

Darkness on Harvey's World

J. R. Casey Bralla

“Don’t Die Trying”

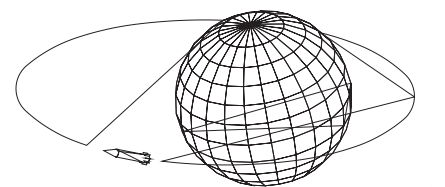
Harvey’s World seemed like a paradise, perfect for colonization. Its broad rolling grasslands were warmed by gentle breezes and blanketed with docile herbivores. But when the first small survey colony arrived and started sending bizarre reports of unexplained darkness, then abruptly stopped sending reports three days after landing, a rescue ship was rushed to help.

As the rescuers neared Harvey’s World and began to receive automated telemetry from the stricken ship, they learned that only four of the twenty-four crew members were still alive . . . barely. The survivors’ medical telemetry made no sense, but their final log entries made even less sense.

What happened to the survey colony? What was the darkness that enveloped the sunny green paradise? Can the rescue team save the remaining survivors without succumbing to whatever caused the disaster? Harvey’s World looked gorgeous and safe, an ideal colony planet. But something had destroyed the colony ship and crew within three days. The first rule of a space rescue is “Don’t Die Trying.”

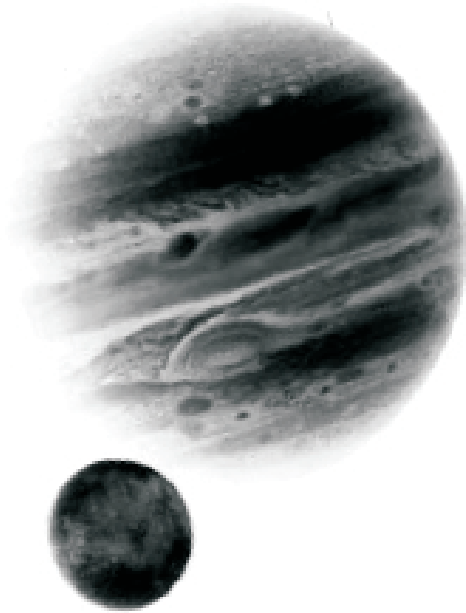
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Chapter One

Squawk

I hate rescue missions.

We were still four months out from Harvey's World when we picked up the first faint signals from the transponder on the Explorer's Lookout. I had been on watch, scanning the spectrometer on the EM bands while I transmitted a coded signal pulse and waited for the return squawk from the Lookout. Since we were tail-first, with full ion jets blasting away as they had been for five months, I was not really expecting to get much of anything, even if a Lookout was still functioning.

The ion jet is a marvelous device, but it does have this nasty habit of overwhelming and blanking out almost all electromagnetic radiation. They had always told me that the transponders were designed explicitly to cut through this static, but I had never really believed them until now. The signal was very faint, and it took about forty repetitions before I could confirm the Explorer's ID code, but there was no doubt about who the signal belonged to. Who else could be out here?

I hate rescue missions. I had never been on either a deep exploration, or a rescue. The only good thing you could say about rescues, besides the potential to save one of my fellow diasporamates, was that they were quick. Of course, "quick" is a relative term. We spend five months boosting at full jet at 0.6g's, then at the halfway point, we flip over tail-first, and decel at a slightly higher rate that peaks at 0.7g's near the end of the trip. They used to advise us to "Go Out, Young Man" and build a quick fortune. But how fast can you advance a career when each assignment lasts a minimum of twelve months, and perhaps as long as a decade? The only mechanism for rapid promotion is the unforgiving nature of deep space itself which thoughtfully kills off enough of your colleagues and superiors to open the ranks for advancement.

We had come within spitting distance of Harvey's World in only ten months. We weren't burdened by the accoutrements of a 5-year supply of survival rations and enough equipment and

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supplies to start a pre-colonial industrial survey colony. We carried reaction mass for the jets, a metric boatload of medical supplies, and enough repair parts to practically construct an entirely new Explorer-class survey ship. The two dozen crew members on the Explorer had made this same trip in twenty-two months, most of which was in the nauseating, bone and muscle wasting cushion of free-fall. Even their accel/decel was never more than a measly 0.4g's. It's no wonder they got into trouble; they were probably all as weak as kittens when they got to Harvey's World. Harvey's World is a little smaller than earth. It's really just a moon orbiting a banded gas giant, but the gravity is still 0.91g. Those poor dummies probably needed all the muscle they could muster. Heck, I knew I'd have trouble when we landed; 0.7g is not the sort of gravity field to make you into a muscle man.

After the computer had finally gotten around to confirming my identification of the Explorer's Lookout, I said aloud, "Mother." She responded in that horrible disembodied and passionless voice that I hate so much, "Working." Why can't they give these things at least some personality? They always talk in that steady, unhurried monotone that gets under my skin. "Record a message for the Captain when she wakes up," I said.

"Ready," said the computer.

"Record," I said. "Signal received 19:14:12 hours confirmed to be transponder of Explorer. Squawk codes match. Signal condition green. Whatever happened to them did not trigger a distress call. End message."

"Recorded and logged," replied the computer.

I went back to scanning the instruments. I pointed the telescope at Harvey's World again and took a look in the visible light band. At this distance, Harvey's would be a speck, overwhelmed by the Gas Giant, but our ion jet plume obscured my entire view so I couldn't even make out the Gas Giant. About the best I could do was check the photo spectrograph and try to verify the planet's constituent elemental analysis. The computer detected the presence of water, chlorophyll, nitrogen, oxygen, and a touch of methane on Harvey's World. "Not a bad place for a picnic" I thought.

Janet called on the intercom. "You got something, huh?"

"Can't sleep, Captain? Yeah. It's faint, but it's them. The Lookout is still functioning."

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“Well, that’s some good news. Have Mother get George up, and we’ll have a meeting at 23:00 hours.”

