of innocent youth and the comfort found there. Movies just made no sense.

After missing a hundred years the real disconnect started. There was nothing familiar about home. The upscale shopping district once enjoyed was now a slum, your favorite bar or restaurant rebranded, rebuilt, or just gone. It became increasingly harder to find meaningful connections to the present. At eighty years was where ideas and social philosophy started to change. The constantly shifting landscape of what is normal moves farther than a mind rooted in the past can stretch, so it disconnects. Human beings are social creatures by nature and don't do well when un-connected to their fellows. One becomes a ghost moving through a world they can witness but no longer interact with.

Beyond two hundred years was like landing on an alien world. Dialects and slang had changed to the point that simple communication with everyday people became challenging. Whatever that new fad in music was? It sucked. What people ate for food now? No thanks. Fashion? Forget about it, not wearing that in public. The list was endless and as varied as the Exo's themselves. Things typically got worse the farther down the rabbit hole an Exo went.

That's where the temporal companions come in. It wasn't enough to catchup on the tv shows missed, the changes in music, politics, movies, events, philosophy, religion, or anything else. It was about making a connection to each era as you passed through it, a personal connection, something visceral and primitive that interacts on a subconscious level. The lost past must become more than information recovered, it must be reveled in, experienced in such a way to join one's personal history to history itself. The past should leave bruises, scars, regret, joy, loss, and redemption. For an Exo, that must be done in the very short time before they step off the ride for another twenty. The Agency was stingy and wouldn't pay for one on each trip back, hiring someone for a year to baby sit a full-grown adult was expensive. One of your employees having a psychotic break and killing a few people while on shore leave is also expensive, so the bare minimum of mental health services were provided.

Red was an Exo in every sense of the term, he always seemed to be looking in on everything from a distance, never looking out from within. He traveled between the stars, the earth a tiny spec somewhere in the foreign skies he would look back on, if he even knew where to look, or how. When he was on Earth, he drifted like a ghost through whatever drab existence defined that era, only the colors changed, never the injustice or cruelty. He would witness it all, detached, a performance by fresh characters playing old themes, overused plot twists, with predictable endings. It was a collection of events that happened to other people, not to him, as if time needed to fill the empty space between moments with something while it waited for him to stop paying attention and return to the solitude of space.

In space he was real. Without the human circus to distract from the singularness of existence he could drop all pretense and just allow himself to fully engage with the small, isolated world of ship life. There are no feelings to hurt, no social graces to bungle, no feelings of

inadequacy born of comparison, no facades to maintain out of defense or politeness. He missed the excitement of being on Earth, but being engaged with the swirling mass of chaos that is human civilization is exhausting and after a year he was ready to return to his quiet repose, usually after a year Earth was ready for him to leave too.

He carried his coffee over to the open west window and looked out over the Pacific as the first hint of dawn started to light up the warm waters that surrounded West Papua and Indonesia. About 200 kilometers to the west lay Obi Island and the base of the Elevator. The elevator cable itself was very hard to see in almost all light conditions unless you were very close, and even then, everyone seemed to describe it vaguely and nonspecifically. The phrase “What color is the cable?” had become a long running social idiom to describe something mysterious or malevolently indistinct. The cable was constructed of millions of odd geometric shapes that interlocked and formed a chain reaching into space. The material they were made from was somewhat translucent and shifted colors depending on ambient light and the angle viewed. It made it difficult to discern any real detail as the shapes seem to shift and morph.

But if you were in the exact right spot, at the right time, the cable would treat you to a show. His window looked west from the shallows just offshore the town of Defoer. It was a shithole town and an even worse hotel, but it had a room with a window that faced the ocean. The mountains of West Papua behind him kept the small hotel in darkness as the sun rose. Normally light tended to seemingly bend as it passed the cable, from a distance it was a nearly invisible smudge, but at the beginning of each day the light bounced back to the East for a glorious moment. It started high in the atmosphere as the dawn rushed from space and plunged through the atmosphere and towards the sea, suddenly a lance of fire descended from the heavens as the morning sun set the cable alight in a golden glow. It streaked down growing in brightness like an era ending meteor ready to snuff out all life on a sinful world. The impact when it reached the base was anticlimactic, there was no explosion or flash of light, just a moment of perfect silence as the cable burned from its’ humble connection on earth up to the unknown of the heavens. Then the whole sky brightened, and the cable slowly faded away, waiting for the next dawn.

The morning sun crested over the mountain and reveled the festering town below. After the Elevator cable had arrived, every patch of dirt that could stay above water for five hundred kilometers around Oki Island had been purchased and developed in anticipation of the wealth that would flow through the area on its way to and from the Elevator. Towns sprang up anywhere they could put a decent marina or airport. After four hundred years most of the region had turned into slums when all the wealth died out after the initial surge to capitalize on the Elevator. Now most of the real wealth was from asteroid mining and those loads were dropped way out in open water to avoid accidentally leveling a city, again. So, the area around the elevator descended into a quasi-lawless zone ruled by various crime syndicates, economic coalitions, and a few self-proclaimed dictators. It was cheap and a good place to hide if you didn’t want to be found, otherwise, it wasn’t a good place. There was a lingering scent of something decaying in the humidity, between the lack of sanitation infrastructure and the murder rate, Red didn’t really want to know the source of the smell. The first sounds of the morning assaulted his ears as the denizens began their day of screaming arguments, screaming conversations, and just screaming in general. In the bay he could see a small fleet of what would normally be considered fishing vessels heading out to open waters. The fish had long since died out in the region, which led one to wonder what exactly those boats spent their day doing and what they needed so many guns for. Not that the streets were any safer for him, for anyone really, but especially for him

today. Normally skipping out on a small loan he needed to have a little fun with wasn't a big deal, he did it all the time, in twenty years it was highly unlikely that the gang he was about to rip off would still be alive or think to look for him in another part of the world when he returned. Except in this case word had apparently gotten back to them that he was leaving today and not next week when he promised to repay the loan. It was time to go.

Defoer wasn't a place where you walked around carrying anything, at least, not for long. The only things of value were his ID and access to his nearly empty bank account, both were encrypted safely in the ident chip buried in his forearm. He put on enough clothes to blend in and headed downstairs. A quick trip through the service entrance put him on the narrow street behind the hotel where he headed east towards the docks. Someone would probably be looking for him there, he hadn't booked passage yet, so they would have to watch all the terminals to spot him, but he doubted he would make it that far anyway. The narrow street spilled out on the main road and throngs of people moving quickly without making eye contact with anyone, to be noticed was to be singled out. Despite his towering name, Redwood was anything but tall, five foot six with dark hair and almond shaped eyes, he merged unnoticed into the crowd of people that all vaguely shared his undefined Pacific heritage.

He'd been given the name Pula Kahoy Aquino by his father, and it was about the only thing Robert Aquino ever did for, or to him. A merchant marine by trade, his father had stayed in the Philippines just long enough to do two things, get his mother pregnant and ask a friend who was almost as drunk as he was to translate the word Redwood into Tagalog even though his friend spoke almost no Tagalog. Robert thought it would be a cool name, so while his mother was still covered in afterbirth, Robert had filled out the birth certificate and without ever holding his son, headed for the next ship leaving never to be seen again. The only thing it ever did was teach him how to fight. Red wondered sometimes if his father traveled the world leaving children named Redwood in a dozen different languages and a dozen different ports. He might have a legion of half siblings long lost in the indifference of time. Despite his best efforts the name had stuck with him and by the time he was an adult it was easier than explaining what Pula Kahoy meant, so he kept it.

The main harbor was a few miles away to the north, to the south and much closer was the airport, but that was suicide. Only one entrance and a whole bunch of guards that were all on the take to someone and always on the lookout for a juicy payday rounding up someone for the syndicates. He headed north and tried to not look like someone that was trying not to be noticed. Stopping at a food stand and grabbing a bowl of noodles allowed him to look inconspicuously down the street he had just come up. Among the crowd there was a man that broke rhythm as his brain got caught for a split second trying to override the instinct to freeze when spotted and to continue to walk to maintain the ruse. Red had known a lot of violent men in his day, some were friends, most were not, but they all carried the same look about them, something about the eyes that chilled the spine without reason. He grabbed his noodles and started casually down a side street, breaking into a run as soon as he rounded the corner and sprinting for five blocks, making unpredictable turns at each intersection while heading roughly north towards the harbor. Out of breath and sweating in the morning heat he slowed to a walk and again tried to look like a no one, doing nothing, just another guy walking down the street.

The nearly silent ground car was next to Red before he noticed it, before he could run, strong hands grabbed him and pulled him inside. He knew what would happen next, he would be beaten viciously, when he didn't come up with the money, he would be beaten more, then the ident chip in his arm would be carved out with something not sharp enough for the job so it

could be sold or hacked, and he would be dumped broken on the street. It wouldn't even matter if they killed him or not, without the ident, he couldn't travel, use currency, get medical help or food. He would either bleed out from the initial beating, get killed shortly thereafter by someone else just because he couldn't defend himself, or just slowly starve to death.

"You're getting better at this, took me 30 minutes longer to catch you than I thought, lost 20 credits to Parsens on that one." The rough voice was vaguely familiar and more importantly belonged to a someone that although he wanted to, would not kill him.

"Jesus. Carlson, Is that you?" Red responded.

"None other." Carlson answered as he released Red and settled his wiry frame into the bench seat across from him. He had aged quite a bit in the eighteen months since Red had seen him last, but Carlson had put twenty years of mileage on the family sedan since then and from the look of him, they hadn't been easy miles.

"What do you want?" Red knew exactly what he wanted, but he was still getting over the whole about to be killed thing and needed to buy some time to get his head straight before he started dealing his next problem, the Agency.

The Agency had started at the beginning of the Exo program, all the way back to the First Ten and Hiro Mifune, when they still used the grandiose title of Exosolar Physicists, when the former United States was heavily involved and from their ranks a spider crept in. The goal of the whole planet was to extract as much information and technology from the Trencher's as we could, naturally the world's best spies were put in charge of gathering intelligence using the Exo's traveling out. At first it was the same as any operation, infiltrate, acquire information and get it back. But aliens didn't play nice and weren't easily fooled, so year after year the Agency failed to produce anything useful, eventually they faded into obscurity, mostly. Good spies do their best work under cover of darkness and anonymity and the people that started the agency were very good spies indeed. Using their well-practiced black bag of tricks, they applied pressure to the right places and right people until the program was classified above Top Secret and well-funded despite never appearing on any budgets, anywhere. Desperation had made them cruel, constant failure made them angry, and a lack of any meaningful oversight had made them dangerous. Their main stock and trade now were stealing tech from other companies, but they still like to keep tabs on the Exo's in case that troublesome tree ever bears any fruit.

"You missed our prep meeting last week. That was hurtful." Carlson replied.

"Why would I show up for that? I could tell you to fuck off over the phone. Next time just call and save us both the hassle. You know I don't take new gear out with me, and even you lawless assholes can't send it up without my say so, and my say so is no!"

"Again, that's hurtful. Don't you even want to hear the pitch? It's pretty good." Exo's had to report to the Agency before and after each trip for debrief, if you were lucky, that was an hour in a cube on Sagan station reporting through a video link. If you had spent several hundred years pissing off generations of agents, you fell into the unlucky category and were subject to all manner of abuse, up to and including being Carlsoned. They could only push it so far, they couldn't kill him, god knows Carlson wanted to, and they couldn't send up anything without telling the Exo and getting their express approval. Those were about the only rules in the game, which made it a bit of a blood sport. Red smiled a bit to see that Carlson's nose hadn't straighten out properly since their last meeting but the dull pain radiating out of the still healing broken cheekbone he got in return took any real joy out of it.

"No, no and maybe I will throw in a free no right at the end for you. No!"

"Crustacean." Carlson said with an arrogant smirk on his face.

Red stared blankly at the thin man for 30 seconds before he could form an elegant response. “Whaddafuk?”

“I pained me to have to do it, but I ran your stupid fucking proposal past the hardware guys, and they seemed to think it was less stupid than I did. The idea got bounced around until someone upstairs decided to fund it and they built the damn things for you.”

“You’re shitting me. You fucking hate me, why would you do that? I mean that would have been right after I broke your nose, right?”

“I guess shattering the left side of your face had put me in a pretty good mood, it still cheers me up to think about that, even after all these years. It made the funniest little noise, your face, when it broke.” Carlson sat across from Red with a sickeningly content expression.

“I honestly can’t decide between thanking you or trying to break your nose again.” Carlson pulled a small black recording device out of his jacket, clicked it on, and extended it. “What do you say? It was your idea; you want to launch with operation Crustacean on board?” Once, the Agency had tried to sneak something onboard using the Exo’s food container as cover. After it was ejected into space and the Exo had to live for a year eating nutrient paste, a few rules got put in place, like the one requiring them to have an actual recording to prove they got permission.

“It still feels like I am about to walk into the culmination of some revenge plot that you have spent the last twenty years fabricating just to get back at me.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, I honestly had forgotten about you until your file landed on my desk last month. So” He waved the recorder around a bit to make his point.

“Fine, yes, you have my consent. Are we done now?”

“See that wasn’t so hard, was it? Here’s the file.” He reached over and held a what looked like a standard comm block but wasn’t. A series of lights light up incrementally and beeped when the data transfer was complete.

“I can taste bile right now, agreeing with you doesn’t agree with me.”

Red had never heard Carlson laugh; it was slightly less disturbing than the psychotic smile he got when he talked about hurting someone. “Don’t be like that, you done good, and to show you I am not such a bad guy, I have present for you.” Carlson opened the door and gestured out.

Red had expected to be dumped unceremoniously on the streets far from the harbor as a final payback, so he was surprised when the door revealed what appeared to be a private residence with a launch pad. Everything felt like a trap around Carlson, his stock and trade was deception and pitfalls, so it wasn’t entirely unwarranted. “I’m going to go out on a limb here but seems like you might have been given orders to give me the VIP treatment if I accepted your offer. Probably the same someone that bankrolled this little project and would notice if any of the perks had been held back? I’m guessing you would have preferred to dump me somewhere, kick back and watch the show as the locals finished me off?”

Carlson stared at him without speaking, saying much.

“That’s what I thought. Well, hopefully you will be dead by the time I get back, don’t let me down.” He said as he jumped out the car and away from Carlson, hopefully forever.

The sleek black transport sat humming softly on the pad waiting for him as he exited the car. Completely autonomous, it quietly lifted into the air after confirming that he was the correct passenger going to the correct destination. He set it to tourist mode so that it would fly high over the islands providing a more scenic ride than he completely ignored lost in thought.

Crustacean. He had spent years working on it knowing full well that it would never get the green light, yet somehow it had, maybe they had learned something new that made them think it would work, maybe they were just desperate and didn't mind putting him on the line to test a theory. Probably the latter.

The only connection point between Trencher tech and human tech was a single airlock that connected Sagan Station with the transit craft that ferried Exo's out to Pluto and back.

After docking, the transit ship would immediately depart for Pluto with the new Exo and return to its host ship where it stayed until needed again. No human tech got near a Trencher ship. They even launched into FTL from a position such that Pluto would block line of sight with Earth preventing unwanted eyes from glimpsing any clues to how their drive worked.

But they had to pick up the monkey before each trip, and for that one brief moment their ship came into contact with something humanity controlled. It was a small target, just the one airlock connection between ship and station, and only for ten minutes, that's the length and breadth of time it takes to load consumables and swap primates. Below the main airlock there was the loading lock that moved supplies between ship and station. The loading connection wasn't pressurized, so magnetic seals were used. The upper lock was pressurized and connected securely via four mechanical latches that pulled a hard seal tightly around the craft. Everything was scanned, it was scanned in the transit craft on the way out, it was scanned in the cargo hold before leaving, he was scanned in the airlock before he left and again before he entered the ship for his shift. But they didn't scan the outside of the vessels, at least, that was he was hoping Crustacean depended on it.

Every now and again, a ship would not return, no explanation was ever given, no questions ever asked, it was just one of those things that got chalked up to the price of doing business. About 25 ships a year launched and every few years one wouldn't come back, A ship would show up at the correct time, but it wouldn't be the one the left twenty years ago, the Exo who should have returned didn't. Once, the transport ship that normally dropped off the returning human as it picked him up, returned empty. He never even knew the name of the person who should have stepped out of the airlock, he just dutifully boarded the transport and headed out as if nothing had happened. About one in a hundred, those were the odds of not coming back, not great, not bad. He mostly didn't think about it, unless he was alone heading out to the elevator with no one around to distract him, then it was heavy burden that was hard to shake.

The ship dropped him off at the Oki Island terminal and skipped back to its wealthy owners leaving him on the landing pad, where security descended on him. In a world that was constantly changing from his perspective it was almost refreshing that bureaucracy was immune to evolving. He had his credentials verified by no less than four different armed marines before he made it into the terminal complex, then he passed three more checkpoints manned by unarmed but wary security personnel before reaching the boarding area. The lift car was waiting, and a few people were making their way into the small cabin to find a seat. The bulk of what the elevator transported wasn't people, it was mostly cargo and supplies for the station and the various bases scattered throughout the solar system that needed regular resupply. He always hated the ride up, there was no first-class seating and invariably some idiot that was taking their first trip up would want to spend most of the eight-hour ride yammering excitedly in his ear about the adventures that awaited them in space. They were always wrong of course, people thought going into space was romantic and exciting, but space mostly sucked. Bases were built with minimum comforts, they were always small, cramped and occupied by more people than should be reasonably crammed into a something the size of a school bus without windows. With

very few exceptions, there were no breathtaking vistas to stare at while you ate the protein paste provided to keep you alive, no privacy except a thin curtain that covered the bunk you were assigned. If someone paid to send you into space, it was because they wanted you to work, not relax, so most deployments to science or mining stations were relatively short and grueling. People coming down the elevator never wanted to talk. Red liked them.

Despite the mostly empty cabin, a portly middle-aged man plopped into the seat next to him with the glassy hopeful eyes of a first timer and introduced himself. “Hi neighbor, I’m Ron, guess you and I are heading up together. I’m going to Quanto station out near the asteroid belt to do some prospecting! Where are you heading?”

Quanto station, the outhouse. It got its name from a notoriously bad waste removal system that was constantly overloaded by the station being overcrowded. It was a private operation, so as little money as possible was spent maintaining it, and as many paying customers as the regulations allowed were always packed into it. For a fee someone could rent space there and a remote scout to send off into the asteroid belt searching for treasure. Sometimes someone got lucky and found a rock worth mining, but most just went broke and returned to earth destitute. Companies hired people like Ron to go out and prospect for them, they paid the passage and got ninety five percent of the take, but even a modest find could set someone up for life on that last five percent, so a lot of people took the job without thinking about too much. Red really didn’t want this guy talking to him the whole ride up and he most certainly wasn’t going to tell him he was an Exo. Once people found out what he did for a living they wanted to hear all the crazy stories from all his crazy space adventures. Problem was he didn’t have any, his job was boring, but no one ever believed that. So, he did the only thing he could. In perfect standard sign language, he signed to Ron that he was deaf, along with the appropriate hand gestures around his ears to drive the point home. Learning sign language had been one of the more productive uses of his time and had saved him from several annoying people like Ron.

“OH! I AM SO SORRY, MY NAME IS R. O. N. RON.” Why did people always scream and apologize to deaf people? Like deaf people were only a little deaf and could understand if it was said slowly and loudly enough.

Red almost blew his cover by laughing, instead he just nodded and shook Ron’s hand politely and pulled out the book he intended to read the whole ride up. Mavi had bought it and assured him that it would appeal to his juvenile sense of humor, she was right. There were windows that looked straight out but none that provided a view above or below the cabin since those areas were used for cargo, so the only indication that you were getting closer to the station was the fading gravity that slowly decreased until the seat belt was the only thing holding you in place. Invariably one of the guests would decide they needed to use the restroom and despite the briefing only a few hours earlier they would launch themselves out of their seat in the micro gravity and smash into the padded ceiling. Red had to stifle a laugh as Ron bounced off the ceiling, across the room into a wall, into the ceiling again, until finally colliding with the poor woman two seats back. After apologizing profusely Ron pulled himself carefully back to his seat deciding he could hold it for a bit longer until he reached the station.

An hour later they arrived and were swallowed by the behemoth station as it covered the windows and cut off the view. After a few minutes there were four solid sounding thuds as Sagan station securely clamped the car in place. Red carried nothing with him so when the doors opened, he gently pushed off and drifted through the open door into the station. He couldn’t help himself, looking back at Ron he dropped all pretense of being deaf and said in a clear voice. “Good luck out there. Don’t worry, people say you get used the smell of Quanto, eventually.”

The look of surprise and distain on Ron's face cheered Red up quite a bit; sometimes being an asshole was fun.

Sagan wasn't a spin station, turns out, heavy shit is easier to move without gravity and since there were no long-term residents, all the zero g problems like bone loss and the like weren't an issue. It was also cheaper to build and easier to dock ships with something that didn't move. Red reached the satirically named elevator lobby which was nothing more than series of holes in the ceiling with tubes you could float up to reach the living areas, the green ones were for going up and the red for people coming down. He floated past them to the last one, the only one with a locked hatch covering the opening, and keyed in the twelve-digit code he had been given dirtside earlier. Slowly the hatch slid aside, and a few lights flickered to life illuminating the tube behind it, the only locked door on the whole station. It was locked because this one went directly to The Airlock. The station was covered with airlocks for ship docking, maintenance EVAs, and whatever else required getting outside or off the station. They were just airlocks, but this one was The Airlock, the one that opened into an alien ship, very few people had access to this area of the station. Halfway up the tube he caught himself and stopped by a small panel, keying the code again he watched the lower hatch close and lock itself, inputting a different code he waited for the upper hatch to open and continued. The room outside the airlock was spartan and functional, just big enough for two people to slide past one another. He looked out the small window and could see the sleek needle-like craft anchored to the pressurized gangway. Below the gangway was the cargo bay of the ship as robotic arms pulled large containers out along an open scaffold structure and replaced them with fresh ones. Everything he would need over the next year was stuffed into those crates, all his food, water, clothes, gear, and one very pissed off cat.

A series of clicks and air hissing out let him know the time had come as the door slowly slide open revealing the gangway beyond. He waited for a moment for the door of the ship to open and the returning Exo to depart. As he entered the small room, he nodded at Red and simply said. "Morning Ralph."

Red nodded back and with the traditional reply said, "Morning Fred" It was an old joke whose origin had been lost to time, but it was tradition, and like sailors throughout history nobody tempted luck by breaking tradition before a journey out. He didn't recognize the man, but that was normal given the way Exo's slipped through time, this small room was about the only place in the solar system you could find two together.

Fred slid by and Red crossed the gangway to the transport giving the frame around the airlock a sideways glance as he entered the ship. That was where they had laid his trap. There were four small latches that held the gangway securely to the ship, agents had modified the bolts that the arms pivoted on so the heads were just a bit shorter than normal, replacing that lost material were four small disc shaped robots about five millimeters wide and two high with a slightly domed top. Four curved legs swung out and down from the perimeter of the discs and the tiny interlopers crawled off the arms and onto the hull of the ship. Waiting patiently for the arms to disconnect and vacate the four latch points recessed in the hull so they could climb in and hold on for the ride out to Pluto. Despite the advanced technology used to make them, they were brutally simple devices. The bottom was a strong magnet that held them securely to any ferrous alloy, the entire domed top was a transparent lens that collected emissions and feed them to dozens of different sensors underneath, and the center was a simple power supply and thin disc of memory crystal that could hold terabytes of data. His little spies that would hopefully crawl off the transport ship at the right time and onto the hull of the main ship where they would watch

and record everything that happened outside the ship. Most importantly, what was happening outside the ship when it jumped to FTL.

He entered the ship and stripped naked, depositing his clothes in a small receptacle above the tank that would be his home for the next two weeks. The trenchers had some sort of inertia dampening tech that would prevent him from being liquified by the acceleration necessary to get him that far out in such a short amount of time. Even with that, humans still needed to be in the tank to survive. It was a subject of much debate whether there was a limit to their technology or if it was a ruse designed to hide the true potential of what they could do with mass and inertia. Red didn't give a shit, he just hoped it didn't fail on the ride out, not that he would ever know if it did. He donned the tank suit and placed all the bio patches in all the right places and then the tubes in all the wrong places. The liquid was so close to body temp that he hardly noticed the tank filling and submerging him, once the sedatives kicked in and rendered him unconscious, the tube down his throat would fill his lungs with an oxygenated substance that would keep his breastbone from meeting his spine when the heavy gees hit. He felt the needle slide into his neck and wondered, like he always did, if he would wake up or not, probably didn't matter he thought as his mind fell into the deep black.

Chapter 2

There were never enough cleaning wipes to get all the tank gunk off. Red floated just above the open tank removing the last of the monitor patches while trying to clean the residue off his skin, grateful the intake and exhaust tubes had been removed while he was still in black out mode. Being out for two weeks wasn't an easy ride, they said you wouldn't dream, and they were mostly right, not enough of your brain functioned to produce anything as complex as a dream. There was enough of you left running that darker things moved into the parts of your mind left vacant by dreaming's absence, basic unformed fears and dark emotions reigned, tied to whatever traumatic memories floated up from the subconscious. It was two weeks of falling through a terrifying black void that produced only unfocused fear without understanding what was happening. Some Exo's never made a second trip, for Red the void was only slightly more terrifying and confusing than any other part of his life. The small display just above the tank let him know that he had about three minutes before the door opened on his naked ass. He gave up on trying to clean up anymore, the last wipe was just smearing the stuff around at this point so he pulled the G suit out of the locker to his right. It was a lot easier to put the damn thing on before he stepped onto the gravity plating and the only place inside the ship where he could turn off the plating was in his quarters on the other side of the ship so it was best to have it on when entering. After some pulling and cursing at the gunk that made his skin sticky and the suit harder to put on, he finally got all the right parts pulled into all the right places and zipped up, waiting for the most freighted door known to man to open. The door led to the room, the room is where nine of The Ten lost their minds, nobody wanted to go into that room.

A series of soft thumps, his ears popping, and a hissing sound announced his eminent departure as the transport, the docking tube, and the ship all equalized to each other. He wondered if the crabs had held on for the whole ride out, if they had managed the crawl onto the huge alien ship, if they had been detected, what would happen if they had been. Probably nothing to him, usually the solution to anything being brought aboard that wasn't supposed to be there

was to eject whatever it was attached to out into space and let it wander the cosmos for eternity to think about what it had done. But this was a little different, this wasn't a passive infiltration, this was an invasion, would they chuck him out into space and have earth send up another monkey? No one would say or do anything other than replace the defective primate as fast as they could. About the time he was ready to go into full on panic mode and lose it, the door opened silently revealing the small room beyond. The Small White Room. Somewhere, sometime in the past, those three words covered walls within an asylum.

He steadied himself and moved slowly into the room, making sure his feet were pointed down as he crossed the threshold onto the gravity plating, landing softly and stepping into the room with a practiced ease. The door closed behind him shutting him in as the sheer panic started to raise uncontrollably, he always felt like this moving through the room, but this time it was worse, wondering still if his little spies had been detected. The room was as plain and ordinary as could be imagined, entirely white, four meters long and two wide, there was a low bunk on one side, next to it a small enclosure had a toilet and small sink. The other side had a desk that folded down so one could sit on the bed and use it, and a food dispenser with a waste reclamation unit below it. Exo's for years had lobbied to have the room removed and replaced with a standard airlock, but to no avail, it did make sense to have a backup in case the main living area failed, but every Exo would rather die in the harsh vacuum of space before living in that room. Even the two minutes he needed to spend in there waiting for the transit craft to disengage and the outer door to seal before letting him out seemed like psychological torture.

The room had been cursed by The Ten. The first humans to venture out of the solar system, the first to ride an alien ship, the first to be lost. It started with the notorious Alex Henobi who made first contact with a damaged Trencher ship out near Pluto. Mankind rallied together and created whole new industries and production facilities that helped them make repairs and return home. Twenty years later ten ships returned to fulfill their promise to repay humanity's kindness, or gullibility. Without making any contact or responding to any hail or communication attempt, nine of the ships landed in remote areas spread evenly over the planet, from those ships legions of robotic crawlers emerged and started digging and laying lines radiating out from each ship towards all the major population centers. Fifteen months later without ever having acknowledged humans in any way, they left behind the backbone of a clean power system for the whole planet, each ship was a massive fusion generator serving whole continents, distribution nodes had been scattered far and wide allowing mankind to hook up in any way they wanted. Then the tenth ship simply moved behind the moon and jumped to FTL, presumably never to be seen again.

Twenty years later, to the second, another ship showed up, this time they wanted to talk, just not very much. They sent down a proposition and ignored everything that wasn't a yes or no answer. It was simple, they needed workers to help them on their ships, autonomous and remote platforms all had serious limitations when it came to repairing and doing maintenance on long voyages, sometimes you needed someone who could make decisions and fix something on their own, even when everything else had failed. Humans had proven that they were good at that, and the aliens wanted to hire us. Details were scant, but the broad strokes laid out the time dilation that human would experience on the ship, a basic list of the type of skills needed, and a schedule for the first ten trial runs, starting in a year, with launches every two years, if it worked, then there would be more stuff like the power grid. Other than that, they just sat there being stoic, waiting for the answer and ignoring us.

Of course, the answer was yes. For the next year humanity nearly ripped itself apart as individuals and corporations tried to shove their way to the front of the line to be the first to feed off the trough. Once it was announced that the first ten would be made up mostly of physicists, academia transformed into battle arena not seen since blood last flowed on the sand of the Colosseum. Competition to be one of The Ten was fierce and only the dirtiest players survived to make the final cut, humanity it seemed had decided not to send it's best and brightest, but rather a different and more dangerous group of animals altogether.