“Overtime again,” I grumbled, only half facetiously. “OK, I’ll get him up and hang around after you relieve me. In the meantime, I’ll try to get as much info as I can.”

Janet signed off, ostensibly to go back to sleep, but I suspected she would toss and turn for a few more hours until her shift began. She was supposed to have been asleep when I recorded for her, but obviously she wasn’t or she wouldn’t have called me back. I can’t say that I feel sorry for her; we’ve all been suffering a bit of insomnia lately. Rescue missions, especially those that rescue ships that simply stop sending data without any clue about the cause of the trouble, are a bitch.

I opened the presentation file on our mission. It had our initial orders, all the telemetry received from Explorer before she went silent, a few pertinent events for our mission such as departure and expected rendezvous dates. Now at last I had some real data to add, even though it wasn’t much.

I recorded the spectroscopic data. Water in abundance. Temperatures seemed to hover in the liquid water range. The O₂ level was too high to have been due to some static inorganic chemical process. Oxygen is too reactive to remain stable in its O₂ state without being constantly replenished by some biological activity. And the presence of chlorophyll obviously suggested that there was plant life. The trace methane was the correct amount to suggest the presence of animal life. This facet of biological chemistry always caused a titter in the Academy training classes. They tell me that the correct ratio of methane to oxygen in a planetary atmosphere is a wonderful tool to predict the presence of animal life on the planet. Imagine, the best way to detect animal life on a planet from a great distance is to identify intestinal gas in the atmosphere. It has an accuracy of something on the order of ninety-eight percent. I’m not a particularly religious man, but if this doesn’t prove the existence of God, I don’t know what does. It’s the best cosmic joke there could ever be. If it lives, it farts!

I was ready for the guys at 20:15, and spent the next two and half hours relaxing. Janet walked in at 22:30, a half hour early of course. She looked horrible. I don’t think she’s slept well in the last month. It’s funny, but I just never thought of her as “captain” material. She had guts, and was a heck of a scientist, but somehow I always thought she should have been doing some soft

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scientific cosmology or planetary ecology someplace. Rescuing lost ships just didn't seem her style. Yet, here she was, busting her can with the best of us (or, in my case, the worst of us). My other shipmate, George, was another one who didn't look the part. He had this muscle-bound soldier look. He was one-hundred percent "gung," with an awful lot of "ho" thrown in. Unless you saw him setting a broken leg, or analyzing a DNA sequence with his bare hands, or cooking up an excellent pseudo chicken stir-fry, you'd think he was some brainless army slug. I still can't believe that he keeps his hair so short. Heck, if the Captain didn't rag at me all the time, I probably wouldn't even shave.

"Hi Chief," George said with far too much enthusiasm and good cheer when he entered the control room at precisely 22:55. "Whatcha got?"

The Captain spoke up, "Let's do the whole thing, Chief, by the numbers. It'll help us keep it in focus."

"Ok," I grumbled. "The last six months notwithstanding, I'm sure we haven't been able to keep this mission sorted out in our heads."

Janet gave me a dirty look. I canceled my smart aleck pose, and handed them both a set of printed data sheets and began the briefing.

"Harvey's World, not named after its discoverer, Jonathan Lowell, but after the proselytizer Samuel Harvey who conned us into going there." (Janet gave me another nasty look.) "Orbital analysis and long range spectroscopy had suggested a seventy percent or greater probability of life supporting environmental conditions. A survey pre-colony ship, Explorer, departed forward observation post Deep Star on January 17, 2106. Standard survey ship: twenty-four man crew, 0.4g acceleration. Arrived at Harvey's World on June 2, 2107. One crew member, one of the botanists, had a flare up of a previously undiagnosed chronic infection with *streptococcus cardiosis*, and died of a heart attack en route. Initial orbital survey for two months revealed large water oceans covering ninety-five percent of the surface. Most planetary energy comes from gravitational heating due to the presence of the Gas Giant and several other satellites. The variable gravitation pull of the other satellites in orbit around the Gas Giant flexes Harvey's entire core as they pass by, and warms the planet considerably. This, combined with the unusually deep oceans which act as an excellent planetary heat transfer machine, leads to weather that is remarkably constant and mild. Even though

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Harvey's is rather far from its sun and the daylight is fairly weak, the days are sunny and warm, with night time just a tad cooler. The terrain, what little there is of it, consists of gentle, rolling hills on several small continents. Surface covered with vast grass lands. No large tree-like structures. Large herds of herbivores. In fact, these herds were so large, they could be seen with the naked eye from orbit. No fires or electromagnetic radiation detected. No sign of any non-natural structures of any kind.

“They made a few short sub-atmospheric descents and sampled the air. It confirmed previous data and showed the presence of spores, pollen, and bacteria, as expected. Cultures of these items indicated neither overt toxicity nor allergenic properties. They left the Lookout in orbit and made landfall on one of the largest islands, about fifteen kilometers from the seashore. Reports from the surface were initially routine. They confirmed the presence of large, docile herbivores. No carnivores were detected. A few crawling insects and some protozoa in the soil rounded out the flora and fauna. Their last report was filed early on the third day after landing when everything hit the fan. Their last reports were essentially incoherent, speaking of an unexpected darkness. No distress signals, or signals of any kind, have been received since that last incoherent report. Crew members are now presumed to be dead, probably due to an alien biological infection. We are to rescue any survivors, determine the circumstances and causes of death of those we cannot rescue, and make recommendations concerning future colonization missions.

“My readings so far have confirmed everything Explorer reported. The large oceans, evidence of plants and animals, and that's about it. The Lookout is functioning normally. I haven't been able to get any other data from it yet. Only the squawk code has been able to punch through the ion jet noise. I'm hoping that we'll get some real telemetry in about a week or two.” I paused. “Any questions?” I asked.

George said, “Captain, I wonder if we should shut down the jets and free fall for a couple of hours so the Chief can get his telemetry. It seems to me that the more we know earlier, the better.”