The first to go out was the legendary physicist Aziz Lazaar, he was the face of modern physics, always on tv, always the one interviewed when the world needed something 'sciencey' dumbed down for the masses, he was charming, articulate, and his BBC documentaries got great ratings even in the states. He wasn't the most respected name in physics, just the most famous. When the alien transport touched down in the stifling heat of American desert it was the most watched event in human history, there was fanfare and hours of speeches and speculation while reporters from around the world recorded Aziz as he enthusiastically boarded the craft carrying the hope of the world with him. The world was interested two years later when Savi Gupta left, but it wasn't as exciting and most people only saw the video making the rounds that showed her waving and craft flying off. They didn't even televise the third launch two years later. By the time the last flight out came eighteen years later earth most people had forgotten that there where humans out among the stars and had stopped caring altogether. Until Aziz came back.

With the pending return of Aziz Lazaar, the world once again sat up and took notice. Now the answers where coming, the wisdom and knowledge of the galaxy was returning to Earth to usher in a new utopian era of prosperity and peace. The craft landed amid tens of thousands of cheering people and leaders from all over the world waiting in line to greet the returning hero as the world watched via live stream. When the doors open, peace and prosperity were not what came out, Aziz did. When he left twenty years ago, he had been wearing clothes, that had changed. Coming from a long line of swarthy men Aziz had abundant body hair to begin with, a year of not shaving or cutting his hair hadn't done anything to make him look less feral. What came flying out of the door was barely human, he hit the English Prime Minister standing on the platform at a full run and removed one of his eyes and part of an ear before security could drag him off from the hapless politician. After breaking an arm and crushing a testicle, Aziz broke free of security and descended into the crowd of people that still weren't sure what was happening and hadn't had the good sense to flee, he made many of them pay for that. By the time a guy holding a boom mike got a lucky shot to the back of his head and took him down Aziz Lazaar had injured seventeen people, four seriously.

It took months of medication and therapy before Aziz could give a semi coherent account of what had happened to him. He had spent the entire year in a small room, after boarding, nothing happened, at all. He just sat in the room, in the small white featureless room. The aliens didn't allow them to bring anything with them, it was assumed that everything they needed would be provided on the ship, and it was close to true, they provided air, food, water, waste disposal, and a sleeping platform. Nothing else, there was nothing to write on or with, no computer system, no video screen or media access, nowhere to sit but the bed and toilet, nowhere to walk that wasn't two steps away, nothing to read or even a ball to bounce, they left him in an empty room alone for a year, he left it without his mind. For someone like Aziz who thrived off the adorations of his fans and needed constant validation for his huge delicate ego, it was more than his mind could take, so it broke.

Two year later when Savi Gupta returned there were no bands playing and no one gave speeches, hundreds of marines in full battle rattle surrounded the landing site as snipers watched from afar. When the door opened, they found Savi Gupta curled in a fetal position covered in drying tank fluid and sobbing. Taking no chances, she was immediately hit with a trunk dart, restrained, and rushed off to a secure location for debrief.

And so it went, every two years a ship would land and deposit physicists in in varying state of disrepair, some got better with therapy and lived something like a normal life, others were lost forever to madness, all ended up shadows of themselves. Until Hiro Mifune stepped off.

By the time the last mission launched, and Japan got to send one of theirs up, the public had lost all interest in who was selected, so when a ranking member of the Japanese Diet suggested an unknown minor academic, no one could think of a reason to challenge such an unimportant detail, but his choice turned out to be prophetic. Hiro Mifune's father was a professor of Theology at the university where he met his wife who was a professor in the Physics dept. He inherited his mother's passion for understanding and studying the physical world and at his father's knee he was taught how to explore the unseen and mystical powers that surround life. And so, Hiro Mifune, the first and greatest Exo, was fated to become the last member of The Ten.

When he got locked in a featureless white room, he simply arranged his days and alternated between meditation, exercise, and eating. The main thing that made Hiro different was, three months in, the other door opened.

A small red light began flashing above the door with a soft chiming sound and then the door opened to reveal a huge room, packed with a cornucopia of machine tools and equipment. The space was about fifty meters long and thirty across, it was defined by the maze of pipes and other conduits that covered the walls and most of the ceiling. In the center of the room was a worktable with another red blinking light and a screen displaying a series of instructions to replace a defective pressure sensor. Several hours later with the offending part replaced, tested, and the mess cleaned up, the screen instructed Hiro to return to the living area, Hiro didn't. Instead, he found some suitable stock and fashioned a large brace about the right size to wedge into the door of his room, which contained his only source of food and water. He stepped backed into the room and watched as the door tried unsuccessfully to close him in again. After a while it stopped, and the red blinking light appeared again. This time the screen was giving him instructions on how to best remove an apparent obstruction on door A8, Hiro ignored that.

Hiro spent the next nine months exploring his new home. The Workshop, as he started thinking of it, was at the heart of all the ship systems that might need servicing and contained eight exits, each leading to a different part of the aft end of the ship. Humans knew a lot about the outside of the enormous ship, they had detailed photos from repairing the first ship they encountered, and all Trencher ships were identical. They didn't look built, not in the way a human would build, it looked like it had grown according to some exacting design, sleek and elegant, with enough protrusions and oddly shaped features to leave one wondering about things like weapons ports and drive systems. The ship was just shy of kilometer long, tapered towards both ends from a central bulge four hundred meters wide just slightly off center aft given a sharper angle to the rear. The four large, recessed cones aft were exactly what they looked like, drive engines of an unknown type, the blue light that came out of them when maneuvering at sub light speeds hinted at some sort of ion drive, but immensely more powerful than anything humanity could build.

Hiro quickly discovered that he only had access to the aft section of the ship, nothing forward of the bulge even had passageways that went towards the bow, the interior of the ship simply stopped near the mid-point. But where it stopped Hiro noticed that the walls and pipes were all subtly curved, by taking careful measurements he was able to determine that the center of the ship contained a huge sphere almost the full width of the ship. Above and below the workshop contained tanks of some sort with huge pipes coming in and out of them. Further aft were all power conduits that fed the main engines. As Hiro explored more of the spaces available to him, he started to notice a trend, he recognized everything. Power conduits were obviously power conduits, the massive pipes that led to the tanks had cut off valves and pressure gauges everywhere to handle whatever fluid flowed through them, even the small fusion generators he found distributed everywhere were just smaller versions of the reactors on earth. It was as if the whole aft section of the ship had been built only using technology Humans already possessed, anything exotic or unknown was in the inaccessible sections of the ship far from prying eyes.

Hiro did learn one thing about humanity's reticent benefactors, and it was he that gave them their name inadvertently. The first and only repair required of him gave him access to one of the large pipes that fed into the tanks, specifically a pressure sensor. The pipe it was attached to was a full meter in diameter and the sensor he had to replace was a narrow probe threaded for the whole length that screwed into the pipe, nearly forty five centimeters long. Since the probe gave him the thickness of the pipe wall, he knew the interior of the pipe was only about ten centimeters in diameter. A few quick calculations gave him a rough range for the pressure inside the pipe, the number was staggering. The deepest places on earth will get up to fifteen thousand psi, whatever was running through the pipe was probably somewhere closer to seventy thousand psi and ran through what his repair instructions had labeled as an environmental unit. It was no wonder that most of the instructions had to do with isolating the junction with the sensor and depressurizing it before he removed the old one, even the smallest leak would have killed him instantly. Whatever was in those high-pressure lines was being used by the aliens to keep them alive. If they were comfortable at those pressures, Hiro figured that they must be an aquatic species that evolved in a deep trench somewhere on a world more massive than earth, thus they became Trenchers.

He returned to Earth and stepped out of the transport smiling and waving to the large number of troops and fighting vehicles inexplicably surrounding him. Because he had no idea what had befallen his fellow Exosolar Physicists, the tranquillizer dart came as a surprise. After coming around and convincing everyone that he hadn't gone violently insane during the journey, he had some helpful suggestions for future missions. When the Trenchers returned two years later, it was Earth that had a list of non-negotiable terms, it was Earth that ignored all communication that wasn't them agreeing or saying goodbye forever, eventually they agreed with the stipulation that they would space anything Humans tried to bring on board that they didn't like.

Red didn't wonder what would happen to him if the door never opened, he knew. He didn't possess Hiro's calm tranquil mind that could endure the passage of time with nothing but itself to keep him company, if it wasn't for Jonesy, he doubted if he could even stay sane alone for a full year outside of the room where there was the illusion of freedom. Panic was messing with his sense of time and he was convinced that more than two minutes had past and that at any moment the outdoor would open and suck him into space. When the door finally opened at exactly two minutes he almost fell to his knees in relief, but recovered and walked out of the room, lest he be trapped for the rest of his sanity.

Across the main workshop there was a small living area that contained a sleeping nook, simple kitchen, and a small room with a desk and large wall screen. It would be considered small even by New York Apt standards, but it had everything he would need for the next year. All his consumables had been loaded into the main storage locker below the workshop and his private items were waiting on the table, including a silver box with a readout on one side. Red inspected the box for damage and was relieved that the counter still had forty-three hours on it. He keyed in the revival code and waited while the box cycled through various operations and integrity checks. After a few minutes the lid hinged open revealing a very wet, pathetic cat laying prone amongst the tubing and wires. The meds that were keeping Jonesy out would wear off in about twenty minutes and he knew from experience that it was better to do the next part when the cat was out cold. Lifting him out carefully he used the cleaning vacuum on the kitchen sink to suck the last of the gunk off and wet wipes got the rest. He took Jonesy and the custom cat sized G suit over the changing plate to make getting him into it easier. For all their advances and other technological wonders, even the Trenched couldn't create artificial gravity, at least, not like in the movies and TV where the main characters walk around nonchalantly as if strolling through a bucolic landscape. They had found a workaround though, instead of gravity, they used a type of magnetism. The idea of a G suit was simple, it was a tight-fitting garment with metal fibers woven throughout, the deck plating created field that reacted to the fibers and pulled them down, simulating gravity. The field only reacted to particular metal in the suit, so nothing else was subject to its effects so although the wearer was being pulled down at close to one g, everything around them was weightless. Putting a garment that weighed one hundred and fifty pounds was no easy feat, so there were several areas of the ship that didn't have charged plating to provide a weightless environment for changing in and out of the cumbersome suit.

With Jonesy suited up and sleeping soundly in his bed, Red went for his usual inspection of the workshop and ship while the cat regained consciousness. Every ship was the same down to the smallest detail, every tool, every piece of equipment in the same place without exception. People had tried to move things around to fit their particular preferences, but everything would be put back later by a small army of dutiful robots that constantly cleaned the workshop. Everything was where he expected it to be down to the most useless box in the known universe. High up on the aft wall was a red box, the pressure alarm. In theory it was supposed to alert you if there was a pressure breach, the problem was that even the smallest pressure leak would instantly crush and kill anyone in any open space before the sound waves from the alarm could reach the would-be victim. He walked over to Big Al and started to run the diagnostics and systems checks out of habit, Big Al was probably the second most useless thing in the universe, but it didn't hurt to make sure it was ready for another year of doing nothing. In theory it was EVA suit, although in all the years working on ships, he had never heard of one being used, no Exo had ever been outside the hull on a trip. Big Al was a hard suit fashioned after ones used on earth for deep diving. Bright red, it had bulbous joints everywhere that allowed enough movement to get around and do basic tasks using the pair of multiuse grippers on each hand, otherwise it was just a decoration hanging in its cradle.

He continued through the workshop and down one of the small corridors that led out into the ship and down to the deck below. He slowed as he neared the end, there were no active G plates in the rooms below. Descending was a delicate maneuver, and it was a point of pride among Exos to be able to drift down the whole length without touching the walls of the narrow shaft. He pushed off gently as he cleared the last plate and did perfect half flip to get his feet on the top of the corridor above the shaft, the small magnets on his boots clicked and held him

weakly until his head lined up and he pushed off gently drifting down. Another flip put his feet on the floor in a perfect landing, he raised his hands above his head like a gymnast completing a vault.

“Another perfect landing.” He said to no one. Talking to himself was one of his more important sanity exercises, hearing a voice, even his own, was comforting in the crushing solitude. It was the primary reason he brought Jonesy with him, the conversations were a bit one sided, but it was nice to have someone to talk to, even if he was an asshole.

Gliding through the passageway he came into the larder to make sure all his food had made it onboard; the container was still being unpacked by loader robots that sorted the dry goods from the frozen items and placed the boxes on the appropriate shelves. Past the larder he entered the most important room on the ship, at least to the Exo riding out, the garden. Of all the changes that Hiro had suggested the garden showed the most wisdom and forethought, without it there would probably be no Exo program. The garden grew two things that couldn't be brought up from earth, fresh vegetables and sanity. There was almost nothing to do on a Trencher ship, they were notoriously reliable and rarely failed in a way that required repair, so the garden was essential for keeping busy and preventing the mechanic on duty from sliding into madness. The room was a twenty-meter sphere with a small airlock that allowed access from inside the ship and a very large airlock that opened directly into space on the bottom of the ship. It had originally been designed as a staging area for EVAs that required moving something bigger than a man in or out of the ship, but since no one had ever been outside the ship, the space was repurposed into something more useful. If anything serious enough ever happened that necessitated using the airlock, losing the garden would probably be the least of his problems. The walls were lined with lockers that contained different items for repairing the exterior of the ship and gardening tools. In between each locker there was a full spectrum light shining into the center of the sphere where a smaller sphere was held in place by four thin wires. The smaller sphere was about ten meters in diameter and was covered on all sides with vegetation that ranged from vegetables to flowers and bonsai trees. The garden was the only thing that was unique to each ship and it was the only way that Exos could communicate with each other and tell the age of a ship.

Horticulture was an important skill, it was a required course for new Exo's who always thought it was a stupid waste of time until they returned from their first mission. Eating fresh fruits and vegetables on the long trip was reward enough but it also filled much of the free time that plagued his profession. Each Exo was assigned a specific plant when they joined up and they brought one with them on each trip out to add to the garden. By reading the garden you could see how many times the ship had gone out and who had sailed previously. Being one of the first and because of his name, his was assigned the redwood tree which he would plant, and other Exo's would keep trimmed into a small bonsai version of the mighty conifer. He in turn would tend to all the small bonsai plants that had been left by previous Exo's. A quick survey told him that this particular ship had made twelve voyages before he arrived, no one knew how long Trencher ship could operate, but so far, the oldest they had found had been in service for twenty-five years subjectively. The previous tenant had done a good job keeping the vegetables rotated and there was already a good crop of tomatoes, peas, lettuce, onions, strawberries and a dozen other varieties waiting to be picked. At least he would eat well on this trip.

Trencher ships were virtually silent, but an experience operator could read the subtle shift in the low vibrations that told him they were maneuvering for the jump to FTL. Whatever they used to dampen inertia was efficient enough that he wasn't thrown all over the room by

Newton's laws as the behemoth moved out from Pluto. For no reason he could ever define, making the transition to FTL always freaked him out and he preferred to be in the living area when that happened. There was no discernable change that could be felt, space didn't warp and twist around him, there was no flash of blue light, or a moment of confusion like in all the stupid movies that tried to make going faster than light more exciting. It was just the knowledge that he was, the ignorance of how, and the feeling of helplessness that came with traveling faster than light that got under his skin.

Moving back up to the living area he could hear Jonesy starting his bitch session. It was understandable, the cat really didn't like being in zero g even with the suite on, he didn't like being cooped up on the ship after a year of running outdoors and catching slower mammals, he didn't like using the modified litter box that kept everything from floating around, he didn't like that he hadn't eaten in weeks and was hungry, and as far as Red could tell, he really didn't like him. That might have something to do with the fact that Red would occasionally take the g suit off the poor animal and watch him flail as he floated about the workshop trying to find purchase on anything. He always swore that he wouldn't do it again, but boredom is what it is and sometimes watching a movie just doesn't scratch the entertainment itch.

"I'm coming, I'm coming, you cantankerous old bastard."

Jonesy responded with what Red assumed was the cat equivalent of "Feed me or I will scratch your eyes out while you sleep asshole."

He found a tube of the special food that was designed to stick to the food bowl and not float around. It was nutritionally complete, tasted pretty good if you were a cat, and smelled like meat that had been left in the sun too long if you were human. The psychologists said that having an annoying pet was actually good for you, it gave your mind something to focus negativity onto rather than it festering and making you all Azizy in the head. Red sat down and opened a tube of Coke wondering what it would taste like this time, they swore that they hadn't changed the formula in five hundred years, but skipping twenty years between each supposedly unchanged version, he knew that was bullshit. It wasn't bad this time, close enough that he downed the rest in one long pull and let the satisfying burp echo off the walls.

The shift shifted again, and he knew they had made the transition. Nothing physical happened, but his mind made up for that. His skin crawled and tingled, his stomach turned threatening to return the soda he just drank, panic started to raise as the realization that he was truly not in Kansas anymore sank in and became reality. This was the only part of the trip when he hated the no alcohol policy, it made sense no matter which way you turned it, but that didn't change the fact that he really wanted a couple of stiff drinks right now. A few minutes of deep regulated breathing returned him to his normal level of despondency and since every other breath came in through his nose, reminded him that he smelled as bad as the cat's dinner and needed to shower.

Leaving Jonesy to his meat goop Red headed into his room and took off the suit and stuffed it into the cleaning receptacle above the changing plate to be washed. He floated over to the shower and slid his feet into one of the numerous hand and foot holds that lined the tube. After securing the door he started the bathing cycle. At first warm air came through the metal grate at the top and flowed down to another grate at the bottom. Hitting another button mixed warm water into the air stream and over his body, exiting via the lower grate. It was a pretty good approximation of a shower except that water tended to collect under the arms and between the legs where the air movement created small eddies trapping it against his body.

There was only one thing that he disliked about earth, sleeping at the bottom of a gravity well. He had taken to weightless sleeping like he had been born into it, no pressure points or awkward positions that would make a limb go numb while he was out, no tossing and turning to find a comfortable pose for the night. He didn't even suffer the dreams of falling that so many of his fellows reported. It had been a long stressful day and Red drifted off to sleep forgetting the million things that could still go wrong.

Chapter 3

Red was especially fond of movies about Exos, mostly they were funny to him, some tried creating excitement and adventure out among the stars, others attempted to fashion a mirror to hold up to the current culture or politics of the era, most tried to reveal the true nature of the Trenchers, evil antagonist, or benevolent chaperones. It was an old media rut that that was returned to time and time again in the absence of originality, they ranged from casting people like him as villain, savior, or just Joe average trying to make it in the cold vacuum of space. They always got it wrong, there was no grand nobility to be found, no spirit of adventure, no heroes. It was fear that defined him and those that blindly rode the ships that traveled through the stars to destinations unknown, fear was the ever-present companion. Fear of leaving earth so far behind, fear of arriving to an unknown sector of space, fear of the aliens that controlled him completely through every part of his journey. He was meat, no more, no less, he was the stopgap that filled the void left by autonomous robotic workers, another piece of machinery that was needed to keep the ship running, he was replaceable. It wasn't his skill as a mechanic or failed physicist that made him good at his job, it was the ability to manage the fear that filled his days. The fear had color and texture; each stage of the journey brought another brushstroke to the canvas. He feared time, the invisible force that eroded the complacent mind, he feared death in cold reaches of space, he feared those things that lurked in his psyche that couldn't be buried under layers of alcohol, drugs, and denial this far out alone with himself. It was fear that reigned when the ship dropped out of FTL, another chapter in his trauma journal.

They had traveled for three weeks before dropping out of FTL, it was always different, the time spent in FTL and the time spent maneuvering in real space, it didn't matter, there was no returning early, he would be onboard for a year, to the second, he would leave subjective time and return twenty years later, to the second. Returning to normal space didn't require the experienced sensitivity that dropping into FTL did, the fusion reactors starting up to power the main drive system couldn't be missed. The ship rang like a bell as the distributed power system came to life and filled thousands of conduits with high energy plasma. Whatever powered the FTL drive lived in the mysterious unreachable sphere that filled the middle of the ship and kept him isolated in the aft section behind it, but the system that powered the huge engines used for maneuvering in real space used a different system altogether. Instead of one massive power plant, it used dozens of small fusion reactors spread throughout the ship in an integrated power grid. It was the one thing about the alien ships that humans knew quite a bit about, they were virtually identical to the ones that powered earth, just much smaller. The going theory was that it was for redundancy so the ship couldn't be stranded by a single failure, given that the main drive system, the only one capable of returning him or the aliens home, used a single point for power,

Red always thought it was bullshit. True wisdom always started with recognizing ignorance, it was meant to be a deep thoughtful line in a crappy movie he watched hundreds of years ago, but sometimes insipidness hits the mark. No one knew why the Trenchers did anything, no one knew why they traveled the stars or what they did once they were out there, so guessing didn't do him much good, blind acceptance was far more useful, it prevented you from being wrong.

Being in FTL was interesting, but he always had an image in his mind of a whirling flashing vortex of light and energy surrounding the ship, convincing him that there wasn't much to see even if he had a window to look out of. Back in real space his imagination ran unchecked and the agony of what he was missing was almost unbearable. Everyone who has ever traveled in space has brought a twelve year old version of themselves along for the ride, the sense of curiosity and excitement that can only come from a mind not yet beat down by the inequities of life, a mind filled with wonder and naivete, a mind that only sees beauty and promise without the ugly underbelly of reality fogging the innocence of youth. He always imagined binary suns with massive gas giants orbiting in ridiculously unrealistic colorful nebulas. Dyson spheres enclosing stars, giant stations mining asteroids and comets, a huge green space hand reaching out to capture the ship. Something more intriguing than the gray walls that defined his existence. The urge to climb into Big Al and go sightseeing through the airlock was nearly overwhelming, even with the knowledge that it would be the last thing he ever did. Maybe that's what happened to the ones that never came back, the Exo on board simply walked away to experience their last moments floating among the majesty of the cosmos, to spend their last breath wisely, to see, even for a brief moment something that no one had ever seen, a beautiful memory to escort them to death and whatever adventure awaited them on the other side, if any. He could think of less imaginative ways for a failed physicist to step off the mortal coil.

Being an Exo in the modern age was considered a respectable profession with a lot of competition and most who entered the program didn't make the cut, some for psychological reasons, some just couldn't handle the academics, a lot bailed after their first meeting with The Agency where it was made perfectly clear who owned your ass. Back when Red joined up, it was anything but a respectable profession, they had recruited him out of prison. He had a unique set of qualifications that made him ideal for the work, near genius level IQ, no family bonds to hold him to earth, a degree in experimental physics, and of course, a life sentence. It was about 50 years after the First Ten had returned and the academic world had realized that traveling out into the black wasn't a one-way ticket to a Nobel prize, but rather the last thing you would do in your career, since they still wanted people with higher degrees who could do the kind of spying the Agency needed, it made recruiting hard.

A relief agency had found him on the streets of Manila after his mother had died and when they saw the results of his aptitude tests, he was immediately shipped off to the states to become the poster child for the good work they were doing, at least that was the story they feed the news outlets. He had been living with his aunt and was just finishing high school when the cyclone hit and devastated the middle-class neighborhood he lived in. So technically he was living on the streets when they found him, even if it was only because they were waiting for the insurance to come through so they could rebuild the four-bedroom house they lived in. When the overly sentimental relief workers told him that they were going to take him out of poverty and squaller and pay his way to college, he didn't really see the point in correcting them and played along with the helpless orphan narrative they were so keen on believing. He ended up at Dartmouth, the alma mater of the great Alex Henobi who had made it famous, Red, as it turned out, was to make it infamous. Even after the first wave of feel-good stories about him passed and

his brief fame faded, there was still enormous pressure on him to succeed. The people running the physics program didn't give two shits about where he was from or what he had been through, keep up or get out and make room for someone more deserving. The agency that was paying his tuition made it perfectly clear that they couldn't raise money from donors with a poster child that wasn't succeeding at the highest levels thanks to generous donations from the gullible. By his senior year when it became apparent that he had fallen behind, desperation set in and he did what desperate people throughout history did, he started making bad decisions, for him it pop rocks.

Before drugs became largely legal and the market was taken over by recreational pharmaceutical companies that were good at creating addictive products that had limited side effects and maximized profits, drugs were created and sold by people that didn't care if twenty percent of their consumers were taken off the market annually due to incarceration, psychosis, or just good old fashion death. Pop rocks were one of the last of wild west drugs, although its reign was brief, the body count was high enough that the world took notice and started doing something about illegal drugs, mostly by making them legal. Rocks didn't kill you, they killed other people, they could keep someone up for days, alert and functional, for a struggling Grad student it was a godsend. The problem was that after a long enough time, they made people psychotic from lack of sleep, but they never noticed, the drug kept right on making them feel great until they did something horrible, and then the drug made them feel great about that too.

When Red was confronted about the originality of some of his research, and the questionable nature of his data, he did what any addict would do, he made it worse by getting even higher, and drunk, then he stole a car. Someone rational would have faced what they had done and try to make it right, he could have, he had that chance. The Rocks had other ideas, payback, that was what was needed, they hurt him, so he would hurt them. He took his revenge on the lawn of the large quad in front of the physics building digging circular ruts six inches deep before barreling onto the walkway and heading for another part of the campus. He never saw her, the girl that had stepped out of her dorm building to see what was making all the noise out front. He remembered the sound though, the dull thud of her body caving the front of the car in, the frantic shattering of glass as she came through the windshield and landed upside down in the passenger seat, the final crescendo of chaos as the car ended its rampage and smashed into the trunk of a large elm tree. That's how they found him, bleeding, sobbing, staring at that innocent girl. They threw him in jail, then rehab, then jail again, this time for good. Life without parole, he got the same mercy his victim had.

When they found him, he was sitting in isolation block B on suicide watch, most people, at some point in their lives, think that they have hit rock bottom, but they don't really know what that means, it is a naïve misconception that life can't possibly get any worse, that this is the low point of their lives, and it may be. They are both right and so horribly wrong, it may be that lowest point they will ever reach, and they will pass through it without realizing how much lower they could have sunk. Redwood Aquino knew what the bottom looked like, laid bare on the cold stones of his own failure, he knew where the bottom was and understood that there was only one door left open to him to escape it, he simple lacked the courage to take his own life and walk through it. When the Agency psychologist walked into his cell and offered him another path, he refused cursing as much as possible, the weight of his folly was more than he was willing to bear, the life he took haunted him and demanded retribution, but she kept coming back. After a year or so the medical staff had undone most of the physical damage he had done to his mind and the Agency psychologist convinced him that he might yet be able to repay some small measure of his debt. It was bullshit of course, they didn't care about him, redemption, or justice. They

needed bodies to send out into the black, disposable people they could control and cast aside when convenient.

He never made peace with himself, not really, after a time the pain and guilt just became part of who he was, a thick black line on his soul that others could sense but not understand. It was probably why he was still doing this work when almost all his contemporaries had called it quits and settled into an era to wait for death gracefully and with dignity. Red didn't want to stop running, to stop would mean to finally confront that black line, he knew it was a road that only led to one place, and he was still too much of a coward to give the ferryman his last coin.

He was in the garden when the first indication that something wasn't right hit, he was weeding when suddenly the whole garden shifted to the right and set the guy wires holding it vibrating.

"Oh shit. Did that just happen?" The plants all around him swaying a bit confirmed that the event wasn't just the first indications of insanity. A cold blanket of fear settled over his body and froze his mind for an instant. Pushing off the wall, muscle memory and experience guided him on autopilot down the corridor and up to the workshop where he crashed into floor as he passed over the first g plate without having his feet pointed down and rolled to a stop. Half running, half crawling, he dashed into the workshop unsure of what, if any, protection he could find there. It happened again, this time with enough force the slam him into a bench 3 meters away. Whatever was happening was throwing enough force around to overwhelm the technology the Trenchers used to dampen inertia, when Red pulled himself up, he saw what it was. The four massive conduits on the back wall that fed directly into the engines were glowing red as unfathomable amounts of power flowed into the mains. Part of his job was spying and that meant a lot of taking boring measurements of everything that hopefully would yield a pattern or provide some clue as to what the aliens were doing or how they were doing it. Tracking the temperature of the power conduits was one of those boring tasks and in all the years he had been tracking it he had never seen the temperature raise more than a degree above room temp. For them to be glowing red hot sent an ironic chill down his spine.

The next jolt sent him straight up and slammed him into the piping that comprised the ceiling of the workshop, just as quickly the g plating pulled him back down onto the unforgiving metal of the floor. His breath wheezed out as several ribs cracked, it was a sad testament to his lifestyle that the sound of breaking ribs was so familiar. He could taste blood, globs of it were coalescing into small spheres coming out of his nose, another jolt sent the bloody chunks flying off towards the back wall along with him. He couldn't tell if the next impact had broken new ribs or just shoved the already broken ones further into his lungs, it didn't matter, that wasn't his biggest problem now. The violent shifting has dislodged all manner of tools and other sharp metal objects from the workbenches and drawers and turned them into lethal projectiles flying through the room with every shift and jolt. Grabbing the nearest table leg, he swung himself behind the bench and wrapped his arms around the leg and anchored his feet as best he could to put the bench between him and most of the flying debris. The ship tried it's best to dislodge him and when it couldn't, it seemed to content itself by slamming him into the bench as many times as possible while reminding him that his hiding place wasn't completely immune the artillery rounds flying through the workshop. He lost count of how many things hit him, how many times his head hit hard enough to bring stars to his eyes, the area around him became splattered with is blood and reverberated with the sound of his screaming.