“I'd like to also George,” I said, “but we're already pushing the ballistic safety limits. Losing even a few hours of 0.7g would make our initial orbit too elliptical. I'd rather hold off and try to tease what signal I can out of the static before we starting jumping around on the jets.”

“I agree with the Chief,” Janet said. “We'll stick to our flight plan. We'll do this one slow

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and easy and by the book.”

We all looked around at each other. Finally Janet said, “Ok. Thanks, Chief. Good report. We’ll meet again when you have something more.” We all looked into our hands, not making eye contact. Finally, George got up and poured himself a cup of coffee. Janet watched him do it, then got up and poured herself one too.

“No wonder you never sleep, Captain,” I said. She shrugged and smiled. George said, “Well, I think I’ll double check the anti-biologicals we have in the stores. I have this sneaky suspicion I’m going to need them in a couple of weeks.” He left by the aft hatch, while Janet sat at the table which variously served as a conference table, dinner table, cocktail bar, operating theater, and psychiatrist’s couch.

“So, what do you think?” I asked. She looked at me kind of wistfully. “I think we’ve got a heck of a tough job ahead of us.”

“I know, but what do you think got them?”

“Well,” she said taking a sip. “It’s got to be one of a couple of things. Either there was an undetected infectious agent, or some type of hostile alien presence, or . . . “ she paused and looked into her cup. “Or,” she went on, “they went mad after drinking this coffee too long and killed each other.”

“I vote for the coffee,” I said solemnly. We both sat there for a while. The communications panel bleeped a few times as Mother once again, with infinite wisdom, determined that the transponder signal we were receiving belonged to Explorer.

“You’ve never been on a rescue mission before, have you Captain?”

“No,” she said with a sigh. “This is my first. Hopefully, this will be my last. Most of my time has been spent doing near-body surveys for elemental analysis. I did a couple of biological assays on New Earth during the first couple of years after colonization. Then I spent about six months shuttling miners, merchants, explorers, and investment bankers around the known universe. But this is my first rescue mission.”

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“Mine too,” I said. “I was kind of hoping to get a berth on one of the actual survey missions, so I guess this is almost as good.” I laughed. Janet knew my story. I was a survivor. I had lost my ships and most of my shipmates in two fairly well known disasters. One of those had us drifting in orbit around a large asteroid for four months. We didn’t resort to cannibalism, although the thought had certainly crossed my mind more than once. I like to blame my chronic “Space Fairer’s Amnesia” on the poly-metallic plate that they used to rebuild the front of my skull. This disease I suffer from can be a real boon to one’s sense of well being. I refuse to remember how I had to choose between taking this mission (for “therapeutic reasons” they suggested), or going back home to Baikonur. The real joke is that only the psychologist could call Earth “home.” I’ve been gone so long I’ve lost half of my color vision. Heck, I can’t see the color green anymore unless it’s produced by a panel display. I even dress in spaceship grey these days. Maybe I needed this mission though. I know what it’s like to be stranded and near death. I can’t bear to think of any of my colleagues in that condition.

Janet asked, “When do you think you’ll get some real telemetry from the Lookout?”

“I don’t know. I’ll start to get a little something in a day or so, but it won’t be enough to learn anything. My guess is, it’ll take about four weeks before we get any really good stuff . . . if there is any data to be had.”

“Oh, there will be data all right,” Janet said. “I’m sure of that. The real question is whether that data will tell us what happened. I just don’t understand how we can lose all twenty-four people within twenty-four hours.”

“Twenty-three people,” I corrected. “Remember, we lost one en route.”

“Oh well,” Janet replied sarcastically. “That makes all the difference. You can lose twenty-three people on a stroll through the park.”

With that, she got up, leaving her cup half full. “I’m going to check on George. You can finally get off that overtime that bothers you so much.”

“Thanks,” I said. “But actually, I’d just as soon build up the comp-time.”

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Janet ignored my remark, and said aloud to the computer, "Mother, I take the con. Follow me aft."

"Change in watch acknowledged and logged," the computer replied. God, that voice was horrible!

Chapter Two

Survivors

Over the next week, I pointed our high-gain antennae at Harvey's World. The ion jet continued to obliterate almost every bit of the signal from the Lookout. However, by repeatedly sending the same interrogation sequence to the Lookout, and thereby receiving the same data in reply, I was able to piece together the data, literally bit by bit. By the end of the week, I had about sixty percent of the static information that the Lookout had to offer. I was able to get a still image in the visible-light band from the Lookout's camera, and the current condition of all the medical telemetry units and all the ship's systems. I was not able to get any of the archived historical records, or the real-time medical telemetry.

The Lookout, as you probably know, had two functions. First, it was an orbiting observation post for the colonists. It gave them weather information, and provided them a bird's eye view of their surroundings. Nobody, or no thing, could sneak up on them without the Lookout being wise, at least while it was passing overhead. It could function in this role largely autonomously, or it could be directed to scan for specific items, or watch specific areas on the surface. This particular Lookout was placed in a polar orbit instead of geosynchronous so that it could monitor the whole globe. The only downside of this strategy however, was that it was only within line of sight of the colonists about $\frac{2}{3}$ the time. My greatest fear was that some humongous multi-tentacled monster had hauled itself out of the sea, marched the fifteen kilometers to the Explorer, ate the whole ship, then crawled back in less than twenty-two minutes. One orbit the Explorer would be there, and the next it would be gone.

Secondly, the Lookout functioned as a communications link and data archive for the Explorer. One of the prime considerations of its design was to allow it to function just as it was now, as an information repository for stricken or lost ships to guide would-be rescuers. As such, virtually every bit of information that the Explorer's Mother would have held was also held on the Lookout--and therefore accessible to me.

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The first data I requested were the basics of ship's life. I was interested in the ship's status reports, its fusion power reactor's condition, the local weather . . . and the medical telemetry from the crew. The ship's status came first: all green. There was a minor imbalance in the hydrogen injectors, but otherwise the fusion core was humming along just fine. Actually, I've been a little concerned about our ship's hydrogen injectors. They had built up some induced magnetization, and this had forced them slightly out of balance too. After reading the data from Explorer, I realized we could use Explorer to get home if we had to.

The weather on Harvey's World was a balmy twenty-four degrees C. Humidity was a very pleasant, if somewhat humid, seventy-eight percent. Winds were out of the north at four KPH. Barometric pressure was holding steady at 97.66 KPa. There were lightly scattered high clouds under pale sunny skies. Even though Harvey's only got about half the sunlight that earth did since it was so far away from its sun, the beautiful weather made it a really nice place for a picnic!

The medical data came next, and it wasn't pretty. Sixteen of the readouts were redlined: death of the bearer. The bodies (or rather, the telemetry implants) were scattered in five clumps, between two-hundred and five-hundred meters from the ship, except for one which was inside the ship itself. Without a better data link to the Lookout, I couldn't get any history that would indicate when death occurred, or any of the gory details. No signals were being received from four of the modules. That could be caused by anything from the total incineration of the unlucky implant body, to mechanical failure of the unit. (One of the modules had probably been turned off when the botanist died, which accounted for one of the missing signals.) Four of the telemetry implants showed very strange data. It appeared that four crew members were still alive, but with signals so bizarre, it was impossible to say whether the telemetry units were simply malfunctioning, or the wearer had suffered some horrible injury.

"Mother," I said aloud. "Working," the computer responded. "Patch me through to the Captain and Mister Wendt," I ordered.

"Yeah Chief," came a couple of voices, just slightly out of synch. The thought hit me, here we were together with not a darn thing to do for months and we would have made a fine barbershop trio. "The weather's fine, but don't break out the picnic baskets. Picnics are rough on Harvey's World. We've got four possible survivors," I said.

Chapter Three

Data

Over the next week, I was able to get progressively more and more data from the Lookout. Although what I really wanted, the medical telemetry histories of all the crew members, was unavailable, I was able to get quite a bit of other information. We had all eagerly awaited the bird's eye view of the Explorer's landing site, as photographed by the Lookout during one of its orbital passes. Unfortunately, as we should have expected, the picture, although dramatic to us, revealed almost nothing. The ship appeared to be intact; apparently, there was no large tentacled sea creature after all. Nor was there a massive explosion which would leave only a crater where the Explorer had rested. Whatever happened to the ship and its crew was not a massive physical trauma. We continued to get the four faint life signals, but the data were still so bizarre it still was not decipherable.

On one orbital pass of the Lookout, I had it train its high-resolution optical camera at the location where five of the dead crew members (or at least their medical telemetry units) were located. It was a perfect photo shoot. The sun was directly overhead, minimizing shadows. The weather of Harvey's World cooperated marvelously as it always does, and I received crystal clear images which resolved items on the ground as small as twenty-five millimeters. "What do you make of this?" I asked George when he came into the main cabin to see how I was doing.

"This is DOA site Number One?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "It was taken about three hours ago. I had to download it from the Lookout about a dozen times, then let Mother fill in the gaps and enhance the resolution. The process may have corrupted a few of the pixels, but considering what I had to go through to get it, this is a pretty darn good photo."

The photo showed a cluster of the large black herbivores lying in a loose arrangement around

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an off-white patch of vegetation. "According to the Lookout, the remains of five of our comrades are lying within a meter of the center of those herbivores."

"How mobile are those herbivores?" The Captain asked, just as she stuck her head into the cabin.

"Don't know, Captain," I said. "My guess is they're as mobile as terrestrial cows. They're about the same size as cows. In this environment, with abundant grasslands, they don't have to move fast. No carnivores were noted in any of the Explorer's reports. Herbivores typically only move fast when they're running from a carnivore's dinner table."

"They look like they're napping after a good meal," quipped George. George wasn't the type to make jokes. I think he was probably serious.

"What about the survivors? How do they look?" Janet asked.

"Sorry," I admitted. "It was simpler to direct the Lookout to scan here. The coordinates just happened to be right on nice, whole number radians. It would have taken another couple of hours to retransmit the longer location coordinates of the survivors. I can still get them in another hour or so."

"Can you get another shot of this same spot in twenty-four hours?" asked Janet. "And in the meantime, can you start downloading the survivors' coordinates to the Lookout?"

"You don't want much, do you?" I snickered. The trouble with making these gadgets work is that nobody understands all the agony you go through to make it look easy.

"I'd like to see what changes a full day makes," Janet explained.

"In that case," I replied, "I'll wait only 21 hours, 42 minutes, and 15 seconds. Days are shorter on Harvey's World."

"But I also want to see our people as soon as possible," she added.

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“The difficult we do right away,” I said with a slight sigh. “The impossible takes just a little longer. I’ll let you know when I’ve got ‘em.”

What I had told the Captain was only partly BS. It really was tougher to instruct the Lookout to spy on the survivors. But, I guess I was afraid of what I might find. We were still two months away. What if they were in imminent mortal danger? Nineteen people had died on that planet. The four who remained could be dying at any moment. I could not bear to see them die before my eyes. I had seen enough men die, and I was not eager to repeat the thrill. At least here, I knew that I’d have no horrible desire (too horrible even to admit to that psychiatrist who talked me into coming here) that I wanted someone to die because I was hungry. Thank God for Space Fairer’s Amnesia. There are some things I don’t want to remember.

But I’m a professional. I came here halfway beyond the explored galaxy to save my fellow man. I could not save them if I could not understand how they died. So I did what the Captain asked. It only took forty-five minutes to instruct the Lookout where to look. It required 378 repetitions of the command before the Lookout got it through the ion jet static, then another forty acknowledgments from the Lookout before I realized it had gotten it. The picture was worth the effort, was not worth the worry, and answered virtually no questions.

The image of Survivor site Number One was just as clear as DOA site Number One. Three of the four survivors were visible. They lay immobile, haphazardly in a group. All around them a small herd of the cows was lying down with them. One of the survivors was naked, another was in a fully armored environmental suit. The other was in normal space fatigues. Nearby was one of those strange off-white clumps of vegetation. The cows seemed to like them. I guess they made comfortable beds.