Then it just stopped. Still too afraid to let go of the bench he surveyed the area around him with surprising calm. There was blood everywhere and he noted with a strange detachment

the handle sticking out of his forearm was a Phillips head screwdriver, easily identifiable by the business end sticking out the other side of his arm, most of what was sticking out of his legs and side were harder to identify immediately because the blood that flowed out of the wounds stuck to and obscured the dozen or so objects he could see imbedded in him. The air around him was filled with various object large and small floating on whatever trajectory they had been launched into and clanging off the walls to change direction adding to the chaotic, dangerous mess. Fortunately, the g plating was still active, so although everything else in the workshop had turned into something ballistic, he was firmly rooted to the deck. Working quickly, he started pulling bits of metal and tools out of his body before the action started up again, most of it was thankfully small and although looked bad, had only penetrated a few millimeters, a few larger items like the screwdriver had enough mass to go deep when they hit. Grabbing the handle firmly he pulled the screwdriver out with one quick pull.

“Ay dios mio!” He cried as the tool left his arm. One of the last things to hit him in the head had been a roll of multiuse tape and it had gotten lodged under the shelf of the bench he was still holding. Pulling off a strip he wrapped his arm and did what he could for the other wounds to stop the bleeding. He could still feel several things embedded in his back, but those could wait, he hoped.

After few minutes everything had hit enough walls to bleed off most of the velocity making it somewhat safe to stand and take stock of the metal snow globe he found himself in. All the benches and large machine tools were firmly attached to the deck plating, if they hadn't been, he doubted that he would have survived, coming up to the workshop wasn't the greatest idea he had ever had, but like most of his ideas, he was happy to have survived it. The conduits the fed the engines were still glowing red, but a duller shade of red.

“What the hell are you assholes doing up there? Little warning next time?” he screamed at nothing and no one in particular. Why would they choose now to start talking to the lower life forms working the back of the ship? Whatever was happening, it was pretty serious and he doubted that his life was being considered on any level.

He had always assumed that the Exos that didn't return died in some freak accident or finally lost it and killed themselves mid voyage, he certainly had considered it a few times, now he wasn't so sure. He had gotten as good as one can get about inferring what the ship was doing at any given stage of the journey, he couldn't tell what the enigmatic aliens were doing, but he knew if they were doing it in FTL, under drive, or just coasting in space. All of those things had a common connection, none of them had ever slammed him against a wall or even made so much as a hair move in an unpredictable fashion. He forced himself to take ten deep breaths and calm his mind slightly, he was panicking badly and in shock, neither of which wasn't terrible helpful in an emergency. He had gained more information about the Trenchers in the last ten minutes than he had in the twenty odd years he had spent sailing with them, if only he could calm himself enough to parse the data.

Normally whatever they were doing in deep space they did in such a way that power usage didn't really fluctuate much other than switching from the big power source to the smaller fusion grid. They certainly didn't ever do anything that could affect the inertia dampening they used.

“Come on man, work it out, you used to be smart. What do you know for sure, what happened first?” He made himself go back in time before the first jolt hit and dissected his memories.

“Whatever happened, you probably didn’t know was happening until it got bad enough to start throwing you around, you came in the theater mid movie, so what did you miss?” Hearing his voice was oddly calming, dead people can’t do that.

“You were down below, so the mains could have been burning hard for a while and you wouldn’t have noticed. Something happened that made them start running, then something bad must have happened to make them start maneuvering violently. You don’t run that hard unless your life is on the line, probably still is.” A quick check showed the conduits still glowing. “They are still running, but now they are running at a constant velocity and in a consistent heading, no more dodging, now they are running flat out. Like prey. Shit, that can’t be good.” His mind brought up images from some nature documentary he had watched, he remembered rooting for the gazelle, he remembered being disappointed at the outcome. Predators didn’t waste energy chasing prey they couldn’t catch.

“Fuck.”

It had been a day of firsts, and the day wasn’t done with him yet. The lights flickered, simultaneously his feet lifted off the floor slightly and slammed back down three times in quick succession. The g plating was failing, he didn’t even know how to turn that off, it was just tied to the power grid and was always on, which meant that the main power had just suffered a failure, and if there wasn’t enough power to keep the g plating active, then the engines probably weren’t running at full tilt. Whatever they were running from, was catching up.

“Alright asshole, what do you know, what can you do?” A simple question without any ready answers. He forced himself to breath and think, the last set of hard pulls had all come in the same direction, he had been holding the bench and facing the back wall, the force pushed him into the bench not away from it. The other jolts had been chaotic, random, but the last few had been consistent, they had been pouring on acceleration, running, running in one direction. He couldn’t do anything to affect the outcome, he was just meat along for the ride, but he could do something to extend his life. Looking around he found a spot near the aft wall with a sturdy solid worktable about a meter from the wall. Moving quickly he sat behind the bench and pushed his back as hard and straight as he could against the wall. With the bench directly in front of him, he would have some protection from flying debris if they hit hard acceleration again.

A few minutes later he wished he had thought of padding when his head slammed against the wall and what felt like twenty g’s hit him in the chest. Everything that had been floating in the room suddenly embedded itself in the aft wall, the solid bench in front of him held and saved his life. His vision blurred and all thoughts of breathing vanished for what seemed like an eternity, his broken ribs became steel lances in his chest, then everything stopped suddenly as the lights went out and the g plating went dead.

As a kid his mother had once taken him to some caverns and once deep underground the guide had turned off the lights to demonstrate how complete the darkness was this deep, no light, none at all. It had terrified him, he had never realized how dependent humans were on light until it had been taken away, at that moment his psyche nearly collapsed in the face of this previously unexperienced state. It was as if he had been thrown into a vat of ink to drown alone screaming, when the guide turned his lamp back on, Red was still screaming. He wanted to scream now, no light, no gravity, he had become untethered from everything floating in the black without even a sense of up or down for his mind to cling to, he couldn’t even think of a way he could kill himself to escape this madness. Before panic took him completely, he drifted into something and immediately grabbed on for dear life. He was hyperventilating, bleeding, in shock, probably had

suffered fatal internal injuries and the only thing he had was a cold pipe that he was sure was being crushed under his vise like grip.

Red had known rock bottom, it was an old friend, he had faced real death before, at the hands of others and from the frailty of his own tortured mind. He had known pain and suffering lying in alleys behind bars beaten within an inch of his life, he had watched his mother die slowly and his own victim die quickly surrounded by broken glass and twisted metal. He didn't believe in an afterlife, he couldn't, there was too much red in his ledger for that to be a pleasant place of redemption and reward, if there was something after, it would be a place of retribution and justice. It was fear of death not a will to live that had kept him going all these years, and it was fear of death that once again took over and made Red into the survivor that he was, it made him angry. Like a wave of fire, anger washed over him, he didn't want to live, he wanted to hurt someone or something before he was done, if he was going to die, someone was going to regret killing him. That was a fact.

His fury brought focus. He didn't need to take calming breaths to quiet his mind anymore, the rage stripped away everything that wasn't related to him getting retribution. A clear picture formed in his mind of the workshop where he had spent countless hours and by feeling the pipes above and below the one he was holding he knew exactly where he was, twisting his body he pushed off the wall towards the floor and cranked the magnets in his boots to maximum as he floated down and landed softly by the vertical mill near the back of the shop. Ten feet to the left and four feet over was a bench with drawers that closed magnetically and probably stayed shut during all the fun, he walked over to it without bumping into anything and opened the third drawer down as if it were a sunny afternoon lighting up the room. He fished out a small inspection light and snapped it on bringing the room into focus once again. The last burn had removed all the floating debris and firmly embedded it in the aft wall, the shop was once again free of ballistic hazards. He didn't know what he was going to do, but he knew he would need Big Al to get outside and kill something. Big Al was all the way on the other side of the shop and Red was about halfway there when the day that couldn't possibly get any worse, got worse.

There was a series loud impacts, different from the forces of acceleration he had just survived, it was the sound of something hitting the ship, hitting it hard, the reverberations running through the decking followed by that sound of metal being torn apart. He froze in place and looked around trying to find the source of the sound. A red light began flashing and a loud klaxon started up as his ears popped.

"You have got to be fucking kidding me." He responded to the pressure alarm on the opposite wall producing a sound that he shouldn't be able to hear, warning him of a problem that should have killed him before the sound could reach his ears. It had its own power supply independent of the fusion grid, while everything else shut down the most useless box in the galaxy had continued to stand its lonely vigil waiting for the apocalypse, one of many this day seemed to have in store for him.

It made sense in a strange way, of course it had gone off, of course the pressure leak had killed him instantly, and of course the hell it sent him to would be a Trencher ship, if the gods of the underworld created a unique hell for each sinner, then this is what Red's would look like. Being dead would solve most of his problems, but somehow, he knew he wasn't that lucky. His ears popped again and broke him out of his reverie, whatever was happening was really happening and he started to make double time to Big Al. Walking with mag boots was infuriating slow, each step needed to be planted firmly before lifting the next step and moving forward, but

he didn't dare push off and glide through the room, his luck wasn't good today and he didn't want to chance bouncing off the walls for ten minutes if he missed his mark.

The g plating being off actually made getting to Big Al easier, the legs were held in place on a small gantry and the top segment floated a few feet above waiting to be pulled down. He swung his legs around and into the bottom half of the suit, reaching up he pulled the top half down and screamed. There was something sticking out of his back, something large enough to prevent the suit top from coming down, whatever it was had gotten snagged in the upper suit and was now stuck. He tried to push the top back up, but that only brought another wave of pain as the suit twisted the knife in his back further. Forcing himself to move slowly he felt around until his hand found the jagged piece of metal sticking out of his back, firmly lodged between two of his broken ribs. He simply hadn't noticed the injury amongst all the other damage he had suffered. It was in an awkward place and hard to reach, but he finally managed to get a decent grip on it and pulled with all his might. He nearly lost consciousness as the shard came out, holding it up he could see that it was part of drawer slide that had been ripped off during the high g maneuvering and lodged itself into his back. He could feel blood flowing freely out of the wound, but there wasn't anything he could do about it so he just added it to the list of stuff that was competing to kill him and kept moving.

As he was pulling the top half of Al down another pressure change hit, this one hard enough to pop his ears again and start sucking the air from his lungs, which made no sense at all, it was high pressure that was supposed to kill him, not low. The two halves of Al came together and made a satisfying click as they locked into place. It took him a minute to remember how to activate the controls and power up the suit, but eventually he found the right combination of finger and thumb movement to bring the suit to life. Air started to flow over his face and the HUD lit up as the suit went through its systems checks and brought up one system after another. The room he was in had once again plunged into darkness when he abandoned the small work light as he got into the suit, a bit more trial and error brought up the external lights allowing him to see what was happening around him. He wished he stayed in the dark.

One instant the room was the same chaotic mess he had left, an instant later it was suddenly filled with a green fluid and all the pressure alarms on Al went off. Red was getting weary of hearing alarms that should indicate he was already dead, but there it was. The suit creaked and groaned as the pressure hit it and tried to squeeze the life inside straight to purgatory, but Red was a survivor and he still had work to do, bloody work. It felt like his whole body had been put into a vise and crushed, with all his injuries and the blood loss, it was more than he could bear. Redwood Aquino finally succumbed to the blackness that seemingly had been waiting for him his whole life.

Chapter 4

Red felt a slight sense of regret when he came back into consciousness, sadly, he almost always did. This time there was no shortage of pain to drive that regret home. There was a red cross shape on the HUD slowly fading in and out, the med kit. Big Al had a rudimentary medical suite built into it and although it couldn't do much, it did have the ability to inject medicine and pain killers, which it had in great quantities. The clotting agents had probably saved his life, the narcotics kept him from passing out again, giving the amount of pain he was feeling after getting a near lethal dose of happy juice, he was in bad shape. Streaks of blood covered most of the inside of the faceplate limiting his vision although it didn't matter, there wasn't much to see

anyway. Everything was still the same shade of puke green he had seen as the fluid rushed in and caused him to finally blackout, it was different this time and it took a moment for his mind to lumber back into operation before he realized why. He remembered being overwhelmed by the fluid to the point that he was completely submerged in it. Now it was still everywhere but it didn't fill the room, he and the room were still covered in it, but most of it had gone leaving a slick film over everything. The list of stuff that made no sense was growing to epic proportions, but a quick check of the external sensors gave him a clue as to where the fluid went. The pressure outside the suit was zero, after the initial rupture, something must have breached the ship pulling all the lethal fluid out into space before it could build enough force to crush Big Al like a beer can, he wasn't sure if the breach had done him any favors, it might have been better to end in a snap rather than a slow death waiting for the suits systems to run down and kill him., which according the status panel in the upper right of the HUD would happen in about nine hours.

Red was becoming increasingly aware of his body as the vagueness of the narcotics started to wear off. Most of the blood on faceplate had come from his nose and mouth, the bleeding had stopped for now, but he could feel liquid in his lungs and knew he would drown in his own blood as soon and the clotting agents wore off. His right arm and leg throbbed in pain from the numerous poorly bandaged wounds he had climbed into the suit with that now were cemented onto the suit. The sharpest pain was from his lower back where the drawer slide had penetrated, there was an alarmingly large pool of blood crusted over most of his back and side. Everything hurt to move, but everything moved.

The suit was still locked firmly into the gantry, although judging by the odd angle, it had taken some damage in the fracas. He hit the release hoping for the best and was surprised when the suit answered with four loud bangs as the gantry disconnected from the hard points holding him in place. Naturally he had forgotten to enable the mag points on the boots before he released so the force of disconnecting sent him floating gently away into the workshop. He realized that it was probably one of the non-lethal lessons he was going to get having to do with thinking before taking any action. After a minute he activated the thrusters and drifted close enough to a bench to find purchase and swung his now magnetic boots onto the floor. Although he had never had to use ninety five percent of the equipment in the shop, long hours of boredom had led to him reviewing inventory lists and equipment status on a regular basis, so he knew where the hull repair kit was, he just never imagined he would use it. The locker it lived in had maintained integrity and the door was still intact, unfortunately some fast moving something had impacted it on the side and dented the side panel and door severely twisting the two pieces together. Big Al wasn't impressed, using the grippers on the arms he gripped either side of the cabinet and using the considerable power of the suit he pulled the door clean off, revealing the treasure inside. The hull kit was large and bulky but well designed, he pulled the sensor probe off the side and used one of the hardpoints to secure it to the right forearm, the rest of the kit he threw over his shoulder and waited for the pack to intersect a mount point and attach itself. The soft chime let him know it was secure and he started off pausing for a second when he realized that he had no idea where to start looking for the breach.

"Alright dumbass, you are on a ship with a hole in it, where do you start looking?" his voice sounded strange in the confines of the helmet. The answer was stupid and obvious. "The hull I guess." There were a million places the hull could have breached that he couldn't access, so might as well start looking in the places he could access. The aft section looked intact, and the sonic probe confirmed there were no large holes he couldn't see hiding beyond. Working his way painfully through the workshop and towards the bow yielded nothing as he searched every

corridor and crawl space Al could fit into. Finally, he found himself in the lower section near the garden, or near where the garden had been. When he descended the shaft that led to his food larder and the garden, he very nearly launched out into space through the void that had replaced it, the area that used to hold all his food and the garden simply had vanished. A huge section of the ship had been ripped out by something large, powerful, and seemingly angry. He could clearly see that giant pieces of the hull had been ripped outwards and tossed into space, the hull opened like a flower into space.

Despite his situation, despite the pain and certain knowledge that he was going to die, and die badly, the view through that mortal wound was captivating. Other than the viewports of Segan Station, he had never looked out into space before. Seeing it now with only a bloody faceplate between him and the universe was altogether a different animal. He could see a gas giant floating serenely before him, beyond it were a set of binary stars anchoring the solar system together, their light illuminating half the planet before him, a swirling vortex of gas painted in every shade of the rainbow, dancing as if alive. Bright dots of light glistened in the dark, moons forever orbiting their massive host, one large and close enough that he could see details of thin atmospheres, and oceans of exotic liquids on the surface. He wondered if there was life down there, gazing in wonder and curiosity at the stars as he gazed down upon them. It seemed that he could push off gently into space and float down to explore the tantalizing world before him, take his final breath sitting on the beach of an unimaginably beautiful shore, as if true peace was only a step away. Red didn't know how he was going to die, but if given a choice, he couldn't think of a better way to finish his life. As it did with most everything, reality asserted itself and ruined his fantasy.

“What's it going to be, step out and go for a walk, or turn around and get to work?” The question seemed less hypothetical when spoken aloud and Red honestly had to think for a moment before turning the suit and lumbering back into the ship. It was convenient that whatever had torn a hole in his ride had chosen an airlock to rip out, more precious had ripped half the airlock out. The outer door was gone, as was the primary inner door, but the damage had stopped short of taking out secondary door that was recessed deeper in the corridor at the end of the large lock. There was no power, but the door had a manual crank on it and the power arm on the suit made short work of closing the hatch.

Red used the thrusters to gently guide himself back to the workshop, his right leg had gone numb and he couldn't move it anymore. The right arm still moved, but both bones in the forearm were broken and the arm had swelled painfully making it all but useless, he could feel blood flowing from his back again and the pain meds were no longer doing anything to mask the agony coming from his ribs and large rip in his lower back. His breathing was what was really starting to worry him, it was getting very shallow and with his back bleeding he could feel the punctured lung filling. He drifted down and locked the boots to the deck before the panel that held the atmospheric controls. Red tried to get his breathing to slow, but his lungs had become coated in blood and he wasn't getting any oxygen anymore. Before panic took over or he changed his mind, he flicked over to the emergency menu on the suit, taking a deep breath, he hit the emergency release on the faceplate which immediately hinged upwards exposing him to vacuum. Red opened his mouth exhaled as hard as he could as the vacuum pulled and air and the blood from his lungs. It took what seemed an eternity for him to put the faceplate back down using the clumsy arm, but lifesaving air rushed over him before he passed out as the faceplate clicked into place and sealed the helmet again. After he regained his breath, he ordered the suit to ignore all safety protocols and inject pretty much whatever it had left into him.

Getting the hatch off was slow going in the suit, small fasteners that came out easily, were nightmarishly hard using one of the overpowered arms of the suit, but eventually the panel floated free and out of his way revealing the mechanism behind. If this were a bad movie then there would have been a large red handle labeled 'manual' or a series of clearly labeled valves. Red stared in defeat at the maze of small pipes and wires running into and out of control blocks connected to powerless circuits. Even with all the reactors off, there still should have been residual current in the power conduits unless it had all been used or there was damage to the system somewhere.

Red didn't have another extended search left in him like closing the hull breach, his body was close to done and whatever the suit had injected him with was making falling asleep a more attractive option by the minute.

"Damn, I got close, almost had it." Red rasped out wondering if those were going to be his last words, probably should have said something cooler, but it did sum it up nicely. A sharp pain shot up from his leg and jolted him alert again. He realized that he didn't need to find the breach, he just needed to isolate the panel from the damage. Using his left thumb, he clicked through menus until he found what he needed, a schematic of the fusion power grid. A quick look showed him what he feared, part of the system passed through where the airlock used to be and had been torn out. Fortunately, there were only three valves that needed to be closed to isolate that area from the part of the grid with the atmospherics on it. It was slow going using one arm but they were all in the workshop he was in, so his lack of mobility wasn't as much of an issue. The closest reactor was aft near the engines, it powered the control system for the drive and like every part of the power grid, it was meant operate independently. Red opened the two valves that connected back into workshop and went further in until he reached the reactor. Normally they were controlled autonomously through the same system that monitored everything, but that system was dead, and Red was faced with a reactor that lacked any sort of control panel he could use to restart the reactor.

Red slowly worked his way back up the workshop and to the locker that held the inspection robots. They were small, semiautonomous bots that could get into the smaller areas of the ship, equipped with six magnetic legs and two small multi use arms they were ideal for inspection and repair. Like everything, they were normally controlled by the system, but they also had a feature that would allow them to be tied into Big AI for direct control. He couldn't talk to the reactor, but the drone could, and he could talk to that. Placing the agile robot on the bench, he rotated the power arm and extended a small data connector which he plugged into the drone. The drone immediately unfurled its legs and stood up, waiting. A new icon appeared on the HUD and clicked over to the drone commanding it to follow him back to the reactor.

The trenchers were serious about keeping their tech away from the inquisitive primates working in the lower hold so although they had finally agreed to the modification that allowed the suit to talk directly with their bots, it was limited to simple commands and didn't allow for complex programming. At first Red commanded the drone to inspect the reactor and after five minutes told him it was intact, which he could see by looking at it. Next, he ordered a systems diagnostic which revealed that the reactor was indeed capable of receiving commands and was ready to go, whenever it received orders to do something, from the nonfunctional central computer. Red tried sending various commands like 'restart reactor' and 'power on', but the drone didn't know how to do any of that, so it just ignored him. Out of growing frustration he started cycling through the various menus of what the drone could do. System Fault Analysis. That caught his eye, selecting it immediately sent the small drone into action as it scurried to a

side panel and rotating the correct tip onto its front arm, removed it and revealed several circuit boards beneath. The drone extended a data connection that caused several lights to come on when it made its connection and began talking with the reactor. After a few minutes a bit of text appeared on the HUD informing him that there was a report ready.

“Audio playback” He coughed out. His vision was starting to get spotty, and the HUD was still splattered with blood which made reading anything detailed tough.

“Reactor unit Five is operational. System check: No faults found. Reactor Core Status: SCRAM shutdown, operational. Last System Log: Reactor running at ten percent, output nominal. Stop. Repeat. Detail.”

“Detail. SCRAM Shutdown.” He asked.

“Last log entry corrupted, null data, no information on cause of SCRAM shutdown. Reactor is in stable, all systems functional.”

Red had to think for a minute, which was getting increasingly harder to do between the drugs, blood loss, the rest of his injuries. The drone didn’t know how to control the reactor, but the reactor did, all he had to do was get the drone to ask the right questions. Fortunately he knew what he needed to do, the reactor in front of him was just a much nicer version of the ones they used on earth.

“Detail. SCRAM shutdown. Damage Analysis. Magnetic lock test, open locks.”

The system was setup to have a strong mechanical failsafe, if everything went wrong at once, complete failure of all systems, a series of magnetic locks that had been held open, would lose power and slam shut, cutting all power to or from the reactor core, hopefully, before it exploded. It looked like it had worked as intended throughout the ship, any single one of the dozen reactors going critical would have vaporized the ship. After a few minutes Red felt a strong thump through the suit feet anchored to the floor as the locks opened again, nothing happened, which probably saved his life since he hadn’t worked out what to do next.

“Detail. Systems Check. Backup power status.”

“Battery status: Full.”

Red started running through the steps to restart a fusion reactor in his head and quickly realized that he probably couldn’t do it even if he had direct access and control of the reactor, doing it using hand signals and grunts translated through a mindless drone was impossible. Maybe it was smarter than he was giving it credit for, maybe he had just been over thinking it.

“Detail. System Status. Verify full system functionality. Start reactor. Five percent.”

He laid his head back into the padding of the helmet, an odd gesture in zero g that carried the same meaning, the same resignation. Red was done, he didn’t have any more tricks left, if this didn’t work, he was just going to take that nap he had been thinking about and stop worrying so much.

There was a low rumble that started slowly and built as the lights all around the reactor started to come on, then the ones in the corridor behind him.

“Guess we’re doing this instead.” He said as he released the mag boots and navigated Big Al on thrusters back towards the shop with the drone right behind him. Once he reached the open panel, he was able to get access to the controls through the drone the same way he had with the reactor. A few minutes later he was rewarded as the panel lit up and air started rushing into the room, hissing off his helmet and sending the thousands of small floating objects occupying the shop spinning off in new, but thankfully, non-lethal trajectories.

Clicking over to the suit menu while the room filled with air, he checked the status of Big Al. It didn’t really seem to matter much before, there were numerous problems racing to kill him,

the suit running out of air wasn't that high on the list. Twenty-seven minutes left, he was cutting it close, if there was another pressure leak or any other problem, he wouldn't have enough air to fix it. After ten minutes the air pressure stabilized, Red shut down the controls and sat waiting to see if it would hold or start dropping again. When he was done to five minutes of air in Big Al the pressure hadn't changed much, so he started the atmospheric up again glided over to the living area where the primary med bay was.

The door was closed and sealed, but the controls were now active and the door slid open at Als command. For a moment Red stared through his bloody faceplate in awe. The room beyond was spotless, perfect white walls, white floors, even white dish towels floating lazily. None of it was covered in the green goo that had coated every surface of Red's world for the last nine hours, none of it was covered in blood and gore, none of it was trying to kill him, all of it was out of reach. Big Al was not fitting through that door easily.

Red thrust a meter back and locked Als boots to the floor. This next part was going to suck and he knew it. Normally to get out of Al, he would just put both hands far above his head and slowly worm his way out of the top until his arms were free. His right arm was immobile, broken, and had swollen badly in the constricting arms of the suit. Reaching slowly with the left arm of the suit, he gripped the right claw and slowly raised it until it was above his head. Through all of this Red had never screamed, he screamed when his right arm went up, the sound shockingly loud in the confines of the helmet. Keying the suit release with his left thumb there was a rush of air as the suit split at the waist and the pressure equalized. Red had been sealed in a suit for nine hours, nine hours of blood, gore, sweat, fear, urine, all combining to create the vilest smell imaginable, his nose had long since stopped working in self-defense. The smell that came in from the outside air was like getting hit with a chemical weapon. Red hadn't thought much beyond getting oxygen back into the room, but that's all the air controls did, control the air, there wasn't a system that filtered alien toxins out of the air, no system to detect poisons and give warnings. He was breathing whatever the green goo the Trenchers lived in, and it obviously wasn't compatible with humans. His first reaction was to start throwing up and not stop, but throwing up in his helmet in zero g with one collapsed lung and another half full blood would kill him before he got out of the suit top. Moving quickly, he pulled his left arm as far down as he could and got a firm grip. The wound on his back was bad and it had welded itself to the back of the suit with blood. Pushing up as hard and fast as he could he ripped the back away from the wound in one swift motion, his right arm unfortunately, stayed securely wedged in the suit. Half in half out he waited out the waves of pain trying desperately to keep his breathing under control. The arm was wedged in tightly and covered with congealed blood cementing it into place. Working his left arm free and under his chin, he managed to get purchase under the right shoulder and pushed with everything he had left. At first nothing moved, then he heard bones in his forearm click as the broken bones compressed and slid out of the suit arm. Gasping, he pushed the suit top up and allowed it to float away while he gripped the waist and slowly pulled his mangled leg free of the suit. Carefully angling away from the pristine room in front of him, Red started vomiting uncontrollable from the noxious air he was breathing. Eventually he stopped retching and decided that whatever it was, it wasn't lethal. It bothered him somewhat the number of things that he had classified as nonlethal today.

Gripping the door frame he pulled himself into the room, tapping the interior control panel as he floated by, sealing the horrors beyond the door from his sight. He drifted into the room and towards the back wall, the med bay was a long drawer on one side of the kitchen that he had never opened, until now. Inside it very similar to the g couches they used for the trip to

Pluto, mostly a mass of tubes large and small, tipped with things that made you not want to know where they went. Red pulled himself inside and activated the unit. The drawer slid closed encasing him in darkness as soft mechanical tentacles wrapped themselves around his face and forced a tube down his throat, then forced in a few in places best not discussed. Goggles covered his eyes and lit up as the tank started to fill with fluid, displaying information in small well-organized categories, they were all red, most were flashing urgently. A miniature version of him appeared and started to populate injuries, within seconds all he could see were flashing dots of different sizes denoting severity covering the diagram to obscurity. Above that there was another info box flashing faster and more urgently than the rest, blood comp. Whatever Big Al had dumped into him combined with what toxins his own body was producing, added to whatever was in the air from the Trenchers' goo, had sent his blood chemistry into uncharted territory. Red didn't understand all the icons and terminology being displayed, but he knew the one flashing on the blood chem panel translated roughly into "You should be dead, if you take so much as an aspirin, you will die, quickly." Whatever hopes Red had of being anesthetized and unconscious for the next part were dashed. It didn't matter, when a mechanical arm grabbed one of his ribs and pulled it out of his lung, Redwood Aquino passed out, screaming.

Chapter 5

Waking up without the desire to live had always been an old friend to Red, but the addition of excruciating pain was getting old, he was seriously reconsidering his chosen profession. At first all he could make out were blurry shades of red, yellow and some green, as his eyes slowly allowed light into his world again, the tube down his throat kept him from screaming in agony and confusion. He thrashed weakly in the med tank for a moment before the memories of how he had gotten there came flooding back, then he thrashed some more in horror and denial. It only took a few seconds for him to wear himself out and lay motionless in the fluid of the med tank. The blurry shades of color started to resolve and showed him how much the tank had fixed and how much was still broken, given that red was still the predominate color for most of the readings, he was just a smidge over the 'not dead' line and might survive. The bad news was that his blood chem was still one of the few things that was actively flashing red which meant that the tank wasn't giving up any narcotics yet and he was just going to have to bear the pain until it finished patching him up. There was strong taste of copper in his mouth and something acidic that was like sucking on a fresh battery, the first he knew was just residual blood from his wounds to his lung, the other he had tasted before, and it wasn't good. Sympronephrin, it was one of the main steps in the Rejuvy treatments that shaved years off your physical appearance and gave you the body of someone much younger, it was also the reason that Rejuvy still had a fifteen percent fatality rate for the first treatment and somewhere above seventy-five percent by the third one. It was the reason that people waited until they were relatively old before taking the treatments, it might give you another fifty years of life, or it could take the last fifteen you had left and snatch it away in an instant. It was why you had to wait thirty years between treatments, the human body really didn't stand up to multiple doses of the stuff and needed all those years to recover enough to survive that next round. Sympronephrin ripped cells apart and forced them to reconstruct themselves, during the Rejuvy process a retro virus containing an idealized version of your DNA was introduced along with it so that when the cells put themselves back together, they did it with a fresh copy of your DNA to work from and erased most of the aging that had happened. It was also usually done when the subject was unconscious since it was very similar to being killed with radiation, living through having your

body dissolved was on everyone's list of ways they didn't want to die. The fact that sympronephrin put you back together again wasn't much of a comfort, it actually made the pain go on twice as long, at least radiation killed you at the halfway point and ended the suffering. The fact a machine designed to save lives and treat wounds had given him a dose of something that would almost surely kill him made him start to wonder if he really was going to stay in the 'not dead yet' category, having to stay alert through the whole process made him question if he wanted to stay 'not dead'.