I reprogrammed the Lookout. It would monitor this spot as continuously as possible. At night it would scan in infrared. I canceled Janet’s order to look at DOA Number One the next day. I wanted to know what happened to these poor guys. I wanted them out of there. I wanted them home. I was going to get them home somehow.

We all watched that scene for five days. If Janet remembered her order to review DOA Number One the second day, she never mentioned it. We all watched Survivor Number One, or as we called it, “SN1.” The picture did not change for five days. Our survivors never moved. The

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cows never moved. The medical telemetry never changed. The medical telemetry still didn't make any sense. I think it was driving us all mad. It bugged the heck out of me. Poor Janet slept even less than before. Even George started to act a little wacko. He lost some of that nauseating can-do good cheer that usually dripped out the large pores all over his well-toned body. He never got rude, but there was at least one time when he was not overtly polite to me. I knew that this whole thing was tearing him up inside.

Finally, Janet gave the order. "Let's look at something else," she said. "We've got a whole planet to figure out. Lets make sense of it." Now I know why they made her captain. She's the only one of us who had half a pico-gram of intelligence.

George snapped out of it pretty well, too. He suggested that we survey the cows. (We had started calling them cows without even realizing it.) We had another meeting around our psychiatrist couch in the main control room. "Let's survey those things," he suggested. "Let's do a census, record their movements and create some statistics. How often do they eat? How often do they sleep? Do they have sex, or do they reproduce by mitosis? Do they ever swim in the ocean? If these blasted things are eating our people, we've got to understand them. It's a sure bet the Explorer didn't understand them."

"I agree with you, George," the Captain said. "But remember, we don't know that these things hurt the crew. Why did one crew member die in the ship? Why were the SN1 victims dressed so differently from each other? Don't jump to conclusions."

"Affirmative," George replied. "You're the scientist, Captain, I'm just a wayward biologist who's not too bright but can lift heavy things. Maybe the cows only eat them when they're dead. I don't know, but we've got to find out."

"I know, I know. Just keep your mind open, that's all."

I didn't say much. I'm not smart enough to be Captain, and I'm not some buzz-cut muscle man with a fancy degree in biological science. I push buttons for a living, and I had some more to push now. We were getting closer to Harvey's World, so it was easier to cut through the ion jet static. I programmed the Lookout to identify, then count the cows. I wasn't able to track each individual cow, but I could take a series of snapshots at five minute intervals, then have the Lookout

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plot the location of each cow on a spherical coordinate grid. Later, Mother could calculate the statistics about where the cows like to congregate. Presumably, the places they went would vary by the hour of the day, and then also vary over the course of weeks and months. Within several days, I expected to get some good data trends.

About a week later, we had a general conference. “I think we can dispense with following the full protocol for these meetings,” Janet said nodding to me. Finally, we could start a meeting somewhere other than the absolute beginning. “Chief, would you get us started with our current status?” she asked. I handed out the printouts from the mission file. It had grown thick. I had been busy setting up the data recording, and helping Janet and George get the information they wanted. First, I opened with the technical details.

“We’re two weeks from super-orbital injection around the Gas Giant,” I started. “Our current decel is 0.703g’s. We’ll increase this slightly just before we make entry. I plan to bring us just into the thin outer atmosphere at both sides of our elliptical perihelion around the Giant. It will slow us, and help to mitigate any slight errors in our trajectory which may have gone undetected until now. Harvey’s World is this side of the Giant, of course, so we’ll complete almost one full orbit around the Giant before falling into Harvey’s gravity well. It’ll take us another day or two to maneuver into geosynchronous position above the Explorer. I think that within eighteen to nineteen days we’ll be able to shut down the ion drive and finally open our eyes and ears.

“The electrical noise from the ion jet is not as serious now as it had been because we’re closer to the Lookout and don’t have to boost the gain much. However, I still can’t get real-time telemetry (we’re on about a thirty-five minute delay now), so by general agreement . . .” (George and I nodded to each other.) “I have continued to download near-current data, rather than use the limited bandwidth to get the historical medical data that we’d really prefer to have.”

“Very good, Chief,” Janet said. “Mister Wendt?”

George cleared his throat a couple of times. It amazed me how a guy who radiated such physical power could get so tongue-tied talking to this group that he had come to know so well. It was interesting because George only had this problem when “presenting” to us in these meetings; he was fine in normal conversation. Janet had told me once that George had almost flunked out of the Academy during his last semester since he found it almost impossible to make the formal oral

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presentation of his graduation thesis.

Finally, George got all his sniffing and twitching done, and started with his presentation. “The medical data is like nothing I’ve ever seen,” he began. “As you know, we have sixteen redlines, four missing in actions, and four active bio signatures. The data has been too spotty to accurately correlate which transponder belongs to which crew member. As the Chief said, I’ve been more interested in continually monitoring our survivors and figuring out what the others died from than in figuring out who they are.

“But let me first discuss what we know about the non-survivors. The redlines’ telemetry units are working properly. All of the internal fault checking signatures show green, and all the data are consistent with mortality. All but one of the units gives readings that are consistent with units that have been removed from their occupant. (The one exception is the redline in the Explorer.) The removal of the telemetry units could have been deliberate, which would allow for the unlikely possibility that the redlines are actually alive. More likely, I think, is that their owners have either been consumed by the local flora and fauna, or have been exposed to the balmy atmosphere of Harvey’s World and rotted away. With the previously stated exception of the crew member in the Explorer cabin, all the data being transmitted are consistent with telemetry units laying either directly on, or slightly below the surface. Temperature is about where I expect the surface of Harvey’s to be. The salinity is low, about the same as typical soil. EEG is very low frequency and very atypical of any biological activity, and is probably due to some iron in the soil causing minor eddy currents. I read no pulse, although I am picking up some minor vibrations which I believe to be footsteps of our bovine friends walking near the units. In short, unless we get into orbit and happen to spot a fully equipped surgical hospital capable of removing a cylindrical abdominal implant that is six cm long and one cm in diameter, I think we can conclude that we have in fact lost sixteen of our colleagues.”