Red drifted in and out of consciousness for the next few days staying awake only long enough for pain and exhaustion to send him into the black once again. On the fifth day he woke up feeling wonderful. Absolutely wonderful. The pain was all gone, he wasn't worried about dying, or anything at all, more than that, he felt optimistic about the future and confident in himself. Somewhere deep inside something stirred, something dark and skeptical, that thing that never trusted anyone or anything. If it looked too good to be true, it was, and there was a knife heading for your back. The skeptic made him stop thinking about the unlimited possibilities the future held for personal growth and take in the situation. Slowly his glassy eyes scanned the seemingly undecipherable images floating in front of him until it landed on a green rectangle. He had a memory of that flashing angrily, a strong memory of fear that brought the taste of bile up as his body released adrenaline in response to the remembered trauma. That brief flash of coherence put it together and he realized the panel was the one that monitored his blood, whereas before it flashed dire warnings of doom, now it was an extensive list of all the different drugs it had administered after the patient mysteriously lived. Red was far too high to understand what any of the long complicated pharmaceutical names meant, he did know that seeing that many of them listed was bad news. He slapped himself slowly in the face several times trying to ascertain if there was still a breathing tube down his throat, satisfied that there probably wasn't, he spoke.

"Chompu, nomoor, woofff." Red was a bit higher than he thought initially. Forcing himself to take several slow breaths and not laugh, he focused on what he needed to say. The med pod had a rudimentary AI running it, so you didn't have to be overly specific, but you did need to form words. Red tried again. "Sysstem." He waited for the chime before giving his next command. "Stoph all meds."

"System unable to comply, several of the medications would cause death if treatment is terminated."

"System. Shop all narscotity, narcotiies, iks.. "

"Would you like to remove all pain and non-essential medication?"

"Chomfirm."

It only took about fifteen minutes for him to start to regret his decision as his body was slowly set on fire by the withdrawal of the merciful narcotics. Deep pain is the same as good hot sauce Red mused, at first it seems like it's going to kill you, then it doesn't, the pain doesn't fade, but the knowledge that you can take it, that you already have taken it and survived makes it manageable. The pain is no longer crimpling or debilitating, it hurts, but it's not going anywhere and it's not getting any worse, so you live with it until it does fade. After an hour he finally pushed himself up out of the med pod and slowly started wiping himself down to get the bio goop off. Pulling on the soft sweat pants and tee shirt felt like sandpaper on newly reborn skin that was far too sensitive. He looked down sadly at his forearm, the once beautiful tattoo was nothing more than a smear of discoloration. Rejuvy treatments destroy any tattoo as it tears cells apart and rebuilds them, the cells come back stronger, but the ink washes into the surrounding flesh staining it. Red had actually waited until after he got his treatment to get the work done,

twenty hours in a chair getting a Japanese dragon to wrap his forearm, now it was just a featureless brown blob.

Looking around he got his first good look at the living quarters, they had stayed sealed enough to keep the foul smelling goop out, but had obviously been in vacuum at some point, everything had been thrown around and he could see objects jammed in the air intakes, lodged there as the air was sucked out. A great sadness joined the physical pain as Red finally had to accept that Jonesy hadn't made it. He took stock as he moved through the space, the kitchen had disgorged most of its contents which ended up filling all the corner spaces of the room, a peculiarity of air flow when atmosphere was restored. The main storage closet was still closed, but the large metal bins inside had done considerable damage during the high g maneuvering and the door was buckled outward at a disturbing angle. Next to the storage area the bathroom looked intact, although there was a large amount of water that would need to be vacuumed up before he could use it. He paused at the door to the sleeping cabin, the last door. He knew he was going to find Jonesy in there, and as much as he hated that cat, Jonesy had been a good travel companion. The hatch to the sleeping compartment opened easily as Red pushed it open. At that moment, Jonesy, the cat that used 8 lives in one night, got his new name.

"You Lucky Fuck!"

There, curled up in the upper corner, surrounded by a warm ball comprised mostly of Red's clothes, was the luckiest cat in the galaxy, also, the most pissed off. It took him a minute to piece it together what had happened, the air duct was the last one on the main pipe that ran through the living area, when the air pressure dropped, the emergency system had dumped air in before the power had failed. When the air rushed out valves in the ducting started slamming shut trying to isolate the breach, that rush of air slammed the sleeping compartment door and for a brief moment the last of the emergency air had rushed in to fill the room before the final valve slammed shut and isolated this one room. Of all the cruel twists that fate could have chosen, reaching out at the crescendo of violence to nudge salvation onto a cat while indiscriminately killing everything else was a cosmic jest that Red couldn't help but laugh at.

"Alright Lucky, let's go take a look, see how fucked we are." Lucky seemed to weigh the satisfaction of launching into Red's face and clawing his eyes out against the possibility that being nice might result in getting fed. He pushed off gently and drifted over to Red, landing on his shoulder, but close to the eyes, just in case the food gambit didn't pay off.

"Don't worry buddy, we will find you some food first, and for me, I haven't eaten anything but medical tubing."

He drifted into the kitchen and headed over to the pantry, most of what had flown out around was the little stuff stored for convenience; utensils, drinking tubes, bags, the same detritus that fills any kitchen. The food was stored differently, it was organized into meals and packed into sealed crates that were brought up from the lower larder as they were needed. Red chose one cabinet that although damaged swung open easily revealing the box inside. He opened it and pulled out a tube of food for Lucky.

"Here you go, chow down." He squeezed the contents of the tube into the corner of the counter and set the cat down in front of it, the magnetic feet of his g suit clicking into place on the counter. Red grabbed a water tube out of the bin and carefully squeezed a ball of it into the corner next to the food where Lucky could get to it.

Grabbing another bin, he pulled out a handful of breakfast pouches and started sucking them dry one by one. They were always some vaguely sweet, vaguely fruity concoction that was just good enough that would he eat it, but only if he had to. After he and Lucky had their fill, he

left the cat to its own devices and headed towards the workshop, his hand stopping an inch above the button that would open the door. He had no idea if there was air on the other side still, and there were no spare spacesuits in the living quarters. Although it was meant to be sealed, it wasn't an air lock and didn't have any systems to equalize pressure or even tell you if there was pressure at all.

Even though the pain meds had worn off bringing him agonizingly back into stark reality, many of the psychoactive compounds were still running strong giving him a near suicidal optimism that reached out and pushed the button. The door swung open silently revealing the chaos of the workshop. Everything was coated in a thin film of greenish slime, which acted as a kind of adhesive and had slowly glued down everything that had been floating around. Red drifted over to where the top half of Big Al had come to rest. He gently unlatched the helmet and spun it a quarter turn to disconnect it from the suit. After cleaning out all the blood and gore out of the helmet and faceplate he gently slid it on and activated the system. After a few seconds it connected to the top half of the suit and the legs remotely and reported both in good working order. He brought up the external sensors on the suit and was relieved to see the pressure had held steady for the few days he was out, oxygen was fine and although there was some carbon dioxide building up, it was still low and wouldn't be a problem for some time yet. Without the computer to monitor and control the atmospherics, he was going to have to do it manually for the foreseeable future. He activated the drone and sent it off towards the reactor to get a status. After negotiating through the drone, the reactor logs showed that it had run for seven hours before the circuit it was on maxed out and the reactor was forced to scram again, that was roughly five days ago and everything had been running on the plasma still in the conduits, but he had no idea how much was left. He finally decided to tell the drone to order a two hour test running at ten percent, that would hopefully be enough to keep the lights on for a bit more without forcing the reactor into emergency shutdown again.

It was an odd sensation floating serenely in the shop, the only sound the soft hum of a fusion reactor several decks below him. After all the trauma and violence he had suffered, the quiet seemed ominous, even with the drugs, there was a small feral animal inside of him wary of the next attack, jumping at shadows and sounds, real and imagined. Every object in the room seemed to hide an unseen terror ready leap out and finish what was left of him. It was oddly reassuring to pull the helmet back on, it was a small safe place. He couldn't communicate directly with most of the tech on the ship, the drones on the other hand were meant to be used for assisted repairs and complex tasks in hard to reach areas, so Red had a lot of control over those. Bringing up the control board he set all twenty of them to clean up the workshop and get rid of the goop. He pulled the helmet off satisfied to see the robot locker disgorging drones, their magnetic feet clicking as they scurried off to complete their tasks.

Floating back to his quarters he found a few more food packs and ate. He knew food was going to be an issue, but he didn't want to deal with rationing yet, starving to death was still pretty far down his dance card, and if something else was going to beat starving, at least he'd die with a full stomach. His more immediate problems were air locks and suits. He only had Big Al on this side of the air lock, in the main lower lock there were six suits, four were stored against the wall next to the main door and had been ripped away with the airlock door, but the other two were kept by secondary lock. The only way to open that door would be to depressurize the workshop and living quarters venting the air into space, he might have enough air left in the tanks to do that once, maybe twice, then he would be out of air without a way to make more.

Without those suits and a functioning airlock Red was trapped in this tiny pocket of air he had made, then it really would just be waiting for starvation to do its work.

He grabbed Al's helmet on his way through the workshop and slipped it on taking command of one drone as he headed to the lower lock. When he came to the shaft that dropped down two levels, he skipped his usual acrobatic maneuver and carefully pulled himself to a stop before gently floating down. The secondary lock was twenty meters away down the corridor which was lined on three sides with various pipes and conduits.

“Scan. High rez. Twenty meters. Return.”

The drone started down the corridor recording it in precise detail, then turned around and did it again coming back.

Red looked down the corridor to the airlock door that was just a little smaller than the space it was in, Big Al had been a tight fit going through and there was no way he was going to fabricate another door that large with the limited resources he had at his disposal. He could make a door that was large enough for him to go through without a suit, and if Big Al was already on the other side of the makeshift airlock he could use that to access the other suits. There wasn't any g plating down here so there was no floor, it was just a shaft that was covered irregularly with conduits and other oddly shaped mechanical systems that were going to make creating an airtight seal a nightmare. Working one problem at a time, he drifted back up to the workshop and over to the main bench. The drones had made remarkable progress cleaning up and the shop was starting to resemble its old self again, there was still goo everywhere, but a lot less, most of the tools and other items had been rounded up and returned to or near their assigned locations. Red settled in and powered up the console, the main computer was down, and it was limited in what it could do, but it was able to interface with the drone that had followed Red up and was backing to the port on the desk to upload the scan. The scan of the corridor displayed and after he highlighted several areas, it started spitting out dimensions for him.

He slipped the helmet back on started marking damaged panels and cabinet doors throughout the shop in the HUD for scanning by the bots. Using the image from the corridor scan he started piecing panels together until he had something like a crude airlock aid out on the screen workbench screen. After re-tasking half the drones to cut away the panels he needed from the workshop and move them to the lower airlock he floated back to the living area, sealing the door behind him. Red activated the med panel and slipped his right forearm into the socket that opened. There was a brief pressure as the cuff inflated, took a blood sample, and a few other readings. A few seconds later the panel informed him that he needed several medications urgently, mostly steroids to help him recover, and a long list of recommended pharmacology. After looking through the list, Red approved all the urgent meds and refused everything else except a mild sedative to help him sleep. Several more needles went in, and the machine released his arm. He found his cat already sound asleep in the bedroom, curled into small sleeping sack installed for him.

“Hey Lucky Fuck, good to see you are comfy.” The day had taken a toll and the sedative was starting to make everything just a little fuzzy as Red slipped into his sleeping sack and zipped himself in. The list of things trying to kill him wasn't getting much smaller and his list of answers was nonexistent, he had no idea if whatever hit the ship was coming around to finish the job, or any idea what had happened at all. Tomorrow, if he woke up, he was going to get some answers.

Chapter 6

Red didn't know how long he slept, long enough that Lucky had climbed up his sleeping bag and was staring him directly in the face screeching angrily about several forgotten meals. He pushed the cat away watching him float across the room windmilling his limbs until one the magnetic feet contacted the opposite wall and Lucky was able to walk down it to the floor and continue his serenade while staring at the closed door. Moving his arm to push Lucky away had sent shocks of pain throughout his body bringing him instantly and brutally into full consciousness and the unfiltered reality of his situation. While he slept his body had metabolized all the drugs, the complete absence of pain meds was instantly identifiable by the rivers of fire running to and from every part of his body. He waited for the pain to peak and started carefully moving his limbs and stretching until he worked out all the kinks that had formed while he was out. The pain was different today even with the residual narcotics in his system taking the worst away, the pain had felt more severe, more life threatening, today it hurt just as much but felt more like a healing pain born from his bodies efforts to repair itself. The other thing his body had metabolized were all the psychotropic drugs. Yesterday he knew that he was going to die, he just didn't care, today he knew he was going to die, and he was terrified. The full weight of his situation bore down on him as he floated out of his room. the shower was just the left, but he dared not use it until he figured out what the water situation was, he might need that water to survive. Grabbing several food packs he was reminded that each extra pack he ate now might be a day off his life later, carbon dioxide was still building up in his fragile bubble of air, a bubble suspended in space held together by a crippled ship. A ship that would never fly between the stars again, never take him home, a ship turned mausoleum, a gravestone floating endlessly through space. All of Red's decisions and actions had been reduced to choosing how and when he was going to die. If that was even in his control.

"And why, exactly, are we still alive anyway?!" Lucky looked up from his food briefly but supplied no insight. "Well give it some thought and get back to me." The cat ignored him this time. It had been nagging him since he woke up the first time but didn't give it much thought because he was always seconds from dying and the happy meds kept him from thinking too deeply about his situation, but now it was a puzzle his brain couldn't let go of. The ship had been attacked, he had no doubt about that, this wasn't some system failure or an accidental collision with something in space, something had chased them down, disabled the ship, and then what? Just left? A chill ran down his spine and he finished the thought.

"Hey Lucky? I think whatever attacked us is still here." It made sense, nothing, alien or human, expended energy without getting something in return, if they could run down, disable his ship, and rip large holes in it, then they could have destroyed it, but they didn't. They wanted the ship, or at least something that was on the ship. Maybe they already had taken it and just left the ships husk behind in space, or maybe they were on the ship now, taking what they wanted, working their way aft. Red had been expecting that at any second he would hear explosions and rushing air as the ship was finished off by whatever attacked them. But he was still here, and that made no sense unless they still needed something. Since the initial attack, the ship hadn't moved or made a sound, if there were demented aliens tearing apart the ship, he would have heard or felt something. The tiny bubble of air keeping him alive seemed very small and fragile, just sitting around waiting for fate to reach out and pop it without warning wasn't how Red was going out.

He threw on a set of heavy coveralls and headed out into the shop where he reassembled Big Al and brought it to the lower airlock, securing it to the wall. All of the panels he had

requested had been brought down by the drones numbered and lashed down along with the welding rig. He pulled up the design for the new airlock on the portable tablet and started finding the pieces he needed and tacking them in place. The panels had been cut to rough shape but most were bent, or irregular enough to make fitting them together challenging. His still healing body wasn't yet up to the heavy work of forcing them into position, so he would have to give the panel to the drones to modify further, which was time consuming, they worked diligently, but not swiftly. Eventually he had cobbled something together that covered most of the corridor, there were a hundred extra braces and struts welded in that weren't on the original design making it look like a pile of scrap had gotten wedged into the space. Right at the center was the heaviest door he could find in the shop, it was only sixty centimeters square, just large enough for him to fit through without a suit. He had rigged a simple gasket and just bolted the door in place, he would have to remove the bolts each time he used it, it was inconvenient but airtight.

He used nearly all the emergency foam from the breach kit to seal around the perimeter and all the weld lines giving the whole mess a disturbingly organic look as the bright red foam hardened as it flowed and dripped. He pulled himself inside, secured the door and tightened the bolts that held it in place. Strapped to the wall next to the hatch was a small pump connected to one of three fittings going through the wall, he double checked the air line for tightness and turned on the pump, drawing the air out of lock. Floating over to Big Al, he slipped into the legs as he pulled himself into the top and sealed the suit. He had cleaned the suit but the smell of everything he had gone through last time he wore it was still strong, it was a combination of so many different elements that he finally decided that it was just the smell of fear. The little pump worked for a few minutes until it had removed enough air that Red couldn't hear it very well, reaching over he turned it off and checked the pressure outside the suit. It reported about thirty percent of normal and was holding as far as he could see. He probed the makeshift airlock he had created expecting at any second for it to fail violently, crushing him against the other airlock door. When that didn't happen, he turned the pump back on and let it run until the pressure was just over ten percent, then turned to the main airlock. That door was always meant to be an inner door and there would never be a reason to create a vacuum on the ship side of it, so there was no mechanism that open the chamber to space. Using the clumsy claw on Al, Red used a drilling attachment to bore a small hole through the door allowing the last of the air to escape into space. Using a sealing valve from the breach kit he pulled the tab on the glue surface and pressed it firmly over the hole. The airlock had a lot of protocols that were all designed to stop someone from opening the door when there was a vacuum on the other side, but there were manual controls built in that he was able to access and after disabling four redundant systems, the door swung open revealing the ruined room beyond.

The locker with the smaller, more functional suits was still intact and Red surveyed the rest of the room to see what was left he could use. Last time he was down here he was in pretty bad shape and hadn't really taken in what had happened, now it was terrifying. The gas giant could still be seen through hole, but the little moon had moved on out of site. The hole in the ship was unusual and it took staring at it for a few minutes before he realized what was bothering him. Most holes that were made quickly and violently had a direction to the destruction, but this one didn't, tortured metal bent inward in one place and outward just a few meters away. There were five huge pieces that were bent out at the very tips, but were caved in where they connected to the ship at their base. How the outer airlock had been ripped off was less important than what hadn't been tossed into space with it. Half the room was gone and the lockers at the edge of the whole had lost most of their contents to the black. The lockers containing his personal gear were

still intact thankfully and he moved the four large totes into the ship. Ironically most of the gardening supplies had survived, while most of his food was gone. He grabbed the four food totes that were left and tossed them in with the rest of the gear. The other lockers contained a mix of repair equipment and spare parts which Red cataloged in case he needed any of it later.

He entered his makeshift airlock and pulled the large door closed behind him locked and sealed it using the small valve he installed. Going over the other door he gently turned the handle on one of the valves on the other door allowing a thin stream of air back in, filling the space. He stayed in the suit until the room had equalized with the ship and climbed out of Big Al. After unbolting the hatch, he pushed through the extra suits, his personal gear, Big Al's power pack, and the last of his food before climbing out and bolting the hatch back, it wasn't necessary, but it made him feel a little safer having two sealed doors between him and the cold.

After an unknown amount of sleep, he woke up for the first time not feeling like dying, there was still pain, but now it was dull and achy and eased up after he stretched out. He still didn't want to figure out the food situation yet, there were two full bins left and that should last for a while, so he pulled two pouches out and sucked them down. It was going to be a busy day.

He floated down to the airlock and unbolted the hatch. After getting everything he needed through the hatch he went in and put on Al's power pack. Al still stank, but Red climbed in anyway and started cycling the doors. The Gas giant was still waiting for him, but seemed a little further away as he slid out through the jagged hole riding Big Al's micro thrusters out into space. Turning he could see the damage completely, around the hole there were four huge dents that went to the edge of hole, in between them the metal of the hull was pulled out like leaves. Red just stared in complete incomprehension, wondering at the type of weapon that could do that, it looked as though someone had grabbed a handful of the ship and just pulled it out. Thrusting towards the bow he could see damage randomly along the hull, bright impact lines, crumples and dents, although most of it looked superficial, there weren't any new holes in the ship until he got past the bulge and headed for midship. At first all he could make out was undefined lumps but as he got closer, he could see that it was frozen liquid, it was the green goo. He thrust a little further from the hull to get a better look and caught his breath. There was a gash ten meters wide and a hundred long carved into side of the ship exposing the Trenchers biome. There was no mistaking what did this, the edges were charred black and had been melted, splatter everywhere, this had been done with an energy weapon, a frighteningly powerful one.

Whatever was in there when the side opened had been sucked out into space, with the high pressure inside, judging by the way the edges had been pushed outward, it happened quickly and violently. Al's lights didn't make it very far into the cavern beyond, but it was huge, probably accounted twenty percent of the ship. Red decided that there probably wasn't much to learn by going in, whatever hit that area had done a good job of destroying it and there wasn't much left. He continued forward until he reached the bow, or the new bow, a hundred meters of the ship had been cut off, cleanly. It was like someone had passed an impossibly sharp knife through the ship and sliced part of it off at a perfect ninety-degree angle.

Red thrust towards the ship until Al's feet contacted the ship and locked in place; he didn't want to float away while distracted. Strapped to the arm of the suit was a very normal looking personal tablet that was tied into the suits system. For all its' banality, the humble device was a sinister player. It was a just what it seemed to be, a media tablet, like all media tablet it sends out signals from time to time looking for network connections, and can receive input, just like any device, which is why it skated through all the scanning and inspections without setting off any Trencher alarms. The device was unremarkable and even the software that ran on it was

nearly harmless, it just did one thing, it would send a ping with a specific code, a code that looked like any other network ident code, what made this code different was that each one of the tiny spybots he had snuck onto the hull was listening for that code, waiting to transmit it's data. Each of the tiny crabs had been programed to move to different parts of the ship, one fore, one aft, two around the bulge. Red accessed the tablet through Big Al and sent a ping, almost instantly he got a reply from one of the midship bots, he had been hoping that the one assigned to the bow would reply but apparently it was attached to the missing section. The bot that responded opened a link with his tablet and dumped terabytes of data into it along with its location. It was just off the left, which meant the other one would be to the right. Red detached from the hull and thrusted up and right, sending another ping, this time two responses and two downloads. he took a moment to send out new instructions to the bots, sending them to take up position around the bulge giving him a three sixty view around the ship.

He moved to the other side of the ship and then headed for the stern so he could inspect the side he missed coming in. Just in front of the bulge he found a matching wound running through the Trencher biome, although not the same. This one showed no signs of secondary damage from the pressure release, this one had been hit after the first, this was a coup de grâce, it almost felt personal in its pursuit of finality. He drifted all the way to the stern and looped around the engines in back. He had seen pictures of them, taken millions of kilometers away, enhanced, colorized, but seeing them up close the real scale became apparent, mountains could be hidden in them. The four main drive nozzles were a hundred and fifty meters across, nestled geometrically in between were five smaller nozzles, each fifty meters across. For reasons he couldn't imagine whoever attacked the ship hadn't touched the drive at all, probably just didn't need to, there was nothing left alive onboard that could use the engines, at least, not yet.

Hungry, tired, and aching all over, he decided to go back and get something to eat, take a piss, scratch his nose, and review the data from operation Crustacean, not in that order. He was surprisingly relieved to see that his makeshift airlock had held the whole time and hadn't leaked away his little bubble in space. Al had to stay in the lock, so he grabbed the tablet and Als' power pack and headed back to his quarters, stopping to plug the power pack into the cradle that used to hold the hard suit. Lucky Fuck was hungry and vocal when he came through the door to the living area, grabbed a food pack for each of them floated over to the table to secure himself. Pulling up the data from the crabs he started sorting through it, there were separate data streams for each of the sensors, so he accessed the visual data first, he could go through the data from the FTL section later, right now, he needed to know what had hit him. The two mid ship drones would have the best view, so he pulled up the feeds from both and started scrolling backwards through them until the feed went solid white, FTL. Each drone gave a full 180 degree view covering the entire sky and the hull all around it. Starting from there he moved through the video until the action started. At first it was almost unnoticeable, small flashes as munitions impacted the hull, the camera didn't convey the crushing acceleration, but the extreme maneuvering was clear from the star field and gas giant in the background swinging wildly as the ship tried to escape. The feed suddenly terminated and started up again. He pulled up the logs and saw that whatever had happened had completely disabled the bot, shut them down instantly. Fortunately, he had designed the bots to be tough, with enough redundancy to get them back up and running. When the video restarted, he had no idea how much time had passed, but the stars were longer whirling, and the large gas giant could be seen on two of the feeds. The software detected something moving among the star filed, approaching fast, it was almost impossible to see in visible light, but showed on infrared as a blob that was slightly warmer then the space around it.

Suddenly the blog got bright for a second, the forward feed showed instant the bow had been removed from the ship, a bright white line suddenly appeared running the full circumference of the ship about a hundred meters down as the energy weapon sliced through the ship in an instant. The hit was followed immediately by a large explosion from inside the ship that pushed the bow away violently sending it spinning off. As it created some distance Red could see that there was a stream of fire pouring out of the front of the ship impacting the bow, the energy wasn't impacting on the surface but was cutting pieces of it off as it spun. The bow was glowing red in some places as it drifted away from the ship, some of it had come from the weapon used, but most of the damage he could see had come from the secondary explosion from within the ship.

The enemy ship fired again, the dot on the screen getting brighter for an instant, the other feed showed the impact as the beam sliced into the side of the ship, opening the Trenchers' habitat to space. A geyser of fluid erupted from the ship and started spewing liquid and other dark shapes out into space, Red didn't want to think about what those shapes were. The dot flared again hitting the exact same spot again, the fluid that had frozen in place burst into clouds of steam as the beam sliced into the ship again with enough force to exit out the other side. The tiny dot on the screen got larger at a frightening rate given the distances involved and Red was able to enhance the video to get a better look. The approaching ship was twice the size of the Trencher ship and lacked any of the smooth lines and organic look. It was all hard angles and black metal plating that looked like it was designed to absorb damage, with openings scattered around the hull that were most likely weapons ports of same kind, he had already seen them use three different types of weapons, or at least the same weapon used three different ways. It approached impossible close to the ship and matched course at fifty meters, the ship rotating to expose a huge set of doors on the side that were already opening to face the prey.

Red loved science fiction movies, the dumber the better, it didn't matter if there was plot if there was a monster destroying, an alien invading and or probing, a rag tag crew fighting the good fight on the edge of the stars. He ate it up, some people view movies as high art, and they are, but they are something else far more important, portals. They don't go anyway, they just take you away from your life for a few hours, a few hours of actual peace, were all of life's problems were up on that screen and they were being handled by other people, so you didn't have to worry about it. Red had seen some stupid movies with some completely unbelievable crap in them, what he saw on the screen was the most idiotic thing he had ever seen, it just made no sense for a spaceship to have those. As the doors slid open on the screen two huge articulated tentacles unfurled themselves and stretched out toward the helpless ship. They seemed to be about a hundred and fifty meters long and made of segments that could rotate one hundred and eighty degrees at each connection point, the ends were tipped with a massive four-pronged claw. He watched in disbelief as the claw extended and grabbed the hull while the other stopped just short and started moving back and forth along the hull, searching. After a minute it found what it was looking for, the airlock, pulling back the claw opened and then slammed into the ship hard enough to shake the video feed, it then closed and pulled back tearing away a portion of the hull, air and fluid escaping into space.

Red realized that was the moment he had made it into AI, that was why he hadn't been crushed by the pressure from the Trencher habitat, it had already been ejected into space, what he got hit with must have been whatever was left in the lines still under pressure when the chunk had been ripped out. So far that was the only thing that made any sense at all, nothing he had seen added up. Whoever attacked them obviously could have destroyed the ship at will but didn't. They cut the nose off the ship, what was up there that they need to get rid of, weapons?

Killing the Trenchers made sense in a sick way, he didn't condone it, but it was understandable to not leave a living enemy to challenge you. But then they had taken the time to approach, which must be dangerous even with a crippled ship, and actually grapple on so they could rip out one air lock. Red had too many 'whys' and not enough 'because's', and it was starting to piss him off. Something was happening on the screen; the other ship was so close that it blocked out most of the view, but he could see the star field shifting and the arms holding the ship were stretched and taut. They were moving the ship, he must have been unconscious during this part, but he could see a glow from the aft section of the other ship as its drives kicked on, one feed had the gas giant on it and Red watched it slowly change position and slid across the screen as the ship corrected course. After twenty minutes on the enemy ship cut thrust and the arms started to coil themselves back into the dark ship as it drifted away, slowly at first, but when the mains kicked in, it shot off like a bullet and was lost almost instantly when they shut down seconds later. One more puzzle for the 'why' pile.

Red leaned back realizing that he had no idea how long it had been since he slept last. Pulling up an analysis program on the tablet, he opened the three feeds from the crabs and set the program to work organizing the data, there was a lot and he had only scratched the surface enough to form a rough picture of what had happened. Exhausted he floated back to his sleeping bag and got in without taking his clothes off and was asleep instantly.