“What about the body in the Explorer?” Janet asked.

“The data is a little more definite on that one,” George replied. “I’m showing just the slightest signs of cytoplasmic activity, probably caused by the late stages of bacterial decomposition. All the other data are textbook perfect for the death of its owner, followed by decomposition. I would not want to take a whiff in the Explorer until we’ve had a chance to let it air out a bit.

“The Missing in Action data, of course, is indeterminate. One of them is easily explained,

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as the Chief mentioned a couple of weeks ago. We had one crew member die en-route, and the normal procedure is to deactivate the telemetry unit. The other three are probably the result of death of the bearer. It is possible for these things to fail spontaneously. I've read of three occurrences of this happening over the last decade or so, but it is extremely rare. More likely, I'm afraid, is that they were damaged when the MIAs were consumed by the local flora and fauna. These things will easily survive the gastrointestinal tract of your average terrestrial cow. However, if you postulate severe mechanical stress induced by bone crushing jaws, added to extreme acid attack by digestive juices, then additional mechanical stress by being walked on by herds of these cows, it is conceivable that they stop working. We can hope for a miracle, but it will take one to find one of the MIAs alive."

"What about if they were far away, like deep underwater," I asked. "Would that account for the missing signals?"

"It's possible," George said. "It is a deep ocean, and the water is mildly saline which adds enough ionic effect to block the EM radiation they transmit with. But the telemetry unit would have to be awfully deep, on the order of seven-hundred or eight-hundred meters beneath the surface. If our friends are that deep, they're gone."

George paused again. I knew he was ready to discuss our survivors now, and this triggered the whole coughing and presentation anxiety reflexes he had just gone through a few seconds ago. Eventually, he finished enough to say "And now for the important stuff."

"The information from the survivors is strange, to say the least. I've studied this stuff for almost twelve years, and I've never run across any set of readings like these before. I double checked with Mother, and she's got nothing in her records either. We've got a very unusual set of bio readings here.

"We have four survivors, and can visually identify three of them from the Lookout images. I have been able to tentatively identify them as Greer, Jones, and Sarco. Greer was in the engineering section, Jones was an astrophysicist who also doubled as an archeologist. Sarco was on the 'unattached' list. All four of them are showing remarkably similar readouts, so I've therefore discounted the possibility of a system failure yielding erroneous data. If there is an error, it's effecting only the four survivors. This is what I've gotten so far."

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Once again, George had to work up through his sniffles, coughs and general delays. I wondered if stammering ran in George's family. I never thought about it before, but there could be all types of manifestation to speech hesitation problems. Stammering could be one form, and this annoying snuffle reflex of George's could be another. I wonder if he had the same problem when he sang. I've read that most stammerers can sing just fine, or act in stage plays without any hint of trouble. I've often heard George humming to himself, in that jollier-than-thou attitude of his, but I wonder if he ever was in the Glee Club or something. I'll have to ask Mother when I get a chance. She keeps up with all that kind of worthless trivia.

Finally, George worked through his repertoire, and started to speak again. "First, lets start with the basics," he said. "All four are showing greatly reduced body temperatures; they show severe hypothermia, almost to the point of being exothermic. Their breathing and heart rates are so faint as to be almost undetectable. Endorphin levels are high in the cerebral cortex, despite the presence of elevated levels of cortical steroids, or as you probably think of them, stress hormones."

I interrupted. "So you're saying that they're out cold . . . literally."

"No. That's not what I'm saying. They should be out cold, but EEG data indicates a high level of cerebral activity. I'm also reading acetylcholine levels consistent with intense mental activity, like somebody gets when they undertake a particularly intense mental exercise. The good news, if there is any, is that they clearly are in no pain."

"How do you know that George?" the Captain asked

"The endorphins. You know, the brain's natural opiate. They're swimming in it. They're probably having a ball."

"How long can they live like this?" I asked.

"I don't know. Ordinarily, I'd say they wouldn't last a week or more. Even with their reduced metabolism, they still have to eat, or at least drink. I also don't yet know how long they've been like this. Judging from the photos, it's only been a little while. The bottom line is, though, I think we've got a week, maybe two before their chances look pretty poor."

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There wasn't much to say at this point. As I had reported, we were still at least three weeks from a good orbit, then standard protocol called for at least three weeks for orbital surveys. The one cardinal rule of space rescue is "Don't Die Trying." The Captain, of course, has to make this type of decision. She has the authority to override protocol and land immediately. But what would she do? I think I know our Captain; I've lived with her for almost a year.

The Captain started to speak. "Well," she said. "This looks like a good segue into my report. Lets talk about cows."

She pulled out a few sheets of paper, and handed one to George and one to me. "This report," she said, "is a compendium of the movements the cows have made over the last two weeks. You know, if I didn't know better, I'd say our Chief here has been playing tricks on us with this data. We've all seen how the cows at Survivor Number One don't move much. Well, they don't move a whole heck of a lot anywhere else, either. Each cow appears to graze on the local vegetation for 16.2 hours per day, mean. The balance of the time, they lay down and sleep. They move an average of thirty-two meters in that time, getting no farther than twelve meters from their starting point in any one day. These are the most stay-at-home critters I've ever seen."

"What about Bessie, and our other cows at Survivor Number One?" I asked. Bessie was the cow who was right next to Greer.

"We've all noticed how Bessie never moves much. Actually, she does, but then so does Greer. She twitches a leg here, or rolls her head there, but never gets up and rolls over or anything. All over the grass lands, every kilometer or two, there are these off-white clumps of vegetation. All the cows near these clumps are practically immobile, like Bessie. It's my theory that a significant percentage of the cows go into some type of hibernation, perhaps after eating a big carnivorous meal, and find this vegetation particularly comfortable as a bed."