Ten hours later Lucky's cries of hunger pulled him out of sleep, groaning he stretched and drifted over to the food storage to get some breakfast for himself and Lucky. Settling into the console he brought up the data from the crabs to see what the software had been able to do, quite a bit as it were. All the data had been grouped by the different sensor types the crabs employed, seeing an analysis of the variance from absolute zero for the surrounding space probably wasn't going to help much, so he shunted most of the data feeds off to the side and started going through the ones that were useful. The using the background stars for reference the system had been able to create a full 3D rendering of the system giving him a fully interactive model he could work with. It was a binary system with one sun being quite a bit smaller than the other, there were five gas giants and several rocky planets closer to the suns. He overlaid the nav data and saw a red line appear near the second gas giant that went straight for it and then became chaotic as the system plotted the fierce maneuvering. A second line matched the first as the enemy ship was added, the line of its' passage was all smooth curves and it turned just enough to keep the nose on the prey. Eventually the two lines met and traveled in parallel for a bit until they both curved in towards the gas giant when the other ship changed his course. Red dropped the enemy ship off the display and had the computer project his new path through the system. Just as he thought, he was now in an elliptic orbit around the gas giant, some quick math using the old heading showed him continuing out of the system and into deep space. Why? Why would they nearly destroy his ship and then waste time to ripping out an airlock and change his flight path to keep it in the system?

More 'why' questions that didn't have answers, so he focused on what he did know. Pulling up the other ship on the display again showed that the vessel had shot off in a straight line and then disappeared when the light from the drives cut off. He programmed a search to look for stars being blocked out along the projected path until he had enough data points to track it, it changed direction several times, but the computer was able to find it again and update the plot. It was orbiting the same planet he was, just closer in and much faster, like it was waiting. Red felt a chill at the thought that the ship was still out there, still close by, and the data he had was a day old and he was blind. He was going to have to fix that, it was time to break out the spy gear.

Chapter 7

Over the years the Agency had tried just about everything imaginable and few unimaginable tricks to crack the Trenchers tech and gain intel on them, most of their best ideas were still floating in space somewhere along the orbit of Pluto, ejected by the Trenchers. Other ideas had resulted in a few near boycotts by the Exos and a bunch of strict rules written into every contract to keep the Agency honest, or force them to pretend really well. Being a government agency, they learned slowly, but consistently. They learned that the Trenchers were good at sniffing out nefarious devices and suspicious enough to toss out anything else that they didn't understand the purpose of immediately, so everything had to be hidden as something else. The crates that held his personal gear were mostly made of memory crystals that did indeed store the supplemental entertainment catalog that it was supposed to, as well as every bit of nasty software the Agency had ever written hidden amongst the old tv shows and media files. The fact that there was enough memory in those two crates to hold all the data humanity had ever generated several times over didn't arouse any suspicion from the Aliens. There were also about a hundred times more optical memory readers than were necessary. The tablet contained hundreds of micro transmitters that supposedly were part of the wireless connectivity but had nothing to do with it. Everything he had brought had dual purposes, even his toothbrush had a micro probe camera built into it, for flossing apparently.

Red brought both crates over to the workbench in the shop and got busy disassembling what he needed. Every few years the Agency would make Exos re-up their gear certificate which included two days of brushing up on all the different mayhem that could be created with the components hidden in every trip. Red hated it, every Exo hated it. They had a limited number of days on the Earth before the next trip out, spending a week of that time sober was almost unthinkable, spending it doing employee training that would never be used was asinine. Nobody ever got the chance to use any of it, they were monitored during the trip, any suspicious behavior, like making a Marvin Martian ray gun out of your luggage, would result in getting gassed and stored unconscious for the duration of the trip. Nobody was watching now. Red was glad he had gone through the training recently, although he would never let that slip, especially to that asshole Carlsen.

An hour later he had a bag full of gear and headed for the airlock, carefully positioning optical relays every twenty meters to create a line all the way to the airlock. He suited up in one of the smaller lighter suits, there was more danger of damaging the suit and the mobility pack was crude, but Big Al was just too clumsy for this kind of work. After placing several more relays to bridge through the airlock he attached a long safety line and pushed out through the ragged hole being careful to stay away from the sharp edges waiting to tear a hole in his suit. Once clear he thrust slowly back to the hull and locked his boots in place. He had set the crabs to spread themselves evenly around the circumference of the hull, so he started for the nearest one, laying relays as he went. When he reached it, he placed a small transmitter in front of it and activated it, after a second, his pad notified him that the transmission had gone through the network and reached the tablet inside. He repeated the process with the next two, giving each a transmitter to talk to linked back into the ship. As he was heading back he noticed something sticking out of the hull some distance forward, something he missed on his initial inspection. As he approached he started noticing small holes, about ten centimeters, surrounded by blackened melted hull plating, some were a bit larger in diameter, or carved a gash instead of a perfect hole. The shape he had seen resolved into a huge mass of what looked like water ice that had frozen as it burst

from the hull. Unlocking his boots he drifted up and away from the ship to get a better look at the damage.

Surrounding the ice dam, were dozens of charred holes and slash marks in the hull, but it wasn't random damage. Red could clearly see tight groupings of holes bored through, a series of slashes that were perfectly parallel to one another, there was a perfect square that had been cut out and removed, exposing the interior. Looking toward what was left of the bow from his heightened vantage point there were three other areas that looked similar, tight groupings of damage that looked anything but random. This had been surgery, a precise attack to cripple the ship in specific locations. His blood ran cold as the implications of what he was seeing sunk in, they had attacked vital systems from the look of it, including the water supply, his water supply. This had obviously been done after the ship was crippled and drifting defenseless. Why? It was a question he was asking himself too often lately. He added it to the list of things that he wasn't going to get answers to and started back for the airlock.

Once back in the workshop he sat at the console and pulled up the network he had just created. The data dump from the three remaining crabs was there and the computer was already tearing through it to make sense of it all. He sent another series of command to the crabs and three windows appeared on the screen as the crabs started feeding live data to him. He wasn't blind anymore, but he was pretty sure he didn't want to see what was out there waiting for him. Extrapolating from the projected course of the enemy ship he started searching for the attacking ship, naturally it wasn't where he expected it to be. After several frustrating hours he finally got lucky and the computer found a star that winked out for split second as the ship passed in front of it, then a second one, which gave him a speed and trajectory. The ship was nearly invisible, even to his little crabs, it didn't show up on any of the sensors and it kept adjusting course. Every time it changed course the computer had to start searching background stars to find it again, it was a laborious process even though he was mostly just waiting for the computer to complete searches and return information. Eventually the ship settled into the wake of one of the smaller moons orbiting the gas giant, and just sat there, waiting, following the moon, but not precisely. Going back and watching the vector of the ship, he realized that it was staying just on the edge of the small moon, but never slipping behind it, always adjusting its path so that it was in line of site to his ship. It was watching him. He didn't have the strength to ask why, even silently.

He programed the system to watch the alien craft and alert him if it changed it flight path then headed back to the living area. Ignorance is bliss, it's cliché, but true. Not knowing how much food and water he had left wasn't going to make it last longer and since it appeared that his imminent demise had been postponed for at least another day, he should probably look. Going through the food he figured he had roughly a month's worth in the crates, water was another issue. There was about a week's worth in liter sized drinking bags, they were meant to be refilled from the water dispenser in the kitchen which the other ship had disabled when they hit the water system and bled it out into space. He was in a closed bubble of air, so in theory he should be able to condense water out of the air that he was losing to breathing, and since the toilet wasn't working, he was already bagging up his urine and other byproducts, fortunately separately.

He threw a dinner pack in the microwave and sat down at the table, which was strange since the grav plating was off, he wasn't really sitting, just floating in a sitting position at the table. It was almost therapeutic doing something that appeared normal, a balm for his weary psyche, tired of the fear, of the constant panic, tired of having to deal with the situation. For just a few moments he could forget about it and just enjoy a hot meal and a grateful stomach. Even Lucky came over, his feet making clicking sounds as he approached, hopeful for bit of meat or

something from Red's dinner. He tried to jump into his lap out of habit and immediately shot up towards the ceiling without the grav plates that provided the other half of the arc that normally landed him in Red's lap. Red reached out and caught the cat before he got away and pulled him down to the table, giving him some of his dinner. For the first time in a long time, he felt at peace sitting there petting his cat and munching the last of his meal. Death is the inescapable destination and Red had already cheated the devil out of 400 or so years of payback. Death was an old friend that had walked closely by him his whole life, sometimes too close, sometimes almost forgotten, but never gone. It wasn't that he didn't fear death, far from it, but an early death had seemed to be his fate, he had just been waiting this whole time for it to come, never connecting with anyone or even any era in history. He had just been waiting and now that death was here, he felt the full burden of his wasted life, all the mistakes, all the missed opportunities to be a decent human being, all the people he left in his wake as he passed through life without cause or purpose. Pain and fear. People don't want to admit it, but pain and fear are the two dominant forces in anyone's life, defining it in terms of how much pain could be absorbed and what the fear drove you to do. Fear had driven Red hard his whole life, the pain was almost all of his making. Fear had caused him to step off the planet and lead a life disconnected, always vanishing for twenty years at a time, long enough for his problems to go away, for others to forget what he had done the last time, and long enough for him to convince himself that he didn't care. The pain reminded him that he did.

Several hours later a soft chiming from the console woke him up. Waking up was becoming his least favorite thing to do, although the alternative was worse. Every time he woke up, he felt like a hospital patient in a bad movie where they come to with no memory of what happened, then are told the horrible truth, and they must relive a forgotten horror. The first few moments when his mind replayed the horrific events before he last fell asleep always felt like he was learning it for the first time, disbelief and denial fought for a less disastrous reality, only to be shouted down by the undeniable chorus of pain coming from his still healing wounds. Drifting over to the console he pulled up the feed and dismissed the alert flashing on the screen. There were two events flagged, the first was minor and had only been noted without raising the alarm, the second was more serious, the other ship had changed course and was now out of sight behind the moon. The maneuvering had started immediately after the first anomaly was detected. Pulling it up, Red saw that it was nothing more than a small spike in the background radiation coming from an area a few million kilometers behind him sunward. Moving forward through the feeds that could detect it, the spike continued to climb. He noted some of the other detectors were also starting to register fluctuations as he played the feeds forward to the present.

What he saw didn't make sense, but he had nearly come full circle the point that if something did make sense, that wouldn't make any sense. There were minute fluctuations in the gravity in that region, the variant from absolute zero was going up, he detected neutrinos and a few other subatomic particles that shouldn't exist at all flying around. Time slowed. That one caught his attention. One of the things that had always mystified human physicists was the utter and absolute control over time that the Trenchers appeared to have, never late, never early, no variations. Red couldn't make three trips from the living room to the dining room without generating a variance in his arrival time. But the Trenchers did it over an unknown number of light years through a sea of stars and never missed. Now, unfolding before him was a time event, it was progressive, time was slowing at an exponential rate in a very localized region close to him and the other ship was hiding from it. Nothing good was about to happen.

Ten minutes later nothing good started. The ship hiding behind the moon suddenly accelerated and shot towards the planet, within seconds it had disappeared behind the gas giant on a trajectory that was going to slingshot it around and back towards Red moving very fast. Whatever was happening a million miles away at the distortion point was coming to a head, most of the sensors he had been watching it with started to wash out as they were overloaded. He focused the visible light detectors towards it and watched as the space around the nexus point started to boil and distort, as it increased an epicenter formed as light began to stream out and bring focus to the perfect sphere forming within the chaos. The nose of a ship slowly started to emerge, pushing the light out of the way and causing distortion waves to radiate out that increased in intensity as the rest of the ship pushed through and into the space around it. As soon as the ship breached, the distortion nexus vanished sending a sphere of energy outwards as the event collapsed. It was identical to his ship. The nose was still attached, it wasn't shot full of holes, and it was fully functional, but there was no doubt, it was a Trencher ship. Red found the thought of there being another living human in the solar system to be comforting, even if they were both about to die.

Like most people he had watched his share of nature documentaries and had seen cruelty without malice, death with purpose but no glory. Watching the events unfold in real time was like watching the predator in those shows work its way closer to the prey, the narrator building suspense with his voice as the chase ensues, the uncertainty as predator and prey battle speed and agility over strength and cunning in a death match. Red could see it being played out in front of him, the other Trencher ship entered space with almost no velocity, they simply slipped into being from somewhere else. The enemy ship however was moving very fast indeed when it came around the planet and shot directly towards the motionless ship. The ship immediately lit off its mains at full power and started accelerating at frightening velocities. Red remembered this part of the fight and hoped the Exo on that ship wasn't being turned to jelly against one of the bulkheads. It was surreal to watch knowing what was coming next the whole time. At first the enemy ship matched course and started to pelt the trencher ship with long range projectiles fired from turrets on the rear of the ship that did just enough damage to force them to evade, which slowed them down. When the gap had closed enough the enemy ship deployed its primary weapon as the whole front of the ship disappeared behind a massive release of energy that traveled out in a cone shape from the bow and engulfed the Trencher ship still hundreds of thousands of kilometers away. The effect was immediate, the main drives of the Trencher ship shut down and it tumbled slowly in space, defenseless as the other ship overtook it and matched speed. As expected, a large port opened on the bow of the ship and an invisible beam sliced the nose neatly off the ship exactly as he had been. He thought that the next move would be to start taking out the vital systems and then attacking the bottom airlock, but instead the beam weapon fired again completely removing the aft section of the ship. Red watched in horror as the aft section tumbled off into space, the Trencher habitat ruptured, streaming green liquid into the void, a helpless Exo inside, probably dead already, better if he was.

Red sat in stunned disbelief watching the carnage taking place millions of kilometers from him. For some reason it was more horrific because it wasn't what he had expected to see, mentally he had prepared himself to watch what he had gone through repeat, seeing a ship carved into three pieces with an unknown number of lives lost was a little more than his battered psyche could handle. For the first time in a long time Redwood Aquino cried. He cried for the Exo he just watched die, he cried for the Trenchers that he couldn't even form a mental picture of, he cried defeated, he cried hopeless, he cried for the last time. Fear and pain had made him forget,

he had forgotten what had kept him alive until now, what had stopped him from just laying down and giving up, his only goal; anger and vengeance. He knew now that home wasn't in his future, that whatever the outcome, he was dying here, in this place, on this ship, in this time. Now there was only anger, pain from his wounds fed it, grew it, nurtured it, a white-hot ball in his chest to burn his enemies. Death was the game now, the same prize presented to the victorious and the defeated alike when they fell into the void together only to be forgotten by an uncaring universe.

He sat with surprising calm for the next several hours as he watched his opponent. As before the ship approached close and grappled onto the other ship, accelerating and changing the course of both ships like before. Only this time they dropped into a much faster orbit closer to the gas giant that would orbit four times faster than the long ellipse he was traveling took. Playing a hunch, he accelerated the flight paths of both ship until he saw what he feared he would find, an intersection. In ten days, his ship and the other would swing around the planet together and stay close as they swung out again, if the other ship still had plans for him, that would be the spot to take him. He was certain that he had been kept alive deliberately, after seeing what they could have done, why bother with all the extra work to hit critical systems and rip out chunks of the ship? He was still missing something, but it didn't matter. Whatever their reasons, he knew they would have to deal with him before it was over, he would. Time to fight back.

He had no idea how long he had been working or how much sleep he had before being awakened, but his body was telling him to rest and regain his strength. Red floated over to the med bay and keyed in the code for the pharmacy cabinet. Pulling out one of the liter bottles from the bottom, he up ended it and drank it in a long pull, it was a whole bunch of calories, vitamins, electrolytes, and a host of other supplements meant to provide anything a starving body might need. Next, he pulled out the bottle of Speed, it had a real name, it was long, boring, and no one cared, so it was just called Speed, because, frankly it was a glorified, refined, rebranded version of good old fashion biker meth. The instructions clearly stated for a man of his size and weight, a maximum of one pill per twelve-hour period, Red took three.

Moving quickly, because that was the only way he could move, Red made his way to the airlock and slipped into Big Al's top, he had programmed his drones to scatter and survey everything they could reach in the aft section to map damage, but he called them back into the airlock with him as he buttoned up Al and waited for all twelve drones to make it in. Something had been bugging him since he first watched the enemy ship cut the nose off his ship, the secondary explosion. It wasn't right, but the only vantage point he had was from the hull where his crabs were crouched and he couldn't see what happened, only the damage it did to the spinning bow. But this time he could watch it from the front as the other ship lost its nose, and he could see that it wasn't an explosion. When the beam reached the halfway point, it cut through something, something that finished blowing the front of the ship off. It had acted more like a fountain of energy pouring out in one direction, not the random chaos of an explosion, this was a release, and Red thought he knew where it had come from. As soon and the lock cycled, he sent his army towards the ruined bow to start mapping everything, while he thrust Big Al forward to put eyes on it himself. His best working theory for why the other ship had knocked his bow off was to remove the ship's mainline weapon, which he figured probably used a huge amount of power, enough to blow the front of the ship off when breached. Leaving the slow-moving bots behind he reached what was left of the bow and swung around to get a good look. Everything was melted a little and had solidified in strange patterns that crudely mapped the explosive forces involved. But there in the middle, exactly where he thought it would be he found what looked

like a huge pipe buried in the mess, but all the damage radiated outwards from that pipe. The pipe was about eight meters in diameter with a two meter inside diameter that was a much larger version of the plasma conduits that lined the aft section. That's what had caused the energy release, that conduit had been fully pressurized when it ruptured. Maybe he could rupture it again.

Drifting back from the bow he could see all the internal compartments that had been opened to space when the bow was removed, just below the ruptured conduit on either side were two dark cavernous bays that his weak light did little to illuminate. He gently thrust into the one on the right keeping a watchful eye for any sharp edges that might snag his suit. Once inside and away from the bright light of the binary stars his eyes adjusted and started to resolve monstrous shapes lurking in the darkness, huge ominous figures with bulbous bodies and multiple arms coming out at strange nonsymmetrical angles. He moved closer to the wall and saw a line of the huge beasts hanging in cradles disappearing into the darkness beyond his tiny light. Pushing further in there were gaps between the machines every so often where huge doors waiting to disgorge the strange looking insectoids to do whatever they did. The bay was largely empty even with the giant hulks lining the walls on either side, which seemed strange even for aliens, no one wasted this much space on a ship. Eventually the menacing machines gave way to stacks of what appeared to be shipping containers, about ten meters wide, fifteen high, and forty long, neatly stacked and secured. Next to them were stacks of flat panels that hadn't yet been assembled into crates. Red couldn't see anything that looked like a door that could be opened to reveal the contents, but obviously the Trenchers were out here mining something and boxing it up for transport. From the look of the empty bay, they had been attacked not long after they had started, the few crates he could see represented only one or two percent of the capacity of the hanger.

He drifted along until the back wall of the massive space came into view, it took him a moment to realize what he was seeing. The bulkhead looked as though it had been riddled with bullets, small holes clustered randomly over the entire surface, looking closely every flat surface in this section seemed to be covered in small dents and holes, although the back bulkhead had taken the brunt of the damage. Towards one side the damage was so severe that there was a meter wide hole with jagged edges that pointed both in and out as if it had been hit with something that was both in both directions. Wary of the sharp edges he slipped in close the hole and anchored himself to the wall with the magnets in the toe of his boots. His light showed more of the same damage beyond the hole, but something else as well, here and there were small pellets about ten centimeters long and three in diameter wedged into a fold in the metal. Working carefully, he managed to free one with a small pry bar and caught it before it could sail past his head. Even in zero g he could tell that it was heavy, far denser than it should be judging by the way his body turned and pulled away from wall when he grabbed it and it tried to pull him along with it. It had the same uniform gray that almost all metals do and there wasn't a mark on it from where he had dug in hard enough to bend the bulkhead material around it when he pried it out. Turning it in the light he noticed a slight rainbow shimmer dancing on the surface as his light played over the rod, it very much reminded him of the elevator cable back home and the way it shifted in the light.

On the other side of the space he found a huge piece of machinery with several of the large insectoids attached to it along with some of the containers. The back end of the machine was ripped open where it met the containers and there were still a few of the rods inside that hadn't joined their companions in breaking free and flying around during the high g

maneuvering. Whatever this stuff was it was valuable enough to get the Trenchers to risk flying out among the stars to get it.

Red turned and started back to the bow, a chill ran down his spine as he again passed house sized alien gargoyles staring at him in the dark. The bay on the other side was a replica of the first except they hadn't started using that bay yet for their operation so it was still in pristine condition, aside from having the front of it open to space.

He waited long enough for the drones to reach the bow and make their way inside and then started back towards the airlock, this time taking a lazy spiral course around the ship so he could survey the hull completely. There was minor damage everywhere, but scattered in amongst the scars and holes from the kinetic barrage he found more holes that were just too perfect to have been random. The enemy ship had taken a long time to put so many holes in so many different places, they had to be points where critical systems were vulnerable near the inside of the hull. But it still didn't answer the why question, why bother to leave him alive?

Because they had needed him alive, now they didn't. They had needed him to do what any desperate soul would do, fight to live, repair the broken ship and survive, even if it was futile. Their primary weapon had shut down every power system on the ship, they had needed him to start some of them back up, to power up systems like heat, life support, lighting, and perhaps accidentally powering up the emergency beacon. Red didn't have any access to the ship communication system so he wouldn't have known if he had powered up an automated beacon or not, but he had been mapping out the power system and starting up more reactors so he could power up more of the grid, at some point he must have tied in a section that held the coms equipment and it had called for help. Help that was immediately ambushed and destroyed because he called them. He was used to being used. Used by men, by women, by aliens, but he had never felt so utterly victimized before. He was the helpless fool that made things worse by trying, by not dying at the right time, living long enough to screw up one more time. All the puzzle pieces started to fall into place, the odd attack, the not at all random damage, crippling most, but not all the systems near the habitat area, everything designed to leave just enough intact that the broken hull could serve as a Judas goat, luring its own to slaughter.

Red had been in a lot of fights in his life, sometimes fighting for his life, but this was different, this time he wasn't fighting for his life, that was already used up and he knew it, this time he was fighting because he was pissed and had nothing to lose. He wasn't fighting to win, there was no victory to be found here, he was fighting because it was all he had left, and that made him dangerous. The enemy he faced was more advanced, more powerful, more experienced, but they had never gone toe to toe with Redwood Aquino. They were about to.

With hands still shaking slightly from the speed, he started building a map of everything the drones had found so far, every reactor, undamaged power conduit, valve, and anything else that might become useful later. The real problem was connectivity, everything was tied into the main computer and that was an inert lump that he couldn't control or access. Fortunately, one of the sneaky things that the Agency had gotten on board was several kilometers of nano optical wire that had been hidden as fiber reinforcement in the lid of one of the trunks. It had to be pulled out carefully to prevent it from snapping but after a few hours he managed to get it extracted and ordered the drones to start running it to each reactor and control valve they had found.

The combination of his still healing body, the drugs, and the physical exertion finally caught up with him and he started to make his way back to the living area to get some chow and sleep. As far as bad days went, it had been a good day, for the first time he was doing something

proactive, even though it was going to end with his death, he was motivated and focused on what was waiting for him.

Chapter 8

The main console was chiming as usual when he awoke, it was a strange relief to not have to worry whether it was good news or bad, it was always bad news. The faster, lower orbit of the enemy ship had brought it around the planet and into full view of his optics. The purpose of the strange mechanical arms became clear now, they were slowly taking the ship apart piece by piece, this was a salvage operation now. Most of the forward section of the ship had been removed and was drifting in a haphazard cloud around the ship, some pieces were large and seemed to have been ripped off and tossed away, but closer to the central bulge of the Trencher ship he could see they were being more careful, removing small pieces, very carefully. It was odd given the weapons he had seen them use that they would so precisely dismantle the ship when they could have just cut it to bits from a distance. He could see bright flares in close to the tips of the arms that were probably small cutting lasers delicately trimming off bits. The aft section was more intact, but several large pieces had been removed, nothing close the central bulge was being touched, yet.

The reactor. Whatever powered the Trencher ships was in the central sphere that dominated the mid-section. That's what they were after, they were carefully removing the power source of the ship, that was why they had lured a second ship here, why take one power core when you could take two on the same trip?

The indecipherable puzzle with nothing but blank pieces started to take shape. Humans had always known that Trencher lacked the physiology to create the technology they used, they needed humans to help keep their ships flying. The assumption was that there was another species out there somewhere that was building ships for them. They were smart, so they probably traded scientific knowledge in return for manufacturing capabilities the same as they did with humans for working as flight technicians. Feeding just enough knowledge to keep them working, but not enough for them to surpass the Trenchers and become a threat, just like they did with humans. Watching one of their ships being eviscerated it was obvious that they weren't the apex species running around out there. There were others, more aggressive, less interested in equitable exchange, that were acquiring technology without the troublesome symbiotic relationships the Trenchers maintained. They probably couldn't create the power cores that drove the Trencher ships, so they had to take them by force to expand their fleet, or power their home world, or light up their version of Galactic Vegas.

The ships were of a different design and looked like they had been created by a different manufacturing process altogether, that hinted at yet another or many species capable of creating interstellar craft. What the hell was waiting out there for humans? Hundreds of species waiting to form alliances or to conquer. A huge galactic marketplace where aliens were hocking their wares while bandits waited in the shadows to take what they wanted? Humans had always felt a great resentment towards the Trenchers for withholding information about their technology and larger universe, now Red was starting to wonder if they had been doing them a favor protecting them all this time. More than likely it wasn't out of some altruistic motivation, they were probably just protecting an asset so no one else would come and take it. It didn't matter, it wasn't much to work on, but when you have nothing at all, any data is a boon.

It made one thing very clear to Red, they were going to have to get close if they wanted the power core from his ship, close enough for a knife fight, and that was just what he was going to give them.

The bots had been busy while he was resting, they had created a nearly complete map of the ship and its power system. The central core was probably so powerful that when it was running it needed somewhere to put all that power as soon as it was generated, the ship couldn't store that much energy without exploding, so that was only useful when the ship was traveling in FTL. That's what the secondary system was for, smaller and more flexible, it could generate power at varying levels, bringing reactors online and shutting them down as needed. The conduits that held the power acted like capacitors, storing energy until needed and then releasing it at a constant flow while the reactors caught up. Power from any part of the ship could be tied into whatever section needed power at any given time, it was a well-designed system and almost completely dependent on the central computer to balance the whole thing and keep it from blowing up. The central computer that was now an inaccessible, inert lump. So, he improvised.

He had pulled down one of the cover panels for the atmospheric controls since he was having to manually adjust his air mix in the pressurized section and didn't need it in his way and attached it vertically to one of the benches in the workshop. Using a small cutting laser, he drilled holes in a rough grid and started running the nanowire through each after identifying whether it controlled a valve or a reactor. After a few hours he had a board with what looked like a crudely drawn transit map showing where every valve met every other junction and which reactors tied into those sections. Everything terminated in the one massive conduit that ran straight to the severed nose of the ship. In all he had thirty-two reactors and about a hundred valves he could control from this one simple board, in theory.

The problem was that he couldn't talk to any of the devices on the other end of those nanowires. The bots could, but he didn't have enough of them to control everything. Fortunately, everything worked on a similar set of circuitry and similar code, and most of it was designed to interface with Big AI on some level, even if it was just to report on power levels, so he started disassembling every tool or control panel he could find that fit the bill. By attaching the devices to Big AI and then using a rover to talk to it through AI he was able to give each pilfered device a crude set of commands it could send; open, close, on, off. It was a very limited vocabulary but he was able to group them so each one could talk to a few valves or reactors at once depending on how much processing power each had. He then grouped those into two sets, one set controlled all the valves and the other all the reactors. The valves were easy, on or off, and he had grouped them so they had a somewhat equal number of reactors and amount of conduit to store the energy produced.

The reactors were much tougher, they were designed to be run at varying levels depending on power needs, without the computer he couldn't do that, all he could do was turn them on and run them at a certain output and then shut them down or wait for them to SCRAM when the conduits were full and resistance started to build. SCRAM was hard on them, and it took longer to bring them back online than if they had been shutdown normally. He needed to test the system. Checking on the position of the enemy craft it would be another ten hours until its path took it around the other side of the planet and gave him some privacy. If the other ship detected elevated power levels there was good chance they would just slice the back of the ship off with him in it since they didn't need him anymore, they might do that no matter what. He had to keep the reactors cold until the ship was out of sight, but he could start testing the valve control system. Opening the valve was going to be critical to his plan, they needed to open at the same

time and dump the raw plasma into the large central conduit that terminated in the ruined nose of the ship.

The first few tests were abysmal, there was as much as three seconds between all the valves opening, there were just too many and they were being controlled by a mish mash of different circuits designed to do different things. Eventually he was able to reroute everything so there were only six valves that lead directly into the primary conduit that had to open simultaneously, the rest could open a few seconds before and tie everything into one linked system that was controlled by those valves. After tying the six primary valves onto the same controller he was able to get them to open within milliseconds of each other.

After checking the enemy ship had slipped behind the planet red tested firing up the reactors and running them at ten percent for a few minutes to build a minimal charge in the system. He sent one of the rovers up to the nose of the ship to observe the test and released the valves to the primary conduit in the bow. It was completely underwhelming, nothing appeared to happen on the visual feeds, then he checked the other sensors on the rover. Everything that could detect a high energy particle went off the charts and maxed out whatever sensor was trying to observe the event. X-rays and gamma made up most of it, but it ran the spectrum all the way down to microwave and radio. His calculations showed that he had released about 2 percent of the maximum the system could hold and store. It wasn't the most sophisticated weapon ever designed, but it could hit hard if you got the target in close, and that was his next problem.

The enemy ship had pulled up parallel to the disabled Trencher vessel and grappled it with the surreal mechanical arms that seem to have been pulled from the mind of a mad genius. The ship probably wouldn't park itself in front of the ruined bow and wait for him to blow a hole through it, so he was going to have to figure out maneuvering and targeting. Sighting the barrel was easy, he just sent a rover twenty meter down the barrel and pointed the camera out, it gave him a nice circular image that was centered on whatever his improvised gun would hit when deployed. The rover would be destroyed, but he didn't figure he was getting a second shot out of his weaponized Rube Goldberg machine. Maneuvering was going to be a whole other issue though, mostly because he wasn't going to be able to test it at all before the knife fight started. If the ship wasn't moving on the exact trajectory it had been last time the enemy saw it, they would instantly know that he had gained control of at least some of the propulsion systems and needed to be killed instantly.

During the survey the rovers carried out they had also mapped the exterior of the ship and he had identified a series of maneuvering engines scatter all over the hull of the ship, they were hard to miss, you could have parked an Apollo rocket in each one and not be able to see the tip from the outside. Apparently, the Trenchers, like every living thing that went into space, were big fans of redundancy. The power system that fed the maneuvering engines was tied into the same system he co-opted for his improvised gun, and although it had been heavily damaged in the fight, there was enough redundancy for him to route around the damaged sections and tie in four reactors to provide power to the engines. Power was one of his main problems, he had no idea how much thrust would be produced when he fed power into the massive engines. They had been designed to work when the inertia canceling technology was powered on, so even a small amount of power might liquefy him inside of Big Al when he fired them up. When he routed power to the big gun, he had set it up so that all the valves except the ones feeding the barrel were open to provide maximum output. For the engine system he did the opposite, all the valves were closed, trapping the power into smaller sections that he could open one at a time to increase thrust as

needed and hopefully keep it below lethal levels. It was all guess work though, dangerous guess work.

He didn't know when he fell asleep or how long he had slept, but he had at some point he had come loose of the foot holds that were keeping him anchored to the workbench with his makeshift control console and started drifting around the workshop. His nocturnal gyrations had carried him up to the ceiling and nestled him in between two of the large pipes that used to feed the high-pressure habitat for the trenchers. He could hear Lucky crying in the living area obviously in need of food, company or both, much like himself. He pushed off and glided through the shop and into the open door of the hab. For whatever reason, Lucky never left the quarters, even when he was hungry, he would stay just inside and cry, never venturing out into the shop, maybe he could smell the blood that still lingered on some of the surfaces from Red's time bouncing around during the initial attack, maybe he was just a cat and was motivated by mystic forces only other cats understood. Red scooped him up as he passed through the door petting him as he settled on the table and pulled out some food for them both. He gave Lucky a double portion since it might very well be one of his last meals and then grabbed an extra pack for himself for the exact same reason.

Red pulled up the tracking feeds while he ate something that was meatloaf if you squinted and thought about real food when you chewed it. At this point Red had just about all the panic burned out of him, so when the enemy ship wasn't where it was supposed to be, he took another bite and thought about ketchup, while the system updated him on its new position. It didn't take long to figure out why, as it came around the planet into view the last time, it had completed dismantling the ship and had a near perfect sphere attached to its nose where it had grappled the recovered reactor from the Trencher ship. Once it had the first reactor the ship had accelerated into a much faster orbit that was going to intersect his orbit in about seven hours. The enemy ship had slipped behind the planet for one last orbit which gave him about ninety minutes of privacy before they had him in their sites again and the fight started.

There were thousand things that needed to be done, a hundred different ways he could be preparing, ten changes to the plan he could make, and for all of it, he was content within one moment. Lucky was curled in his lap purring with the kind of satisfaction that come from eating too much food and having your head scratched just right. The eerie calm that came from the utter silence his little bubble of life created, no natural sounds, no sounds but his own breathing, the rumblings of contentment coming from a cat, a horrific torrent of doubt and fear poured through him as he paused for moment before his last stand. Forcing himself to be present, with no fear of the future, no regret for the past and faced this, arguably the most important moment of his life, he saw, for the briefest of instances the balance and finality to his life. He laughed lightly as the fortune cookie revelation skipped through his mind.

It's all pointless.

His life, pointless, the sum of his contribution, pointless, every relationship, every connection, every experience, victory, dark time, joy, and all the pain, and there had been so much pain.

Pointless.

It was the narrative that mattered. A life is a selfish thing, and it should be, something to be celebrated and consumed simultaneously, leaving only stories behind. A life is owned by one, the remnants of that life that echo are owned by all. Even if there was no one to read his story, it didn't matter, the story was his and his alone. It was an ugly story, at times one of deviance, others tragic, but in the end, it was all just a collection of stories that ended up being a life,

whether it was the life that was expected, or not. Red was coming to accept his death, he had certainly borne the pain of it the last few weeks, the actual idea of death was starting to be something more tangible, a philosophical problem that he could no longer push out for his future self to deal with. He could see himself dying, not for a cause, not for victory, renown, forgiveness, or any other reason. He was going to die in the dark. No one would hear the final song in his saga, he would play both orchestra and audience in the last act. No one to impress, no one to say goodbye to. The last story only had to matter to one person.

Destroying these aliens wouldn't make a difference, he wasn't about to turn the tide in some centuries long conflict. He wasn't about avenge anyone, the Exo that had died on the other ship was a nameless, faceless idea, not a real person. This fight was going to be like everything else, another story, another echo, a fool's errand.

Pointless.

Red was starting to like the ending to his book, there was a horrifying freedom in having his choices stripped so bare that he was left with only the measure of his actions in the last few minutes of life to sum his existence. For the first time in his life Red felt heroic, death was only hours away and yet he floated calmly in the hab, listening to the changes in Lucky's purring as he shifted where he was petting him, noticing for the first time small details of his living quarters, the way the air smelled of ozone, sweat, and the savory sent of his meatloaf mixed with Lucky's cat food. It was odd to sit in a room without moving air, he felt as if he was wrapped in a blanket, the air felt heavy and constricting. Red sighed deeply as he slid the syringe into the thick fur on the back of Lucky's neck.

"Sorry buddy, but you can't help me win this fight, I hope we see each other again." Red walked over the med bay and opened Lucky's acceleration cradle. He slipped the breathing mask on and laid him gently in the cradle, watching through the glass to make sure the machine put him into stasis without discomfort.

Red drifted over to the bathroom and painfully stripped; his wounds were mostly healed but a few of the deeper ones reminded him how much his body had endured. Looking in the mirror, the dark alive skin born from the sun was gone, his body hadn't seen sunlight since he got out of the tank, now it was pink blotchy skin crisscrossed with angry red scars and welts. Pulling out a few of his precious water bottles he soaked a wash cloth and slowly lathered himself up. Water was for the living, now seemed the time to indulge in a proper washing rather than using wipes periodically. It was unlikely that he would be alive in a few hours to need a drink anyway. Using the handheld vacuum next the sink he sucked away the mass of water and soap that had formed a crude afro and then sucked away all the water still clinging to his body in odd lumps. He slipped his feet into the footholds in front of the sink and shaved the small patches of stubble that had cropped up. Slipping on a new set of clothes and two pairs of socks to keep his feet warm in Big Al, Red regarded himself in the mirror, surprised to see how tired and foreign the face looking back at him was. The toll of the last few weeks hung over him like a dark veil, removing all traces of a face that once smiled or knew joy. A mask of potential hopelessness and defeat if it weren't for the eyes. His eyes stared back at him reminded him that he wasn't defeated, fierce and resolved. He gave a small nod to the man in the mirror and drifted away.

The list of what the enemy had taken from him now included a cat, Red hadn't been overly fond of the animal prior to this trip out, but he felt Lucky's absence deeply. One more item to feed the rage he carried around, he was going to need that anger, this was not going to be a nice fight, and his enemy was not going to go out without getting their licks in. He was outgunned, nearly immobile, mostly blind, and his only weapon was basically a club he could hit

them with once, if they get close enough. They could sit back and safely slice his ship to bits without ever coming close to his weapons range. If he was going to win this fight it would be screaming like a madman and charging in like a berserker.

He drifted over to Big Al and climbed in, Al's smell had improved somewhat after the bots gave him a scrub down, but the air smelled strongly of body odor and disinfectant when he closed the faceplate and double checked all the seals on the suit. He made his way over to the airlock and opened the small relief valve next to the door releasing his air into the airlock and out into space. Hopefully he would appear more vulnerable if his air supply was drifting in a cloud outside of his ship. It was better to have everything in vacuum for the fight anyway, no explosive decompression to worry about when they started putting big holes in his ship. If he had timed it right, the last of the air would escape when the enemy was only an hour out, close enough for them to see how wounded and defenseless he is.

Getting Al on the right side of his makeshift airlock had been a challenge, he was just too large to fit through the opening without disassembling him. He hadn't liked the idea of taking the suit apart and hoping he put it back together correctly, but wearing one of the light suits for the fight to come wasn't an option and he needed Al to control everything. The arms and legs went through the hatch easily once he removed them, the torso and helmet however required him to cut a few centimeters off one side of the hatch and weld a patch in afterwards.

He had ripped out the top half of Big Al's docking rig and welded it to the wall directly across from his makeshift control board. It would hopefully keep him and Al from taking any unexpected trips into the opposite wall during maneuvering. There was a small bundle of wires with a connector on the end coming from the control board that he slipped into a jack in Al's arm. It was crude and likely to fail as soon as the actions started, but he had a working control interface that he could use to control reactors and valves from Big Al. He moved Al slowly back until the magnetic docking claps latched on and pulled him firmly to the rack. He clicked through the HUD controls until he brought up the current track of the alien ship. Five hours out. Five hours to live. Five hours to turn the cold hard ball of fear and fury into something dangerous.

Chapter 9

To wait in stillness is to bathe in fear. He waited. For five hours he endured the raising voices of doubt and fear, the parts of his mind that still wanted to run and hide, the trauma of relived failures. In stillness he waited, watching. His enemy didn't seem concerned, they drifted towards him from behind, slowly overtaking him as they moved into a parallel course two thousand kilometers away. He waited, his mind racing furiously as he played scenario after scenario trying to prepare for any eventuality even though he knew that when it started it was going to be quick and unpredictable, the only thing he had going for him was surprise and a rather callous indifference to his own survival.

They were still at distance when they fired on him. Everything went black and all the feeds shut off when the powerful EMP based weapon hit the ship, but Red had faced it before and he was ready for it this time. On the approach he had powered down everything to make the ship look dead, but also to protect himself from the EMP, which didn't seem to effect systems that were powered down. The only things he had running were his three little crabs and enough of Big Al's systems to receive and display the data. Red waited patiently counting to thirty in his head, right on cue Al's fans started blowing air in his face and the HUD lit up reconnecting to

his crabs. It took a minute for them to recover and for the software to locate the ship, but it was right where he expected, slipping closer.

Paging through Al's commands he woke up all the bots that he had been using as nodes to make his rag tag network function. He didn't know how good the enemy's sensors were, if they could detect small power sources or not. The big board on the bench started to light up with indicator lights showing the status of the valves and reactors as the bots pinged them. He had the grid split, the forward section would charge and feed ninety percent of the energy into the weapon, and the much smaller rear section would feed the engines. A quick look confirmed everything was still set correctly, just waiting for the reactors to charge the system.

He had enabled the voice command system in case he was unable to use the pads in his cloves to control Al.

"Power up." He said, testing the system. Immediately the HUD started lighting up as Al's systems came to full power. Al was well shielded and Red was hoping that the other ship couldn't detect the power increase. "Optics, center target, magnify image."

The ship was close now and he could clearly see the details, the ship was huge, at least twice the size of his own. Whereas the Trencher ship had an organic look to the outer shell, this was obviously constructed with weld seams and repairs crisscrossing the hull. There was a variety of small holes scattered around the ship, he couldn't tell if whether they were for propulsion or weapons, probably find out soon enough. The ship was rotated slowly along its long axis, Red watched as the massive set of doors in the center came around until they were aligned with him, several puffs of gas escaped at the bow and stern, stopping its rotation. For the next 10 minutes the ship just sat ten kilometers away and did nothing. Red was close to losing his mind waiting for them to do something, anything, and get on with it. He didn't have to wait eleven minutes.

Without warning a shaft of blinding energy twelve centimeters in diameter appeared in the workshop. Al's faceplate darkened and saved him from going blind, but he could feel the heat through Al's thick skin. The beam had entered just left of the living area and globs of molten metal were being sprayed into the workshop, it exited the shop at a downward angle and through the floor near the end of the room leaving another glowing hole. An instant after it appeared, it was gone, most of the metal objects in the shop that were within two meters of the beam were glowing red hot, globs of molten hull material drifted slowly around the shop.

Red checked the feeds to see if anything got severed, the screens showed him that there had only been a single shot fired, right through the shop. There was something else odd about it, they could have easily sliced the whole rear of the ship off, why punch one precise hole in the ship. He pulled up the crude blueprint of the ship his bots had made and followed the path of the beam through the ship. They had been very careful, narrowly missing several reactors and all the power conduits, they didn't want their prize to explode, but wanted to make sure the Exo was all the way dead before they got close.

Red smiled at how smart they were.

The enemy ship moved closer and the portal on the side opened, four triangular doors swung apart revealing a dark hold with something moving inside. From either side came two huge mechanical arms, he could see that they were being fed from either side from deep within the ship. They were formed of powered segments like links in a chain, that could move the arms in any direction, the ends were capped with vicious looking grappling claw with four tines. As he watched four more smaller thinner arms emerged from the void and reached towards his ship, the surgical tools that would rip the ship apart while the big arms held it in place.

Timing was everything, he was only going to get one chance to die right, and Red really wanted to take a few of them with him when he went. He waited as the first claw grabbed and hull and started pinching, Red could feel the ship moving vibrating under him as the claws ripped its way through the hull. A second later the second claw shook the ship as it found purchase. That was what he had been waiting for, waiting for the enemy ship to grab on good and tight so he could strike.

“Light it up, Al” He had programmed the phrase into Al so that he power up every reactor. Powering up the system was going to be tricky, he needed to get a full charge in the system before he shut them down, but if he waited too long, they would SCRAM and it would take too long to bring them back online if he needed them. There was no gauge or reading he could take that would tell him what the system was storing or how much it could take. He watched on his crude control board as the indicator lights for each reactor change color to active. He checked the feed for any reaction from the other ship, while he watched the board with the other eye. It was taking too long, it had been a full minute since startup and he wasn’t at full charge yet, while the other ship couldn’t fail to notice the massive energy surge coming from his ship much longer.

He was ready when he saw it, the first reactor to hit emergency shutdown. “Al, Go dark!” a couple more of the reactors went red, but the shutdown command reached most in time. Because he was sitting sideways to the long axis of the ship, it took him a second to work out which thruster would move the ship in the right direction. He needed to rotate the ship within the two pivot points created by the arms holding the ship. “Dorsal 5, go.” Red really hadn’t had anything to go on when he worked out how much thrust he was going to get when he fired an engine. His first real data point was having his nose broken against the inside of Al’s visor when the thruster hit. A second later the back of his head received similar treatment as the ship stopped spinning. Shaking the stars out his vision he found the small screen showing the hull on his HUD. The other ship was fighting back, the two massive arms had contorted into long spirals and had become rigid. His thruster was still going full and nothing was moving. When the arms went rigid they had rotated his ship somewhat in relation to the other ship, his nose wasn’t pointing where he needed it to. “Dorsal 4 and 6, Starboard 2, go.” Red broke what was left of his nose on the visor again as his head slammed in all directions from the opposing forces acting on his ship. It was hard to see through the blood and violent shaking, but he could see it was working, the nose of his ship was slowly turning to face the side of the enemy ship. He could feel the vibration of metal being ripped apart as the hull tore in the claws as the ship rotated in the pivot points created by the arms. When the Trencher started to line up with the side of the other ship, he said. “Starboard 2, off.”

The remaining two engines continued to push the nose around towards the center of the enemy ship when the thrust suddenly stopped. He had only opened one small section of the engines power lines and that line had gone empty. “Valve 19, open.” The ship was rocked immediately as the three thrusters lit off simultaneously kicking the rear of the ship around, and the nose into the side of the ship. Red had been close when he started swinging around and there wasn’t enough distance for his nose to swing clearly. The first ten meters of the nose scrapped off as his ship’s bow slid along the hull. “Kill thrust.” He said as the ship swung to the center line and the nose of the Trencher ship collided with the base of the mechanical arms and for a moment entangled. Red looked at the small window that showed his barrel cam, the barrel was looking straight into the open side of the ship.

A feral grin came across his face as he gave the command to fire.

“Fuck You.”

The valves opened and instantly the front of his ship exploded into a white-hot mass of liquid metal flying off in all directions. Most of the energy coming out of the conduit was X-rays but some of the raw plasma made all the way out and was impacting the other ship, penetrating the open side. It took three second to fully discharge the system, when it stopped, the everything near the impact site was glowing red hot, the smaller arms had been completely severed and were floating away. The two main arms were still attached but the base of each was a mass of melted metal fused into a hole that gotten considerably larger. The orderly square opening had transformed into a ragged circle twice as large. Red could see glowing metal deep inside the ship with the flash of the occasional small explosions. He watched devastation outside unfold as bits of each ship spun off into the void and the two ships started drifting apart.

“Oh shit!” He had forgotten to close the valves and restart the reactors after firing, he had been so transfixed on not being dead and looking at the damage. “Al, closed primary valves, light it up.” Once again, he watched the tiny lights on his board change color, this time only about half of his reactors came back online, charging for another shot was going take a while, and he didn’t think the enemy was done yet. The ship had drifted a few hundred meters apart, but he was still pointed square at their ship.

He didn’t notice the first shot, the thin beam passed through the ship just above the hab area, and severed several conduits that weren’t tied into his grid. The second shot got his attention, that one went through a charged conduit and blew a large chunk out of the aft section. He quickly switched to infrared which showed two impact sites that were hotter than the surrounding hull. He watched in horror as three more appeared, and another smaller explosion reverberated through the ship. They were poking holes trying find where he was, with the close proximity they were being very careful not to hit any of the reactors, they would have to create distance to use their larger weapons and from what he could see they were dead in space.

“Come on! Come on!” He screamed at the control board, willing it to charge faster. After watching four more holes appear in the ship, and another explosion, the first reactor light went red as it shutdown, it’s task complete. Red didn’t even bother to try to prevent the other reactors from going into emergency shutdown, there would be no third shot. The aft was getting shot to hell and an unknown number of charged conduits had ruptured, but he had no idea which. He had left all the valves in the aft section closed to compartmentalize the grid, so there was power trapped there, but he had no idea what was still connected to an engine he could use, and which ones would just vent plasma inside the ship if he used them. He forced himself to take a breath and shake off the utter terror of watching beams of energy hunting for you in space. There were two main valves that fed power into the aft thrusters, he needed those open if he was to have any chance. Trying to notice the new hole that had been drilled in his ship, he exhaled. “Open valve aft 7.”

One of the feeds suddenly showed a column of fire erupt near the main engines and then disappear 3 second later and taking another chunk of the ship with it. “Open valve aft 9.”

No column of fire this time, either it was a dead section or fully charge and ready, only one way to find out. He quickly checked that he was still aligned the bastards and said. “Aft 2 go.” Nothing happened. “Aft 4 go.” Nothing, “Aft 7 go.” More holes appeared on his ship. “Aft 9 go.” He screamed. An instant later he was being crushed to one side of Big Al as the ship leap forward. “Aft 9 off, Aft 9 off.” He watched as the nose of his ship as it crashed into the side of his enemy, far faster that he had wanted. The impact slammed his head and body to the other side of Al sending waves of pain through his tortured body. He only had an instant before the two

ships separated enough to make his cannon useless. There was so much blood coming out of his nose and mouth it was hard to form the words to fire.

“Fuck you again.” The ship had connected a hundred meters aft of the large hole he had created with his last shot, smashing through the hull and lodging itself into the tender interior. The effect was devastating, with the end point of the barrel inside of the hull, the energy had nowhere to go but forward, aft, or straight through, it took all three paths. A huge flower of glowing molten metal appeared on the other side of the ship and expanded radially as the energy poured through the ship and out the other side. There were explosions breaking through the hull in several places both forward and aft as the ship drifted away from him and started tumbling slowly on the long axis.

Red sat in shock watching the ruined ship float away erupting gouts of fire as it went. He hadn't really though he had any chance of winning, he was supposed to have died sometime in the last hour but hadn't. He had no idea what to do next, he had no victory plan whatsoever, so he just sat watching the small screens on a visor coated with his blood. He was thinking about why the enemy had been so careful in their attack, he wasn't sure how big of an explosion a fusion reactor made when it overloaded, but they obviously didn't want to be as close as they were. Still are. Ice ran down his spine as he realized that unlike his enemy, he hadn't been careful with his shoots, and the power core from the other Trencher ship was still attached to the front of a ship that was exploding. A ship that also had some form of reactor or power source that he didn't want to be near when it went critical. As best he could tell he had drifted a few hundred meters away and was now angled down a bit, hopefully enough to slip under the other ship. There was no way he was going to try to steer, all he could do would be to put the ship into a unstoppable spin with his limited control. Both in the bow and stern, he had left one reactor offline in case he needed it.

“Al, light up reserve 1.” Ten meters of hull in two places turned red as a damaged conduits flooded X-rays into that section. Thinking about it for a second, he said “Close valve 11, close valve 14.” He could see that energy was starting to burn through as a large piece of white-hot material peeled away from the hull. “Shit, close 17, close 12.” The white glow coming out of the hole turned to an angry red as valve closed off that section. Aft 9 was located on the rear with the other large drive engines, significantly smaller and fully gimble it was most likely used for fast maneuvering. It was also for more powerful than the smaller thrusters, the brief second he had it going nearly crushed him to death, and that was with the system nearly depleted, he was about to light it off with a nearly full charge. He had no way to gauge how much energy the system was holding, if any, for all he knew he the reactor was powering a breached conduit that melting the inside of the ship where his camera couldn't see. He decided to error on the side of caution.

“Power down reserve 1” Taking a deep breath and bracing himself he said. “Aft 9 go” He blacked out an instant after the engine fired. It only took seconds for the power to drain from the compromised system, but Red was out for several minutes. He knew the concussion was bad as soon as he came to, his left eye wasn't working anymore and the blood pumping in his head was a bass drum of pain. His left arm was broken in at least two places and if he were somewhere with gravity, he would say that he wouldn't be walking on that left ankle for a while. The software had kept track of the other ship and showed him moving away from the wrecked vessel at a thousand kilometers per second.

Without warning a bright miniature sun erupted from the aft end of the other ship as one of their reactors went critical, a millisecond later, the explosion reached the Trencher core

attached to the front. Everything happened quickly and violently after that. The small sun that had started the reaction was instantly replaced by a large ball of radiant light that managed to exist for almost three quarters of a second before being replaced by blackness. The ball that was the expanding explosion front was still there, but now it was absorbing light rather than emitting it, it was also full of gravity. When the light blinked out and the inky blackness took over, Red was slammed violently into the right side of Al as the gravity coming from the explosion reached out and grabbed his ship, trying to pull it into the unknown. The last sound Red heard was a series of bones snapping as his body impacted the suits unforgiving hard shell just before his head impacted the inadequate padding in Al's Hemet and his world went black.

For most of Red's life, he had never been a morning person, one of those annoying jumps out of bed with a smile ready to face the day kinda cultist. Waking up usually meant facing up to something; the well-earned hangover, dealing with the snoring stranger next to you, convincing the cops that just kicked in your door that they should be arresting someone else, sometimes all three. There had been a period when he thought he was in love, when he would walk hand in hand in the evenings and go to bed early every night. Red would wake up at first light and just watch her sleep, the way the morning light seem to flow through the dilapidated apartment without touching anything that might soil it before it could reach her face. He could get lost in those moments, live a full life and die without a regret in a span of a few breaths, Red enjoyed those mornings. Being a man with poor impulse control and only a nodding acquaintance with common sense, Red had had some hard wake ups in his day. Nothing compared to his regretful return to conciseness this time. While he had been out, his head wounds had finished bleeding and most of that blood had dried on his face, cementing his eyes closed. Both of his arms and legs had suffered multiple broken bones resulting in massive swelling inside of Al's hardshell effectively immobilizing his limbs and cutting off circulation to his hands that had lost all feeling. Most of his ribs had been broken, the left and right-side debating injuries with each ragged breath. His head seem barely up to the task of containing the throbbing organ it held as each beat of his heart reminded him of the multiple concussions he had suffered and their severity.

Red realized that he had been using 'I'm not dead' as weather gauge for his condition for too long now, but right now all he had was 'not dead'. Trying to think in between the crippling waves of pain he took stock of his situation. Being blind wasn't good, he would have to fix that first. He remembered that his left eye had stopped working before he got knocked out the second time, so he concentrated on the right one. Turning his head as far to the right as he could, he pressed his cheek into the padding on the inside on the helmet and scrapped it back and forth until some of the bloody scab on the side of his face peeled off, revealing part of his eye. The blood under the outer layer still liquid and despite the pain it caused he shook his head back and forth as hard as he could to get some of the blood to flow out of his eye socket. After a few minutes of work, he managed to get his eyelid unglued and somewhat open, at first it was all just a blur that got blurrier every time another wave of pain threatened to send him back to unconsciousness. Eventually the small displays on the HUD came into focus and he could see his status. All of Al's systems were undamaged but he had lost connection to all his bots, the makeshift network destroyed in brief carnage of the battle. The space around him was disturbingly empty, he had expected there to be debris from the other ship flying away from the explosion, but there was nothing, no ship, no wreckage, not so much as an errant bolt spinning away. Whatever had happened had completely destroyed the other ship in a way that didn't seem possible. One screen showed his trajectory path and the enemy ship as a series of bright arcs that

intersected. Her could see the smooth arc that led up to his encounter with the other ship, and the hard straight line when he accelerated away from the crippled ship. Right after that is where it got strange, the line just stopped, or rather was slowed over a period of two seconds to a near standstill. Red would have to do the math to figure out how many G's he took during those two seconds, but that was for later. When the other ship exploded, a massive wave of gravity pulled his ship from traveling thousands of kilometers per hour to zero, and then blinked out. It didn't matter since he was probably going to die in the next few minutes, but he had been seconds away from death for weeks now, so no reason to stop now.

The control board that had been attached to the bench had torn loose at some point and was gone, lost somewhere in amongst the wreckage of the workshop still smoldering from the superheated metal that had been blown into it. There were several spots still glowing faintly red where beams had passed through or close to, the large one next to the living quarters door had cooled into a grotesque metal flower emerging from the wall, but otherwise didn't seem to have damaged the habitat. He knew that they had put a lot of holes in his ship trying to root him out without setting off a reactor, so he didn't know if there was any space left on the ship that could hold air. He might very well die trapped in Big Al waiting for his air to give out or for his battered body to finally succumb. Only one way to find out he thought. His hands were near useless lumps attached to broken arms, so he couldn't use the thumb controls, he would have to use the voice system.

“Baash mal gremerbensy slaogh.” Was all his broken ribs and blood clotted mouth could produce. Taking a moment, he tried again, slowly. “Emer-gen-c Sys-tem Ack-sess” Normally Al would not allow him to do what he was about to do when in vacuum, but the system was put in place for the unforeseeable and having all his limbs swell from multiple fractures was as unforeseeable as it gets. He had to be careful, if he ordered it, the suit would open, vacuum or not, and the command to release the restraint system was pretty similar to the one that would pop the main torso connection. “Dish-en-gag pile-out res-tra-ent” Red had to wait for second before he knew if the system had got the command right, or if he was about to experience vacuum. He signed in relief when the inner lining of the suit relaxed its grip on him and allowed blood to flow again. Moments later that relief turned to agony as feeling returned to his shattered body and the full extent of his injuries was visited upon him.

After taking a minute to breathe through the initial intensity and allowing himself to acclimate to the pain he returned to the voice controls. “Dock-ig dolts real-ish” There were four resounding thuds as the main bolts holding Big Al to the docking frame exploded and released him, he floated, spinning slightly, into the workshop. His hands were swollen and didn't move very well, but he could feel the tiny control knob under his thumb. “Al” He spoke slowly “Act-tee-vate cond-troll thush-teers” A small green light appeared letting him know he had control. “Stabil-eyes all-line” Al puffed a few jets of gas and Al spun to a stop, feet pointing to the floor, facing the living area. Red gave the control knob a small push and floated through the ruined workshop towards the hab door. After passing through the door and painfully impacting several walls, he managed to turn the bulky suit around and access the door controls, they closed without a sound in the vacuum. A quick survey of the outer room showed now sigh of damage so he moved over to the main control panel and started up the life support system which thankfully it activated with a single button that could be pushed even in a clunky oversized suit. Red waited patiently, wondering if the air coming out of the system was immediately being sprayed into space through one of the hundred new holes in his ship. After a minute he heard the blissful sound of air rushing and watched as the external pressure gauges on Al started to raise as air

flooded the room. When the hissing stopped, he waited several minutes, watching the gauges carefully to make sure the room would hold pressure. Drifting over to the med panel he gave the command for AI to open. "Pile-out can-oh-pee oh-pen" The waist seal snapped open, separating AI's legs from his torso. This was the part that Red had been dreading, to get into AI, he had to put his arms above his head and pull himself into the arms and helmet, the reverse was true when exiting. He wasn't looking forward to this with two broken arms. Gritting his teeth, he started moving back and forth inching his way out of the suit with each painful movement as he forced his arms up. Eventually the top half of AI floated away leaving him panting as he waited for the pain to lessen now that his arms were free. Once he had recovered a bit, he set to work getting the legs off, it was less agonizing, but he had to use his arms to push the legs off, so only slightly less agonizing.