"Wait a minute," George piped in. "Did you say that Greer moves?"

"Yes. Just like Bessie, all our SN1 victims move, but just a little. As you can see from this photo taken this morning, Greer is laying on his side with his left leg under his right leg. But in this photo taken three days ago . . ." She shuffled the papers she held in her hands and then handed one to George. "Greer's left leg is almost completely straight."

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“He’s asleep,” I said quietly as George and I studied the pictures.

“That’s what it looks like from the photos, Chief,” Janet said.

“We gotta get them out of there,” said George. Interestingly, his voice was lower, meaner, and more determined than I’ve ever heard him . . . and he never sniffled once when he said it.

“I’ve got to get back to work,” I blurted out. “The ion drive needs a few adjustments before our orbital injection.” Before the Captain could even give me permission to leave, I quickly headed aft to check on the controls for the ion drive. Actually, even though the ion drive needed some work, I just had to get out of that room. This was not the first time I had watched guys waste away while unconscious. There were two of us in that old fuel tank when we got stranded around the asteroid for so long. Thank God for this plate in my head and my Space Fairer’s Amnesia, or I’d still see the horrible image of his dying body, which slowly twitched every now and then. He died before my eyes. I was cold, in pain, and hungry then. I don’t want to think those thoughts again. I don’t want to see any photos of guys lying helplessly while Life is slowly taken away, with me just a short distance away and unable to do anything about it. I had to push some buttons; it was the only therapy that ever seemed to work for me. As therapies went, it didn’t work very well, but it was all that I had, and I wasn’t about to give up on it now.

Chapter Four

Orbit

We made our super-orbital injection around the Gas Giant just as I had planned it. The banded atmospheric clouds of the Giant exerted just the right amount of dynamic braking to our ship, so getting into Harvey's gravity well was like dropping a marble into a funnel. I've always had a partial attraction to gas giants. If you've ever seen one up close, you know they're fascinating to watch. The fluids of the atmosphere aren't like the clear skies and clouds of earth, or any of the other inhabited planets you may be familiar with. One band of clouds will scream around the planet in one direction, while the next band moves along just as fast in the opposite direction. The boundaries of these bands, as you might expect, are in constant, violent turmoil. They're fascinating to watch. There's a raw power in them, usually pushed along by the planet's immense internal heat engine, that makes our space craft seem pretty puny and helpless in comparison.

This time around the planet, I didn't have much time to gaze out the window, however. I had to be sure the density and viscosity of the upper atmosphere were close to what I had calculated. If the air was too thin, we would not brake enough and we'd go sailing out past Harvey's world. We could always fire up the ion jets and correct almost any navigation problem, but it would chew up our fuel safety margin, and more importantly to me, add another couple of weeks before we'd get into orbit at Harvey's. More serious would have been if the atmosphere was thicker than I had calculated. Even a minor error here would have slowed us too much and forced us to spiral into the Gas Giant's gravity well. Once again, I probably could have fired the ion jets and brought us up, at the cost of time and safety fuel. If I had made a major error underestimating the density of the Giant's atmosphere, the consequences would have been much more dire. It would have increased the total friction on our hull and completely burned away the thin ablative coating that protects us. We would have died a fiery, unpleasant death.

We swung around the Gas Giant, never actually going into a true orbit. First we skimmed the outer atmosphere during our initial pass. Then we sped on by, arcing high into aphelion far

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beyond the Gas Giant on the opposite side from Harvey's World. The Giant had us firmly in its grasp however, because we slowed to almost a dead stop on its far side, then accelerated again as we fell back around the other side of the Giant forty-two hours later. Our second pass across the Gas Giant also brought us into the outer atmosphere and further shed our kinetic energy, slowing us to a relative crawl.

As it turned out, my orbital calculations were pretty darn good. I had predicted that we would lose 78% of our ablative coating, and the final number came in at about 72%. Our orbital path was almost dead on, so I guess the real problem was that the heat coating on our ship was stronger than the manual said it was. They build these ships pretty tough.

This maneuver had the effect of slowing our velocity, turning us around 180 degrees, and pointing us to Harvey's World, where we simply fell into its gravity well. We got into orbit around Harvey's World with almost no problem then, and it wasn't long before I had us in a geosynchronous orbit over Explorer and completely shut down the ion drive. Finally, we had pure heavenly electrical silence. Janet sent the normal "we got there" message home. They'd get it in a few weeks at Deep Star. I tacked the ship's logs onto the message, including all the data we'd gotten from the Lookout. I think Mother included some other stuff that I was not able to decode. I quizzed Mother about this. She claimed ignorance of the message, but I know she appended a couple of terabytes of data to the end of our transmission. I never trusted Mother. To me, she's a cross between a psychiatrist, a cop, and a fundamentalist Baptist minister. My guess is that she included a full psychological assessment of us for the brain doctors back home to analyze. If I were the bosses back home, that's what I would have done. I'm sure that they are at least as sneaky and devious as I am, and maybe a tad more so.

With the ion drive down, I got full control over the Lookout. We have a lookout too, but since the Explorer's was still fine, I left ours in its pod. Heck, we might need it later for something and I didn't want to abandon it prematurely on Harvey's World.

George wasted no time establishing a good medical link with Explorer. We didn't see his smiling overbuilt physique for twenty-four hours while he absorbed, if not digested, every single binary digit of medical information the Explorer and the transponders had to offer. Janet spent most of her time watching and reading the logs, although there wasn't much to read since they had only been on the surface a short time.

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I divided my time evenly. Fifty percent of my time was spent shutting down our ship after the year in space. I had to be sure that it would start up again. Like I said, the ion drive is a marvelous thing, but it hates to stop and start. Build it, fill it with water to use as a source of alpha particles, turn it on, and it purrs like a kitten. Turn it off, and all heck can break loose. It can be more cantankerous to start back up than a seventy-five year old whore. Another fifty percent of my time was spent analyzing the Explorer itself. I had to understand how it ran, and see if the ship was still space worthy. I didn't think we'd need it, but I'd hate to be stranded on Harvey's World with two dead ships. I've always been a "belt and suspenders" kind of guy. Having only two space-worthy ships at my disposal strikes me as being about half of the prudent number. Heck, even Columbus used three ships on his exploration. Of course, Columbus had better funding than we did. I guess sleeping with the boss's wife has its advantages.