The door of the med pod swung open, and he floated in, the hatch closing behind him when he activated the emergency mode. He had no idea if how much power was left in the system feeding the habitat and he had no way of getting the reactor that fed it going in his current condition. He didn't know how long before the med pod released him, if ever. It made him a little sad to think that he might not get to see how it ended, maybe this was a very anti-climactic end to his saga, to die in his sleep as the power failed. He was past the point of caring much about dying, all he wanted was for the pain to stop, and either way it was about to. Restraints gently pulled him down to the bed and began hooking up all the various tubes and IVs that would hopefully keep him alive. He finally felt one go into his neck and seconds later he faded to black as the drugs hit and he went under.

Exo Red Chapter 10.0

Red was drowning in utter blackness. He could feel the fire radiating out from his lungs, hungry for air, already burning without oxygen. His eyes would open and close, but there was no light coming in. Thrashing, his mind reached full panic and dumped adrenaline into his system, which brought him to full alertness and overwhelmed the narcotics the med pod had been feeding him. The med pod had failed, it must have used all the energy stored in the conduit it was attached to and simply shutdown, leaving him in the tank, fully connected, and drowning in the oxygenated fluid that was no longer circulating through his lungs. Panic started to raise a second time, but he forced it aside and started feeling the pod wall to orientate himself, he had spent a lot of time in the pod recently and had gotten to know the inside quite well. His left hand brushed the recess just above the door, he reached in grabbed the small handle within and pulled. Nothing happened, which was probably a good thing because the most likely outcome would have been him being pulled violently out of the pod and into vacuum. Somehow, he had expected it to be like in the movies where the door would fly open dramatically spilling the goopy contents onto the floor along with the gasping protagonist seconds before death. That's not what happens when there's no gravity and Red had died before. The door unlatched, but didn't move, the bubble of fluid containing him stayed exactly where it was, separating him from the life-giving air just inches away. He turned and found purchase for his left foot and pushed himself through the hatch, only to be jerked back halfway through by the tubing still attached to his body. Flailing with weak arms and hands that seemed unable to perform the simplest task as he tried to pull the mask off his face which was rooted firmly to his face by the tube going down his throat. Gripping as tightly as he could he pulled the mask off and the tube out of his throat as he exhaled as hard as he could driving much of the fluid out of his lungs, which collected in a ball connect to his face, when he inhaled by reflex, he sucked it all back into his lungs. The coughing fit

probably saved his life as he retched repeatedly, expelling more of the thick liquid, clearing it off his face as best he could between ragged breaths. After a few minutes he was able to control his breathing, there was still a lot of fluid in his lungs, but because it was meant to carry oxygen, he was able to breathe through the remaining fluid now that air was coming in.

He was blind and completely naked in the inky blackness of the habitat, large globs of fluid kept sticking to his face and he would have to brush them away with every breath as he disengaged the rest of his connections to the med pod. Free of the tubing and wires he pushed off the wall in a direction that he hoped would take him to Big Al, it had been a tight fit, but he had managed to get Al's fat ass through the door of the hab, but hadn't secured him to anything, so he could have drifted anywhere. Holding his arms above his head for protection, he glided across the room, impacting the wall nowhere near Al. The pain of the impact left him wondering how much work the pod had been able to finish before the power went out, I felt like not very much. Without mag boots or any other way of staying put, he bounced off the wall and starting drifting on another trajectory, painfully, into another wall with nothing to grab. After the fourth wall he impacted something that wasn't more flat wall and grabbed on tightly as his body tried to continue it's journey. It took a moment to orientate himself, fortunately the hab only had a few pipes that ran externally on the walls, so he was able to quickly figure out his position by moving down the pipe until he came to a junction he knew.

Of all the senses to lose, sight is the cruelest. Nothing makes you feel more helpless than to succumb to the unfathomable horrors of your own imagination in the darkness. The monster you can see is less frightening than the monster your mind conjures in the dark. He forced himself to calm his mind and formed a mental picture of the room and tried to piece together what he could remember. The top portion of Al had come off first and he remembered pushing it away while he worked on the legs so it could have ended up anywhere as it bounced chaotically around the room until its energy was spent and it came to rest somewhere. He pointed himself as best he could towards where he thought the small door for the bedroom was and pushed off. He didn't miss by much and was able to grab the small handle on the door before he floated away. Once in the room he felt around until he found the drawer with extra clothes and pulled out one of the jumpsuits that had magnets in the feet and joints to make moving around easier and a pair of magnetic slippers that went on his hands. The jumpsuit was painful to get on, between his barely healed body and the clumps of liquid still clinging to him from the tank it was a fight to pull the normally tightfitting on.

It doesn't make sense, but shit collects in corners whether there is gravity or not. After thirty minutes of groping around the space he finally bumped into Al's upper section which he had located mostly by smell since he had left it full unimaginable gore that had been festering for some unknown amount of time. Pulling the helmet off so he wouldn't have to crawl into the disgusting suit, he activated the two small helmet lights praying that there was still some life in Al's battery since he needed Al to find and restart the reactor he would need to recharge Al. There was vacuum on the other side of the hab door, without a working suit, Red would never leave this room. He screamed slightly when the lights came on, partially from relief and partially from being blinded by the sudden brightness. He quickly turned them off again to save whatever was left in the battery and reached in to power up the helmet since it used minimal power. Soft illumination came from the helmet as the small displays lit up on the visor that was caked with dried blood and other things best left unimagined. Using the soft light from Al's head, he made it across to the kitchen area and pulled out some cleaning wipes to clear the visor. Once he had gotten most of the gunk off he slipped the helmet on and checked the status of his micro lifeboat.

For the most part Al was undamaged, he had about twenty percent battery in the main pack attached to the torso, the helmet battery was at ninety five percent, with the thruster fuel nearly full, he would be able to move, but have limited ability to do any heavy work with the suit. He was going to have to do something soon because of the cold that was seeping through the soaking wet jumpsuit he was wearing, the heaters had probably given out first given their power demands, the hab had dropped to near zero while he was sealed in the pod as it siphoned the last of the power trying to keep him alive.

Using the dim illumination from the helmet to light the room, he made his way back to the bathroom area and stripped off the wet clothes, taking the time to dry completely before putting on a fresh jumpsuit, thick socks, and a thermal shirt. All the food was frozen, so he dug through the bin until he found a bag of nuts that he could crunch on, the water was frozen, but some of the sugary drinks had stay liquid so he pulled a couple of those out and started filling a rumbling stomach that hadn't had food in over a week according to Al's logs. Most of his cleaning wipes had been ejected into space when half the lower airlock was ripped out and he didn't have enough drinking water to spare any for the task ahead, so he grabbed his jumpsuit that was soaked with bio goo and used it to start cleaning out Al. The helmet was the worst by far and took nearly an hour of work to get everything un-crustied and usable again. The torso section wasn't too bad, and the legs smelled like he might have relieved himself sometime during his last adventure, but other than the smell, Al was ready to go.

Red drifted over and placed his hand on the small pod that contained lucky, being portable, it had its own power supply and managed to stay in tack during the battle. He felt the urge to start the wake-up cycle and bring the poor cat back to life just so he wouldn't be the only living thing in the solar system. He had always been a solitary creature, it was what made him suitable for this kind of work, but being this alone was starting to rub through the thin veil of sanity he was so desperately trying to maintain. He knew he wouldn't wake Lucky up, having to say goodbye to him a second time was more than he would be able to bear. Everything he did now was saying goodbye in some way, every action felt like the last time he would take that action, every glimpse a last look, every push the final push, but it just wouldn't end like it should have a hundred times.

Looking over at the pieces of Al waiting to be assembled he gathered what strength he had and suited up for yet another last stand. After giving his nose a moment to desensitize from the initial shock of putridness that came with sealing the helmet, he went over to the door of the hab started working getting it open. The hab was never meant to be an air lock, so there were no controls for depressurizing, and opening the door with all the air inside would create a brief but powerful explosion that would likely blow him out into the shop and certainly damage the door, which he was going to need functional since the hab was the only area on the ship he could pressurize. He still had a small drill attached to Al's arm from when he depressurized the ship earlier that made quick work of getting through the door leaving a hole just a few millimeters wide for air to leak out of. At first he could clearly hear the sound of air rushing, but after a few seconds the sound began to fade as the pressure dropped to vacuum. Red wondered briefly if there was enough air left in the storage tanks to refill the hab if he returned or if he had just vented the last of his breathing air into space. He counted to thirty in his head just to make sure the two rooms were equalize before moving the other arm in and sealing the small hole with the welder.

The doors slide open without a sound in the vacuum of the shop, for some reason his mind added the sound of a door sliding open from the old Star Trek, which made him smile for the first time in long time.

“Who knew you were going to end up being such a tough son of a bitch to kill? Come on Aquino, if Carlson and the rest of those Agency twats couldn’t finish you off after four hundred years, you should be able to get out of this. Right?” It was probably a bad sigh that he was talking to himself in the third person, really need to watch that. “Yeah, you hear that? Shape up!” Shit.

He turned on the helmet lights to survey the shop and find the bench he needed, which he was really hoping hadn’t been melted to slag by the energy beam that passed through the shop. Al’s used cold thrusters that required almost no power to operate save a small amount to gimble the tiny engines. He pushed himself up a meter to clear the benches and then thrust towards the bench, stopping himself just above it. The polycarbonate top had melted and had solidified into undulating surface, but the metal sides and front were unscathed. Getting the third drawer down open with the clumsy articulated arms on Al was challenging, but eventually he got the two large work lights out of the drawer and attached one to each forearm using the suits magnetic attachment points.

He headed toward the back of the shop and entered the aft section, the reactor there was the closest one and would be the easiest to tie back into the shop and power up the hab. About halfway there he found one of the spots where he had been hit during the battle, hit hard, nearly twenty meters of the corridor was gone forming a hole that extended forty meters up in a ragged circle full of stars. This had been one of the areas where something severed a charged power line, the explosion had gutted a huge hole out of the ship, leaving a melted twisted wreck behind. It took him a minute to find where the corridor picked up again on the other side of the gap, it was partially occluded but he was able to force Al through, thankful for the alloy hard plate protecting him as he scrapped past sharp metal edges.

There were several more areas that appeared to have suffered damage from something like a railgun or artillery of some sort, evidenced by distinctive shape of a hole made by something solid and fast passing through it. There was fragmentation damage everywhere, apparently his enemy hadn’t been as careful as he had thought in their attack. Fortunately, the area around the reactor was undamaged and more importantly, the small drone was still sitting where it had been left acting as a relay for this section. He had no idea how many of the valuable robots has survived the battle, but is he was to have any chance at surviving for the next few hours he was going to need them. He picked the bot up and jacked a small cable into it allowing him to access the systems. The drone still had eighty percent battery and was functioning perfectly, he had shut off all the wireless networking to reduce emissions during his sneak attack, so he was going to have to find the bots one at a time to reenable it, but that would be a problem for some inexplicably not dead future version of himself.

The power readout on the HUD told him that he needed to get moving, just running Al’s systems was slowly draining his battery and it looked like he only had a few hours left. He knew the conduits leading back to the shop were ruined beyond repair, so he backtracked until he found the first valve and closed it off, isolating the damage section. The power conduits that ran towards the stern disappeared into a bulkhead and connected again at a junction on the other side of the engine bay. Sending the bot jetting away on small puffs of gas it headed towards the junction and hopefully another working drone sitting at that location. A few minutes later a small light came on letting him know a second drone was now connected to him as the first finished

interfacing with its silent brother, ordering him to close the valve he was guarding. He instructed one drone to move away from the junction, but stay in the area to monitor, the other he brought back so it could talk to the reactor.

Red gave the command to start up the reactor at five percent, expecting it to explode at any moment, when it didn't, he checked the feed from the other drone to make sure that it wasn't exploding on the other end either. Working around the damaged the aft had taken was slow work, sending his working drones ahead to open or close valves, sometimes nothing happened, but twice he felt the vibrations through his boots when a damaged section was tied in and caused something to explode somewhere. By the time he tied in a usable series of conduits leading back to the shop he had picked up three more drones and unfortunately, four that had been damaged beyond repair. He activated the final connection in the shop and held his breath waiting. With a flicker the remaining lights in the shop came on along with the hab reveling the extent of the damage. There were eight different holes running through the shop that showed stars, most of them were only a few centimeters, save for the large one that almost cooked him in the suit. There were organic looking shapes covering the shop and most of the rear wall from molten metal drifting through and cooling into strange shapes as it stuck to something. The large beam had come through right above most of the large machine tools and he could see the sagging metal from where they had been partially melted by the radiant energy, anything that had electronics anywhere near the path of the beam was likely useless. He drifted down to inspect the airlock and found two perfect holes, one on each side of the hatch bored through the flat plate. The foam he had used to seal up the airlock made finding where the energy beam has passed through easy since it had melted the foam leaving large, scorched craters behind.

Al's battery was close to done so he headed back up into the shop and over to the cradle he had rigged up, attaching the power line and setting the mag boots. There were two large holes from the heavy beam which left an uneven melted mess on one wall and took part of the floor along with the other wall on its way out, most of the others were relatively small and he should be able to weld patches over. He bought up the five working drones he had left and set them to working on the two large holes, cleaning them up enough to patch with something. The HUD showed that Al was going to need three hours to charge up enough to run the welder so Red closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep wondering why he was still alive, as usual.

Twelve hours later when he came to Red was certain that he hadn't been in the tank long enough, the pain was a deep pain, his bones were singing to him from every unhealed fracture without the meds from the pod to quite their insistent voices. He was thirsty, but that would have to wait until he could get out of Al. There probably was enough left in the isolated system that controlled the hab to pressurize it one more time, but he didn't trust his luck, never bet against a good losing streak. He started repairing the large holes first, the bots had found several pieces of plating that were larger than the hole he was patching. He selected one and used the cutting torch to get a rough shape that matched the opening and welded it in place. The other side was more challenging and required four plates to be welded in place before he sealed the wall and floor, an hour later he had all the obvious holes in the shop sealed.

He let a small amount of air loose from the large tanks in the shop and watched his pressure gauge until it started reading pressure and then turned off the air. The pressure dropped back to zero depressingly quickly, he obviously had missed something somewhere. The damage from the beam weapon was easy to locate and repair since the entry and exit wounds were always in a perfectly straight line, but the projectiles they had hit him with took more chaotic courses as they impacted and shattered into progressively smaller pieces. He grabbed a tube of

dry graphic lubricant and squeezed the contents into the air forming a large black cloud as he turned on the air again, this time watching the cloud. It only took seconds for the cloud to start drifting over to one side of the shop as it followed the air out through six tiny holes in the ceiling tucked in behind a pipe. Red welded up the holes and repeated his graphic tracking trick three more times, each time finding more small holes that needed repair. The fourth time he watched in disbelief as the cloud swirled around from the air rushing into the room but didn't start to track in any direction. After thirty minutes of holding a minuscule amount of pressure, he let more air in and waited another thirty minutes to be sure, he could afford to lose a room full of air, he didn't even know if he had enough to fill the room even once. When he got to about thirty percent of normal pressure, the nitrogen ran out forcing him to add more oxygen in to compensate for the lower pressure.

When he cracked his helmet, the cold air was a shock, it had gotten considerably colder since he climbed into AI. Breathing was difficult, at first it was like choking, he just couldn't get enough air into his lungs creating a very primal fear that started to take hold until he calmed himself enough to realize that although it didn't feel like he was getting enough air, there was enough oxygen to keep him alive. His breathing slowed as he got used to the thin air and started taking long deliberate breaths. AI showed fifty below zero as he carefully climbed out of the suit and floated over to the heater control. His jumpsuit was damp from sweating inside AI and immediately froze on contact with the air, his hands were shaking so bad he could barely get the heater turned on. Once air started flowing out of the small vent, he pushed off towards the hab and headed for his quarters, stopping briefly to put a frozen bag of water in the microwave to thaw. He stripped off his frozen clothes, replacing them with a dryer set and immediately climbed into the sleeping bag, taking the warm water while waiting for the heater to do its job.

Two hours later he could still see his breath and hadn't formulated any sort of plan whatsoever. He was just stuck, there was no way out that could be seen. The ship was a wreck and would never leave this place, he didn't count on the Trenchers being dumb enough to send even more ships to investigate somewhere that had already cost them two ships, and even if they did, he doubted they would return him to humanity to recount the horrors of space travel. They would probably just kill him and go ask Earth for a fresh mechanic. The other aliens could return, and he would be powerless to stop them from taking the core out of the ship, or just destroying him from a safe distance. His only viable plan was that there was some sort of galactic Red Cross that swooped into conflict zones, saving survivors like himself by setting up tent cities in space and dropping bags of alien rice out of their ships. Most likely, Red was just screwed.

Suicide. It was going to come up and not thinking about it wasn't going to make it go away. The only thing left to do was to figure out how to die. He was going to die, of that there was no doubt, but after his experience getting out of the tank, he really didn't want to go painfully. Gasping for hours as the last of the oxygen was gone? Waiting for agony of starvation to finish the job? Dehydration didn't seem like any fun. Red had some time now, days or even weeks before anything started getting critical, unless one of the patched holes let loose, there was plenty of time to find a good way to go. He thought briefly about smashing the ship into a moon, going out in a spectacular explosion, but the remembrance of broken bones from the last time the ship maneuvered quickly put that idea to rest. Dying in vacuum seemed like drowning, only faster and with more swelling. He knew there were chemicals on the ship that were poisonous but doubted any of them worked quickly or painlessly. The med pod would have the right stuff,

but all the medications were in a sealed replaceable cartridge, and there would be no way to identify the right drugs when opened.

Explosion was probably the best, quick, exciting, flamboyant, and no handsome corpse floating through space for all time, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, as it were. Any of the reactors would do but might as well find one near the core and set off the big firecracker. Earlier, watching the visual feed of the explosion slowed down, the first reactor breach happened somewhere midships, near where a fairly pissed off Exo had punched a hole in it, and spread outward. Even in the first microseconds he could see the front and back of the ship being pushed away from the center breach, riding the shockwave of the explosion. If it had ended there, most of the ship would have still been intact, two separate intact pieces flying in different directions, but mostly still a ship. The second rupture changed that. When the Trencher core went, it instantly formed a sphere two hundred thousand kilometers in diameter made of pure light. An instant later something else happened, it wasn't that the light was replaced by anything, it was just gone. In its place was a void, true in every sense, a metaphysical singularity tearing at the fabric of sanity, not just an absence of matter, but the suspension of physics, brute force bending the will of the universe and making it tolerate that which it abhors, a void. Forces unleashed beyond the flow of time and the playful dances of subatomic particles, this was power unfettered by the delicate balancing act of the universe, this was cosmological rage. Gravity. But impossible gravity, gravity without the local mass required to create it. From the limited data he was able to glean, the calculations showed something with the gravitational force of a large star appeared and then blinked out of existence. At the time Red was too busy having a lot of his bones broken to appreciate the scale and absurdity of what happened, but it was on his mind as he made his preparations to force one of the reactors to go critical.

The heaters had raised the temperature high enough to be tolerable so he floated out of his bag and over the terminal to start working the problem. Since he had basically welded himself into the ship and used the last of his air to fill it up, getting out was going to be a problem. The outer lock had been damaged and Al couldn't fit through the inner lock to fix it, so the inner lock was repaired but not the other meaning there was no way to cycle out even wearing one of the smaller suits. He doubted he could get one of the drones to convince a reactor to explode, but he might be able to get them to do something else that cause a reactor to go critical. Pulling up the rough schematic that had been created by the drones he started looking at all the systems that had been ignored in his focus to commandeer the power conduits. The drones had mapped everything, although the purpose of most of it was largely unknown, it could be grouped into easy categories like; high pressure stuff, electrical stuff, power stuff, computer stuff, etc. Because his sub-conscious mind was still running through what had happened when the Trencher core exploded he started pulling out everything that he knew wasn't related to the main FTL drive that the core powered. A few minutes later he was looking at a stripped-down rendering of the ship that showed nothing coming from or leading into the core. He had expected to find power conduits radiating out to light speed engines dotted around the hull, or some massive piece of machinery connected to it that had remained unnoticed, but there was nothing.

Red had been through a lot recently, so he wasn't too hard on himself for mentally locking up for a few moments while the implications started to sink in. It was like smelling something unknown briefly and then frantically sniffing again and again failing to catch the scent again in a vain attempt to identify it. His mind had flashed an instant of insight and then blanked out while it installed a few updates and rebooted the system. He stayed in the bardo of bliss while everything formed up again and then an inescapable conclusion hit him like a spiritual

hammer knocking him back to the bardo of suffering. The entire FTL system was contained in the core. The completely undamaged core.

Suddenly Red had an idea that seemed like more fun than blowing himself up.

Exo Red Chapter 11

“Fuck.” The reclaimed water from the compressor tasted awful, but water was water. The compressor was able to condense desperately needed water from the air, but it also reclaimed all the different compounds that were in the air, one of which was the latent traces of the Trencher habitat fluid that had coated everything during the initial attack. At the time Red remembered thinking that the smell was the vilest thing he had ever encountered, that was only because he had never tasted it. He squeezed a small bubble of water onto the tabletop so Lucky could get a drink, he had brought him out of stasis six weeks ago when it started to look like death might not be as imminent as he thought. Having company, even cranky company, was welcome as he toiled alone in the void, trying once again to pull off the impossible. It was a fool’s errand, but everything he had done up to this point had been too and he was still alive, still running, one step ahead of death. His dreams had gotten dark recently, always drowning in the dark, always screaming without sound, falling endlessly. Sleep had become a biological necessity to keep his body functional, but there was no rest for him anymore, his mind found no respite aside from an hour of labored meditation once a day.

Redwood Aquino had a plan. It was a stupid plan, but like all stupid plans, it kinda makes sense if you ignored all the details that make it a stupid plan. Two months ago, while contemplating suicide and the most spectacular way to do it, he realized that everything thing that made the FTL drive go faster than light was contained in the central core. This is stupid point number one that must be ignored, having no idea how the drive worked he probably wouldn’t recognize parts of the drive system as such even if looking at them. He didn’t know that all the important bits were in the core, completely intact, he was just assuming that they were. Even if stupid point number one wasn’t enough to make it a stupid plan, stupid point number two did. Associated with his complete ignorance of how it worked was the issue of not knowing how to operate it, how to instruct it to do the thing that he didn’t understand, while not exploding or flying into a star, then exploding. The plan actually had many fatal flaws, most of the bow was shredded, fused into scrap from the battle, the rest of the hull was torn up by weapon impacts and internal explosions from ruptured conduits, there were only a few reactors that were still connected to usable conduits, he had no way of steering or maneuvering the ship in any meaningful way, and his oxygen could run out any day.

He had found the computer core, it was the only reason he was still alive, it was the one thing that could get him out of his torturous continuation. Bringing the main computer back online opened all sorts of possibilities where he didn’t die. It was a tough nut to crack, there was enough spy gear left for him to build a scaffold of scanning sensors around the memory crystal for the computer core and start manually copying data. None of it made any sense yet, but all the available computer power on hand was grinding away it. Some of it he could read, some of the mathematics were easy for the algorithms to pull out, but even the stuff he could read didn’t make any sense. He was making progress; the Trenchers didn’t encrypt their data so much as stored it in a such a chaotic way that he had to analyze massive amounts of data to piece

anything together. It was costing him the one resource he had the least of, time. Everyday could be his last day, his last day alive, or his last day stuck here, fate rolled the dice daily.

He pulled Lucky off his lap and gently pushed him up towards the ceiling, watching the cat gyrate in the air trying to get his feet pointed down before landing. "Sorry buddy, got to get to work, ship ain't going to demolish itself. I gotta go be a foreman today and inspect the worksite." Lucky glared down at him with a promise of retribution as he clicked his way across the ceiling.

Two months earlier when realizing the main drive might still be operational, he postponed his funeral long enough to find the computer core. This wasn't like getting the crappy outboard motor started and stealing his uncle's boat when he was eleven, without a functioning central computer he wasn't going anywhere. While waiting for the scanner to finish its work analyzing the core data, he had continued working getting the ship ready. The front third of the vessel had been damaged extensively in the battle to the point of compromising the structure, he was pretty sure it would just shear off under any kind of acceleration.

Repairing the airlock had taken a while and he ended up creating a temporary airlock by welding himself inside of a damaged piece of air duct he had attached to the hatch on the inner lock. It held long enough for him to repair the outer lock but had cost him precious air that had bled through the makeshift seal while he was working. Big AI was starting to show some wear and tear from being used in unconventional ways and for an unconventional amount of time AI was tough, but even the hulking brute had its limits and Red was going to need the big lunk later to complete the ridiculously stupid plan. He would never admit it to Lucky, but he had started talking to AI like he was alive, like AI, the wear and tear was taking its toll on him as well and the beat-up hard suit was family at this point. He patted AI on the shoulder as he grabbed one of the lightweight suits.

"Sorry buddy, maybe next time, don't need muscle for this trip, just have to go yell at the kids."

Red suited up and cycled through the lock, he had improved the vacuum pump that evacuated the lock when he realized that some air was being lost each time he cycled through. He was still losing a small amount air when he cycled so he had to limit the number of trips he took. The air pressure in the hab had dropped the point that he would wake up gasping and felt like he was choking to death until his conscious mind could convince the body that there was enough in the thin air to sustain him. He waited for the larger pump to clear the lock and then waited a couple of more minutes just in case a few more molecules could be pushed back into the hab. Being careful not to snag the lightweight suit on the ruined metal that surrounded the destroyed outer lock he drifted back around to the hull and anchored down for a minute while he sent out location ping to the drones he had working on the ship. Three responded, the other four were out of line of sight on the other side of the ship. The first three were about a three hundred meters from the bow and as he expected were sitting motionless waiting for someone to end their paralytic confusion. The tiny drones couldn't do much to modify something as large as a Trencher ship, but he had attached them to something far larger and more powerful, creating a small army of golems.

The forbidding mining machines that he had found dormant in the bow hangers early on had been brought to life. He had learned a lot about getting the drones to act as interpreters with the Trenchers systems and had been able to gain some degree of control over the massive machines. They were profoundly stupid without the central computer controlling them, but there was also a bit of autonomy built in, they could complete simple tasks but had no ability to overcome small obstacles, so they would just sit and wait for him to come and help whenever

something happened that didn't fit with the program they had been given. The bow was destroyed but he had been able to gain access to the hanger through a damaged section mid ships and once inside had cut an access hole in one of the imposing creatures that allowed his drone to burrow its way into the meaty bits that controlled the beast and take over. They were impressive when they got moving, ordering the brute to cut away a hull section big enough to allow it to fit through had resulted in the machine deploying a massive laser that cut clean through the thick hide of the ship in spectacular fashion. Too spectacular as it turned out, the energy released in the confined area had destroyed the two machines on either side of the cutting area and forced Red to take refuge behind a bulkhead until it finished cutting through and the molten slag had drifted past.

Now he had them working to remove even more of the ship. The front two hundred meters of the ship were a complete loss, some of the power that he had used to destroy his enemies had been reflected into the ship and done almost as much damage to is ship as to the other. The golems were working their way into the ship, carving out large sections and tossing them into space, it was slow work since the possibility of them cutting into something that could explode and destroy the ship was high. Using the drones that weren't controlling golems as scouts to look for hazards in the next section to be removed was time consuming but less lethal than just cutting chunks off the ship. He had to review the scan data for each golem's scout and program a new set of instructions that defined what to remove and how deeply to cut.

Several hours later all the golems were happily carving up the ship again and he was able to push out a bit to survey the progress. Two months ago, the idea of moving away from the hull even a few meters was terrifying, now he thought nothing of jetting out a kilometer to get a good view. He wasn't sure if dying wasn't as important to him anymore or he had just become numb to the constant danger, probably a bit of both. The ship was still spinning on the long axis so it provided a three hundred and sixty degree view if he was far enough away and patient enough to wait in the terrifying void as the ship rotated beneath him. The ship had changed radically since he boarded her orbiting Pluto. The sleek organic lines were gone, interrupted by huge holes, scars, dents that covered the hull from the aft section to what was left of the bow. The front two hundred meters were missing the hull plating, exposing the spars and struts that defined the exterior shape, bright lights appeared and vanished periodically as his army of insects cut deeper and deeper, removing the useless sections and casting them into the whims of fate, to be trapped in a gravity well or to spend eternity drifting through space. They were getting close to being done, most of the visible external damage was gone leaving only the bent and broken structural elements beneath to be amputated. As he watched one of the golems finished cutting and pushed a section away from the ship, realizing that it was one of the reactors that had to be removed carefully to avoid destroying the ship he wondered if it would be better to be floating at a safe distance when the ship exploded or sitting inside completely oblivious to the impending danger.

His reverie was broken by a small red light flashing in the HUD warning that there was only 30 minutes of air left in the suit. Small puffs erupted from the back of the suit pushing him towards his fragile home floating alone in the dark. The wrecked vessel had become home, prison, and crypt all rolled into one, preserving life while trying to kill him at every turn, indifferent to his wants and desires.

There were several nasty surprises waiting for him after he cycled through the lock. The first came when he hooked up the empty suit to resupply its oxygen and nothing happened, no satisfying hiss as air flowed into the suit, the metal connector didn't frost over slightly as the liquid gas flowed through, nothing. The oxygen was all gone. The other suit had full tanks that

should be good for about twelve hours, Big Al was topped off and could last for thirty hours if he wasn't doing anything too strenuous. He had added oxygen this morning and cleaned the carbon dioxide filters which would give him a few more days, maybe a week before he had to seek refuge in the suits, but then he was dead, again.

The second nasty surprise was a small red light blinking on the consol indicating something of note had happened. Several somethings of note as it turned out, the first was an unusually large batch of decrypted files for him to review and the other was an alert from system watching what was going on outside the ship. A new star blinked in the sky, only for an instant, just long enough to leave something foul behind, something dark, something that looked remarkably like the ship he had destroyed, only larger, with four massive pods spread around midships that bristled with weapons. This was a craft of war, the enhanced imaged showed scarring and patched repair work over the entire hull, large ports dotted the bow irregularly indicating a variety of weapons, there was a large door on the side that would undoubtedly unleash swarms of viscous attack craft if needed. Not that they would need any of that to destroy what he was loosely referring to as a ship, a fast-moving marble would do the trick at this point.

They didn't seem to be in any hurry, the ship had dropped in more than two hours ago while he was floating around outside and hadn't changed course since then. If he could spot them using his last two functional crabs as a sensor array, they had undoubtedly spotted him by now, especially with light from the golems cutting chunks of the ship off. They had entered on the other side of the system from him and were on a fast ballistic course to bring them roughly into the area where his ship had entered the system before being chased into orbit around the gas giant. After running a few projections Red realized that he had found a way to defeat all their weapons, unless they sped up, his air would run out a week before they reached him and there is no weapon that can kill a man twice. Taking a moment to program in a few alerts to keep an eye on his new visitors, Red pushed off towards the living quarters, following the cries of a hungry cat as he drifted through the shop.

He squeezed out a ration of water and cat food for Lucky who immediately voiced his displeasure at the meager serving. The food situation hadn't got bad enough for him to start stealing food from the cat, yet, Lucky was still more valuable than the eight pounds of delicious dark meat he represented. Red wasn't sure what his dinner was, it was the last portion of something he had divided into four servings that hadn't aged well over the last four days, so he just ate it in one bite and followed with his ration of water hoping it would be enough to wash the taste down as it went. It wasn't.

Pulling up the decrypted data in hopes of distracting himself from the horrific taste in his mouth urging him to vomit up whatever foul thing he had just eaten, he was shocked at the number of files waiting for him. He had known that because of the way the Trenchers stored their data that he was going to have to collect a lot of it before he could begin to piece any of it together, but he also knew there would be a tipping point where the computer would have enough data to exponentially increase the rate of decryption. He had reached that tipping point. Fortunately, the computer had also had a few hours to shift that data and get it organized into basic categories.

The astrometric data was astonishing, there were charts for millions of systems, other galaxies, regions even stranger, and intertwined into all of it was other data, mathes that looked like quantum equations that used whole solar systems as data points. There was a thousand years of cartography waiting within that vast trove of stars.

There were other files that he didn't even open that contained system code, log files, sensor data, and a host of other stuff that, if he could sell it, would make him the richest man on earth, but was otherwise useless. One file caught his eye, power regulation. It was mostly equations, but Red had been a physics student in another life and could read through it easily. It was over whelming at first, the amount of energy being produced was frightening and Red couldn't stop himself from looking over his shoulder in the direction of the core amazed that he had been sitting that close to something that could create energy like a small sun. After reading through the file slowly and carefully he started to see the larger story the mathes were telling, the parts that didn't make sense were hiding the truth, but enough pieces were falling into place that he was starting to see the whole. He just couldn't figure out how they managed to contain a power source of that magnitude within something as small as the ship.

They hadn't.

One of the bits that had been driving him crazy were the orbital equations that kept coming up, he had been thinking about it as if it were some giant fusion reactor, where nothing orbited anything else. Then there were the odd Einsteinian equations defining singularities and other more complex warping of space-time that were using the orbital data as variables.

Red physically shook his head to clear away unwanted thoughts as the realization came to him.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me.”

It was a black hole, but it wasn't here. Somehow the Trenchers had managed tap the ultimate power and create a wormhole between a black hole and core of the ship, the core didn't generate energy, it anchored one end of a wormhole. The other end was anchored to another device that was orbiting very close to a black hole, but not just any black hole, this one was feeding on a star that had wandered too close to the massive gravity well. The other end of the wormhole was traveling through the accretion disk pulling energy from the dying star as it fell into oblivion, all they had to do was control the aperture on this end to regulate how much energy flowed through. Although he didn't understand the mechanism the used to do it, this must be how they controlled time. The other end of the wormhole was deep enough in gravity well for there to be a substantial shift in the flow of time between the two ends of the wormhole, they must have figured out how to control it, to allow time to flow through the wormhole as well. Red wasn't sure how it all fit together or how to operate the FTL drive, but a big piece of the puzzle had just fallen into place.

He looked over his shoulder again towards the core even more terrified of it than before. When he destroyed the other ship, and the Trencher core exploded it had lost control of the wormhole for an instant and allowed gravity to pour through until it collapsed. If it had stayed open for another second it would have destroyed Red and the gas giant he was orbiting. The brief instant it had been open had been enough to change the orbit of the massive planet and all thirty-six of its moons. It was humbling to think of wielding that power, to skip across the stars riding a singularity, a literal sword of Damocles following your every move, waiting for the slightest fault so it could collapse the ship into the mouth of a hungry wormhole. Red had been happier not knowing.

The rest of the data either reinforced his theory or was so confusing he would need several Physics degrees from somewhere that wasn't Earth to understand any of it. Most of it went into a mental file he had labeled 'Magic', he didn't have to understand how the trick worked, he just had to know that it did.

Over the next few days, he reviewed data as it became available, and kept a close eye on the neighbors. They had stayed on course for the most part moving into the system carefully, the loss of one of their ships had made them cautious. Every now and again his sensors would pick up energy pulses coming from the ship, some version of radar he guessed they were using to locate the other ship or discern its fate. This wasn't a rescue, they knew what the Trenchers cores contained and what would happen if one was breached, the other ship was lost, but they seemed to want to know the how and why of it as well. Eventually that was going to lead them to him, and they didn't seem the type to talk it out over a pint.

It didn't matter much, Red was starting to feel the thin air getting thinner and would probably become unbreathable sometime in the next day or so, even small exertions would send his breath racing as his lungs tried to pull more oxygen out of the depleted air. An alarm started beeping along with a flashing red light on the consol that woke Lucky up from his nap in Red's lap and brought a chorus of complaining from the cranky cat.

"I see it. More good news from the good news fairy, no doubt. What do you think it is this time? Another black hole? Supernova? A whole fleet of aliens looking to try out their shiny new anal probes?" Red brought up the alert and realized there were two alerts waiting for him, one was a lower priority and lacked the flashing light and beeping. He opened the critical alert and was completely unsurprised to see that the enemy ship had changed course and was accelerating towards him, rapidly, a quick check of the math brought another unsurprising result, they would get here before his air ran out. He had mixed emotions about the aliens getting here in time to kill him before he died. One the one hand it solved his problem of suffocating, but he wasn't sure how much being vaporized by a massive alien warship was going to hurt, probably less than gasping to death inside Big Al.

Putting aside contemplating the method of his demise, Red pulled up the other alert to distract himself. It was another data alert telling him that the system had finished chewing through another batch of numbers and was ready for him to review. Usually when it was done, the system would create a brief abstract that roughly defined what kind of data it was and from where. This was completely different, this was a list of functions, operations, and various hardware interfaces that he now had access to. Still confused, he pulled up the source of the data and was shocked when he saw where it had come from, the spy kit. Most of the information was just being organized and decoded by various algorithms that untangled the information but didn't do much with it. Early on he had unleashed the full suite of nasty intrusion software the Agency had designed to break into and take control of any computer system it encountered. It hadn't made any headway until he had enough data unencrypted for it to work with, but once it did, it had mowed through Trencher's operations code with ease. It had even loaded a version of the main computer's system into a virtual sandbox and had full control over the modified system. The main computer was still down, but now he had a functioning replica of it that he could interact with.

"Shit Lucky, what do you say, feeling like not dying again today.? I'm not sure how many of your lives we have used up on this trip, but I am hoping that you have one left." Lucky looked up unimpressed. "Alright asshole, but if you are still alive tomorrow to complain about it, I saying I told you so." Clearly the cat had a firmer grasp on the situation.

Red always hated it when he had to credit the Agency for doing something right, but all the boring training that seemed so useless at the time was really paying off. Naturally Redwood Aquino would die a slow and painful death before he ever confided that in any of those arrogant bastards in cheap suits, but after ten hours of work and several carefully managed doses of his dwindling supply of amphetamines he had put together something slightly sinister. From the start he had been limited in his control over any of the alien tech due to not having any direct access to it, all he could do was ask nicely through one of his drones acting as interpreter. Now the gloves were off, once he had control, the simulated AI that ran the Trencher computer made short work of bypassing everything that would stop him from gaining full control over the main computer and what was left of the rest of the ship. When he was finished, he had a fully interactive overlay that he could use to control just about everything, the problem was that he understood almost none of it.

Never to be by deterred by ignorance or incompetence, he got to work bringing his Franken computer to life. The AI had mapped out a detailed set of instructions for how to power the system on incrementally and when to add tailored intrusion programs to gain control of each system as he progressed. A few hours later the alien core was completely powered up and waiting for instructions. Sitting in the shop at the bench consol he was using to interface with the main core he couldn't shake the feeling that any input by him would immediately result in the ship exploding, flying through a star, or otherwise meeting an explosive end. Right now the core was up, but it wasn't tied into anything yet, once he gave it access to the rest of the ship he had no idea what would happen. In theory, he should be able to control it, but that didn't mean that there wasn't some emergency subroutine that would jump the ship back to the Trencher home world, or just self-destruct the instant it was reconnected, the way his luck had been going, self-destruct seemed like the smart money.

"To hell with it, here we go. System; integrate core 1." There were no flashing lights or whirring mechanical systems as the computer integrated itself and brought the ship back to life. Nothing happened at all as a very confused computer tried to figure out where the rest of the ship had gone and what had happened to the part that was left. Nothing happened for a few more minutes as the alien system pieced together what it could find that was still functional. The screen began to populate with flashing icons demanding attention for systems that were critical or just missing. Red let it chew through the initial damage estimates for a minute until they stopped appearing, when the core didn't explode, he continued.

"System; status of sensors." A satisfying control panel appeared that listed all the available sensors, most were inoperable, but enough worked to put together a clear picture of the sky around him. "Locate, track, and display all ships in the system."

A model of the system showed the other ship moving fast and hard towards him, but still six hours away. Six hours to learn how to fly an alien ship that used a drive system he didn't understand, relying on senseless navigational data, across a galaxy that he hoped was his own, without making any mistakes that resulted in the ship exploding, since every mistake would likely cause the ship to explode. He had moved beyond thinking in terms of possibilities and likely outcomes, he was in an impossible situation and had already cheated all the likely outcomes, now he acted on what he knew to be true, what he had learned over the months. He was good at not dying. Now he had to not die while doing something else impossible.

"System; Status of drive system." The displayed showed two systems, the sub light drive system showed about ten percent functionality, the enemy had peppered the drive section during the battle and there was very few of the drive cones functioning and even fewer reactors to

power them. The other display showed him what he had been waiting for, the FTL system showed as fully functional. He didn't know how to fly it yet, but at least he had a shot now.

"System; access historical navigation data, plot course to last known location, display current location data and possible destinations reachable from this location along last known route. Calculate travel times, fuel usage, and success rates for each destination." Red stared at the screen completely unsurprised when nothing happened.

"Yeah, I figured that might take a minute. Hey Lucky, you want to pig out?" there was still a weeks' worth of food that was going to be useless in six hours, so might as well enjoy it. He floated over to the hab and pulled out the last food bin and extracting the final meal, pot roast. The large hunk of meat was precooked and sealed in plastic, while it was heating up he dug around until he found the second luxury item he had been saving, a full bottle of ketchup. By this time Lucky had taken an interest in his actions since this usually meant some type of dinner time action was afoot and was doing his best to get in Red's way while he got everything ready at the table for dinner.

"Back off man! Don't worry, you are eating good tonight, no tube meat for you tonight my cranky friend, we are eating in style, the finest wines from California, fresh bread from Paris, caviar from wherever the fuck they make caviar." Red pulled the steaming pouch out of the microwave and opened it carefully. He pulled a chunk out of the middle that wasn't too hot and gave it to Lucky, who comically grabbed it both front paws while standing on his back paws taking enormous bits of meat. Red grabbed a large piece for himself, applied a generous dollop of ketchup to one corner, and took a bite. Good food is wasted on fat people, they eat so much as to become numb to the sensual nature of food, only the starving man can appreciate food. Gluttonous people know the pleasure of food through their brains, they are told it's delicious, they marvel at the subtle nuances of perfectly balanced flavors, and the surprise of the unexpected. The starving man experience food with his whole body, nutrients flow like water through dry riverbeds with primal satisfaction, beyond flavor or pleasure, another day of life, a weighted gift to be savored as more than a passing affectation. For the next few minutes, he and cat ate in silent satisfaction, fully invested in the meaning of the meal, even if they were eleven disciples short.

"You hang out here for a bit. I am going to go see what the Hatfields are up to." Red left Lucky and headed back into the shop to the control consol to see what the computer had come up with. The displayed looked like someone had taken four bowls of different colored spaghetti and dropped them on a map of nowhere. Obviously, the Trenchers organized and viewed navigational data differently than humans, or humans were just too stupid to understand it, the result was the same either way.

"Well fuck, that doesn't help. System; display current location of enemy ship." The mass of confusing lines and numbers disappeared and was replaced by a normal looking map of the solar system with one bright red line arcing towards his position. "System; time to intercept?" Two hours, the hillbillies had sped up. "Shit, that doesn't help either." Time was running out, but Red had been running out of time for some time now. Pulling up the nav data again there was a logic to it, he just didn't understand how the data went together. One of the multicolored lines was yellow and represented the flow of time, it got thinner and fatter as it interweaved through the other colors. The blue one was a little more straightforward, it seemed to track a course through the confusing map that had marked way points on it, they were labeled with non-sensical numbers and symbols, but this clearly represent a route of some type. The red line was defined by a series of quantum equations that seemed to be defining subatomic particles and the various

dimensions they slipped in and out of in their eternal battle to exist. The red and blue lines crossed each other constantly and each seem to follow the other as they twisted through the display. The last line was white and represented power output during the flight, of all of them this was the only one that truly frightened him, it was the only one he understood well enough to fear. At times, the white line expanded to encompass all the other lines, containing all of them inside an energy field that was equivalent to the output of a small sun.

“Okay, so if I am reading this right, when I activate the FTL it’s going to create a small sun around the ship, shift me and the cat down to another dimension normally reserved for quarks, compress and expand time as needed, and then fly me and an artificial sun through the quantum realm, safely home arriving sometime between the paleolithic era and the death of the sun. That sounds about right given the luck I have been having.” He leaned back and shouted towards the hab area. “Hey Lucky, I think I found a cool way for us to die!” The cat seemed unimpressed.

Undaunted he pressed on. “System; access drive control and bring up possible navigation routes.” The computer chewed on it for a minute and then displayed the routes it had calculated along with success probabilities, none of them had a success rate above seven percent. “System; create flight simulation for route nine, account for hull damage and missing mass. ” Nine didn’t have the highest probability, but it was the one most likely to end up in the Sol system, some of the others seemed to be taken the ship back to somewhere unknown and the last thing he needed was to pop back into real space above the Trencher home world or next to a military facility.

He tried desperately to not look at the time display counting down to the arrival of the enemy ship while the computer created simulation after simulation trying to find a set of variables that didn’t result in the ship exploding, so far all the simulations ended with the destruction of the ship. The display he wasn’t looking at showed the computer had less than ninety minutes to find the right set of flight commands.

No matter what happened next, he still needed to deal with the cat. He had decided that he wasn’t going to put Lucky back in the tank, the cat shared his fate at this point and would be just as dead in the tank or out of it, but Red didn’t need Lucky bouncing around during their escape and potentially causing problem or getting hurt. The solution was a carefully modified helmet from the second soft suit that he didn’t need, he had stuffed the inside with padding and mounted it to the cradle that held Big Al. the suit didn’t have much air left, but it was plenty to keep a cat alive during the next hour or so, after that, air would be the least of their problems. He gathered up Lucky and before the cat could figure out what he was happening, Red had him stuffed into the helmet and sealed in, the padding did nothing to soften the cries of betrayal coming from the old suit.

“Sorry buddy, but at least you will get to face death head on. Okay, that sounded better in my head, but trust me, this is better than dying unconscious in blissful ignorance, again, that sounded better in my head. Fuck it, suck it up butter cup, I need company for the ride to Valhalla and you’re it.” Lucky shut up.

“That was weird, either you are starting to understand me, or I have completely lost my mind.” Red regarded the cat through the clear visor for a second. “Well, since I just stopped and waited for a cat to respond to me, I guess I know the answer to that one, I really need to stop asking questions that don’t have any positive answers. Probably should stop talking to myself too.”

Testing a hunch, he regarded the computer again. “System; status of weapons.” He wasn’t surprised when a long list of items marked in flashing red icons appeared, the aliens had done a

thorough job of pulling all his teeth, or almost all. Down towards the bottom of the disabled list there was one system that still showed an active status, it was only twenty percent operational, but it was working. The Trencher designation for the system was gobblygook, but he was able to bring up a schematic of the device and if there was one universal constant in the universe it was that a missile always looked like a missile. He couldn't discern what type of warhead it held or what the full capabilities of the device were, but the specs said it was fast and agile, maybe fast and agile enough to slow the approaching craft, or at least distract it. The weapon was a stand-alone system that didn't rely on power from the ship, sensors, or anything else, all it had was a data connection to receive targeting and then it operated autonomously.

If Red had to sum up his life and point to one thing that caused him the most trouble, it would have to be impulsiveness, he just wasn't wired to think things through and predict the inevitable, which added a lot of extraneous pain and turmoil to his daily life. He probably should have thought about how the other ship would react to having missiles fired at them. He didn't.

"System; target approaching ship and fire weapon, full spread." He had to switch to an external feed to see where the missiles came from. A hatch opened on the stern near the drive cones right next to an area that had taken significant damage during the second battle and disgorged fifty small missiles. Most of them did nothing after being pushed from their tube, damaged to the point of being non-functional, some of them ignited their engines and started flying erratic circles in all directions, but three of them worked and accelerated towards their target with impressive velocity.

"Take that you bastards." He watched the missiles streak away on the consol screen towards the other ship only to see them blink out of existence fifteen minutes later when they were less than halfway to their target. The other ship accelerated again and fired a volley of projectiles which immediately accelerated and homed in on his ship. "Shit probably should have seen that coming. System: Time to impact." Twelve minutes. He put his hand on the helmet containing his only friend. "Well, this is it, hope I see you on the other side pal."

Red climbed into Big Al for what would undoubtedly be the last time and sealed himself inside. He took a moment to savor the full air pressure and abundant oxygen in Al's micro atmosphere, after weeks of breathing low air pressure and minimal oxygen it was gratifying to breath fully again, even if they were final breaths. The simulation had gotten the success probability up to about twenty percent on route nine, but the probability of reaching his destination coordinates accurately had dropped to five percent. Anywhere is better than here he thought. "System: Execute best scenario of route nine."

He knew immediately that something was wrong, normally coming into and out of FTL was an unnoticeable event only perceptible by the tiny shifts in the vibrations of the ship. This time his stomach almost came out through his mouth when the process started, the screen in front of him gave him a blow by blow of what was happening. Something in the core had started up, the energy readings were going crazy, and he could feel gravity shifting erratically as the power ramped up to a crescendo. The Trenchers had some technology that negated inertia and insulated the ship from the ravages of FTL flight, that system was outside the core and had been disabled by the battles the ship had endured. It occurred to him that it might not matter if the drive worked or not, without that system he and Lucky would likely be shredded by the uninhibited forces at play. As the power grew it felt like there was an elephant sitting on his chest, then his back, then his feet, then his chest again, just when he thought that he would be crushed by the gravitational shifting it abruptly stopped, replaced by an even odder sensation of being pulled in all directions at once, but less intensely.

For centuries human had known the connection between gravity and mass without understanding the actual principle at work, Red watched in amazement as the Trencher core allowed gravity to flow through it, but it wasn't just allowing gravity to escape out of the contained wormhole, something else was happening as well. They had figured out how to run the process in reverse as well, they could funnel gravity and concentrate it into mass, a lot of mass, a black hole worth of mass. His eyes widened as he realized that he was sitting at the center of a black hole that was growing larger by the second, that was starting to rip a hole in space for the ship to travel through. When the power level started to plateau, the core started modifying the powerful field around the ship, tuning the singularity to the quantum level, slowly bringing the ship down through a dimensional shift, removing it from the scornful gaze of the universe and hiding it in a lower dimension.

The mistake he made was thinking that the process was going well, and he might not die, naturally, that's when things went sideways. The missiles that he had stopped paying attention to had arrived. Unfortunately, the ship that they were supposed to strike wasn't entirely in the same universe as the missiles, it had partially slipped away somewhere unknown. The ordinance didn't care, it had one purpose and one alone, find its target and destroy it. When the first missile hit the edge of the energy field produced by the core, it went wide and detonated a thousand kilometers from the ship harmlessly, each missile that followed learned from their companions mistake and made adjustments to account for the intense energy field being generated, each one made it a little further before being destroyed by the shearing forces at work as they descended into the artificial gravity well. The last two made it all the way down and impacted the ship in what was left of the bow. Physics at the center of an artificial singularity are a strange thing, a confusing place for energy and explosions, when the warheads detonated, much of the force was shunted harmlessly out of the still forming dimension and back into the real universe, enough stayed behind to cause near catastrophic damage.

The golems had dismantled much of the bow, the missiles took care of the rest. The impacts blew a hundred meters of the bow off and turned the rest into a red-hot mass of molten slag, the physical damage was only a small part, the disruption to the growing energy field was much worse. Monstrous ripples started forming and bouncing off the edges of the artificial singularity creating waves of destruction whenever they reached close enough to the center of the field and the delicate ship suspended at the center. Red watched in horror as one of the reflected waves impacted the aft section and removed all but one of the drive cones, shearing the others off and sending them cartwheeling into the maelstrom, another scoped a long section of the hull away just forward of the core leaving a glowing scar in its wake. Being inside of Big Al felt like a giant hand had grabbed him and was violently shaking him around in the hardshell as the chaotic tidal forces flowed through the ship.

The turbulence subsided gradually as the core regained control over the fluctuating field and continued the process of bringing the FTL online. The approaching aliens redoubled their attack on the ship that had destroyed one of their own, powerful beams of energy streaked out from what seemed like an impossible distance and impacted on the bubble of exotic physics that was surrounding him. Once again, the field forming around his ship saved him, the enormous gravity well twisted the beams and bent them around the sphere of energy surrounding his ship. He could clearly see bright red lines twisting and curving around the perimeter of the field as the beams interacted with it.

Looking at the display that show the progress of the FTL, he could see that the white line that represented energy output had almost reached maximum, and the red one with all the strange

quantum qualities started to spin and twist, modifying and expanding the small rip in space time the core was creating. The ship started vibrating and jumping around in a way that couldn't be intentional as the core tried to pull the smoldering wreck into the growing hole in space. It almost fit. Red wasn't sure if the calculations were incorrect or if the aliens attack had disrupted the FTL process to the point that it wasn't able to create a large enough portal, it didn't matter, the result was the same. As the ship entered the rip the edges of the hull impacted the boundary and reacted with normal space turning the parts of the hull that weren't already melted slag into more molten slag, huge sections peeled away and disintegrated into their component elements as they were sheared off and cast back into normal space. The ship slipped in enough to for his last working external sensor to scrap against the boundary between the quantum and real world and blinked out, leaving him blind.

Once again Red found himself alive instead of dead, although the sounds coming from the ship told him that he might not be out of the woods yet. There was a disturbing vibration that, although didn't seem to be getting worst, wasn't getting any better either as he transited whatever region of space he had just entered. He was completely at the mercy of his own ignorance, he didn't know what the ship was doing, couldn't see outside, and during the fight and flight portion of the show, something had breached the hab letting all the air out, so he was now trapped in Big Al. A quick check showed that Lucky was still alive and even through the smeared visor, it was clear he was all sorts of pissed off, at least he was still alive to complain. His only data point was the display on the consol showing a confusing mass of intertwined lines that didn't make a lot of sense but seem to show that he was in FTL and going somewhere. The line that represented the flow of time didn't seem to be behaving, it was erratic and fluctuated wildly as it intertwined with the other three lines. He wasn't sure if it was building to a catastrophic failure or trying to prevent one, he would find out soon enough. Every time the other three lines got chaotic, the time line would expand and the others would smooth out a little until they became unstable again, which he took as a good sign. For all he knew he was going to arrive at the wrong place a thousand years from the right era.

After nine hours he really wished he had refilled the nutrient tube so he could eat something, but he hadn't expected hunger to be a problem after the aliens vaporized him, so he hadn't thought to do it. He had remembered to hook up the catheter which save him the disgusting issue of urine floating around in the suit while he waited for his air to run out. The screen on the workbench suddenly blinked out making him think that he had lost connection to the main computer and was now totally blind, but closer inspection showed something else. The screen wasn't off, it just wasn't showing the FTL status anymore, and the vibration had stopped. His voice crackled a little from emotion as he spoke.

"System; status of FTL?" The screen suddenly populated with enough blinking red boxes that he knew the FTL wasn't working anymore, he didn't know where he was, but he had broken the ship getting there and wasn't going any further. Redwood Aquino had become extremely good at not dying and he had one last ace in the hole that he could play. Pulling up Big Al's control menu he accessed the last of his drones that was still functional.

"Al; active Magellan protocol." From just under the cage holding Al in place one of the drones crawled out of the small receptacle it had been waiting in and started across the floor. Attached to its back was the last of his precious crabs, beat up, but still in the fight. The drone had been programed to search for a way out of the hab area and get onto the hull. Since the air had been evacuated there must be a hole somewhere and he was hoping it was big enough for the small drone to slip through. It wasn't, at least not yet. It took hours but eventually the drone was

able to expand the hole using the feeble cutting attachment attached to its nose and crawled out onto the hull of the ship, or what used to be the ship.

The images that displayed on the HUD were surreal, the exterior of the ship no longer looked like a ship, the graceful, streamlined shape was gone, the aft section was missing most of the drive cones and most of the hull plating exposing the interior to space. The bow was a twisted mass of metal that curled up at the front from crossing the FTL boundary in a semi molten state thanks the missiles that had made it through. All over the ship it looked as though the hull had been pulled off like a banana peel, there was almost no plating left on the ship, its shape was now defined by spars and deformed structural members that had previously been inside the hull making the ship look vaguely like a wireframe model of itself.

“Al; Star map protocol.” The computer started surveying the stars and celestial bodies around him trying to find his location. A few minute later when it was finished Red broke down crying, tears of joy, anguish, and confusion blurred his vision causing him to shake his head in the helmet to clear his eyes.

He was home, the sun and all the planets were exactly where they were supposed to be, all except one. Pluto wasn't where it was supposed to be, or rather he wasn't where he was supposed to be in relation to Pluto. It took him a minute to figure it out, but the computer had done exactly what he told it to do, it had brought him back to where he had started, only Pluto wasn't there anymore, it had continued its long orbit around the sun and was now millions of miles from where it had been when he left. Pluto's orbit around the sun lasted two hundred and forty eight years, and given the distance he was from it now, some time had passed since he left, thinking back to the fluctuations in the flow of time during FTL, he might have been away for a very long time indeed.

“Al; calculate local elapsed time from original departure.” It didn't take the computer long to deliver the news. One hundred and forty-three years. The core had slowed his subjective time down during the trip, probably to keep the ship from exploding, that's why he had seemingly been in FTL for hours instead of the weeks the outbound journey had taken. Hopefully there was still someone around to answer the phone. the cutting tool on the nose of the drone sitting on the hull was a laser, not overly powerful, but good enough to act as communications array and send a signal back to earth, it would take four and half hours to get there and it might take weeks or months before anyone on earth noticed it, but it was the best he had.

“Al; record message and send to earth on repeat as long as possible.” The drone had limited power, but the lights were still on in the hab, so the conduit powering those hadn't been ruptured so the drone could return to recharge as necessary. Red recorded his message and waited for the drone to start broadcasting before grabbing the helmet with Lucky in it and headed through the workshop and dropped down the access corridor that led to the air lock. The large cutting laser he had left attached to wall was still there and made short work of making a hole large enough for Al to fit through. Once outside the ship he thrust down towards the ships underbelly, hoping the small hanger was still there. The metal around where the hatch had been was distorted and slightly melted, but the hanger hadn't be destroyed. Working carefully as not the damage the precious contents of the space he used the laser to remove material until he could enter the hanger. Once inside the lights from Al's helmet illuminated the most beautiful thing Red had ever seen, the transit shuttle, still waiting patiently for its next passenger. During the second battle it had taken a hit from an energy beam and couldn't fly anymore, but the reactor was functional as well as the suspension tank and that was all he needed.

It was a tight fit to get Al into the ship but after a few minutes of contorting this way and that, he was able to seal the door and activate the environmental controls. The air was cold but tolerable as he slipped out of Al and released Lucky.

“Sorry buddy, aliens blew up our snacks, we are going to have to go to bed hungry tonight.” He spent a few minutes petting Lucky before sealing him in his suspension tank and climbing into his own and sealing the lid. He wondered yet again if he would ever come out of the tank, but the ship had enough power to keep him alive for hundreds of years if his body could endure that long, but he wasn’t as worried about it this time, he had become very hard to kill.

Streaking away from the ship at the speed of light his message hurtled toward Earth

“This is Redwood Aquino, space pirate. I claim this vessel as salvage under Agency contract law 1357.9 and request immediate pick up from this location. Make it snappy assholes, the cat is hungry.”