Another fifty percent of my time was spent making sure George and Janet got all the stuff they needed. Neither of them was fully adept at extracting data from the Explorer's Mother, so I frequently had to bludgeon the dead ship's computer into coughing up the needed info. Yet another fifty percent of my time was spent listening in on the logs that Janet was reading, and eavesdropping on George's telemetry results. I had to be sure they got everything they needed from the Explorer, and that the data wasn't garbled in any way.

The final fifty percent of my time was spent watching Survivor Number One. Our guys were still there. Somehow, they were still alive. I was not about to lose them now.

Oh, I guess I also may have slept a minute or two, but I'm not really sure.

Janet called on the intercom, "George. Chief. We'll have a general status review at oh-four-hundred. Be ready."

At 4:00 A.M. we were all sitting at the conference table. As per protocol, I started. "We are in a geosynchronous orbit around Harvey's World, directly over Explorer," I announced as if nobody knew it. "We have successfully made contact with Explorer and the Lookout. All requested data from the Explorer have been uploaded to Mother. Our ion drive is shut down and safely sleeping. I need to open the reactor chamber sometime next week and check for warpage of the damper plates, but anticipate no problems and don't see any reason why we won't be able to blast out of here whenever we want. Explorer's mechanical systems are all green. Previously noted

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imbalance of the hydrogen injectors has been confirmed, but still presents no problem. Except for the smell," I glanced at George, "Explorer could take us home if we needed it."

I paused, looking at some of the papers I had on the table before me. "I have detected no mechanical problems which put our mission at risk. I've started a gigabyte data stream toward home with all of our pertinent findings. At this distance, that's about the highest data rate we can make, so no real-time video data is being sent. Also Mother, bless her soul, is adding enough info to keep our keepers apprized of our general emotional deviancy." Janet threw me another dirty look.

"I've scouted landing sites," I continued. "We can set our ship down any time, and any where we like. Since all of Harvey's World is so darn nice, we can take our pick of landing sites. If and when we do go down, we have two optimum locations to choose from, depending on what you decide, Captain. We can land practically on top of Explorer if we want. The land is level and smooth for at least a kilometer around Explorer. The best closest point would put us three-hundred meters from the Explorer's main hatch. Alternately, we could land on another smooth patch of ground three kilometers away, just on the other side of a gentle hill. We'd be out of sight of Explorer, and could land and walk up to her probably undetected. Explorer's Lookout is working fine, so I recommend not deploying our Lookout."

I paused, and looked at Janet, expecting her to start her report. Instead, she figuratively passed the baton to George with a commander's glance. Whatever it was she had heard on the logs, she didn't want to talk about it yet. Based on what I heard while I listened in to make sure her connection was working, this is not surprising. George, who had not expected to have his turn yet, snapped to a sudden attention. Then he had to go through an even bigger sniffle regimen than normal. A half hour later, he finally began.

"We've got full biological telemetry, and full histories for all the crew members," he said. "The results are interesting, and very confusing. First, I've been able to confirm the four surviving crew members. We had seen three of them at Survivor Number One. I found the fourth there too, but he's mostly hidden in the satellite images. Here," George said pointing to a small spot on the satellite image of SN1. "He's tough to see in the satellite photos, but I found a bit of him sticking out. You can just see the tip of his boot sticking out from under this patch of off-white vegetation. His name is Hasbrough. He was officially a botanist also, but has advanced degrees in archeology and medical physics. His medical signals are the most desperate."

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“The signals from Greer, Sarco, and Jones have not changed much in the last few weeks, although Hasbrough’s have weakened significantly. His body temperature now follows the ambient air temperature perfectly. Brain activity, as measure by EEG readings, continues off the scale, while his endorphin levels also are several times above the maximum normal level. If anybody is at risk on Harvey’s World, it’s he.

“I got histories on everybody, and they all are fairly similar. I’ll walk you though what happened to Captain James. Everybody else met their fate in almost the same way, and since he made the most log entries, his experiences may give us the best overall perspective on what happened here.

But first, lets discuss the MIAs. One of them was the botanist as we had suspected. His medical transponder was shut off en-route following his death by natural causes. There is no mystery with him. *Streptococcus cardiosis* is generally fatal under these conditions. He probably would have survived had he happened to have his attack while standing in the waiting room of the emergency cardiac surgery ward of some major metropolitan hospital, but otherwise he didn’t have a chance. The other MIAs are actually DOAs. I’ve got morbidity histories on all of them. They follow the same pattern as Captain James.

“And now let’s get back to Captain James,” George said, and this triggered another round of sniffles and coughs. Despite my aversion to seeing people die before my eyes, I was beginning to think it might be worth it to never hear George blow his empty nose into his handkerchief again. Finally, after we had passed several days in Harvey’s orbit, George pulled himself together and continued. “Captain James had been in near-perfect physical condition during the trip. In fact, from what I can tell, he was kind of a fitness nut.” George glanced at Janet, and she nodded.

I added a quiet dig at George by saying, “Imagine having one of those on a space ship” under my breath. George and Janet both were smart enough to ignore me most of the time, and they confirmed my faith in their judgements by ignoring me this time too.

“Captain James’ exercise period was scheduled and logged on the Explorer,” Janet said, “just like everybody else’s. His logs show he forced all members of the crew to exercise regularly to ward off zero-g dystrophy.” Well, so much for my theory of them being as weak as kittens.

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George continued, mercifully without his coughing preamble. “Captain James’ medical telemetry was almost textbook perfect for the entire trip. He had a minor sodium elevation, caused by a genetic disposition to maintain a lower than average body fluid level. He had broken a leg in his early 20's but it did not seem to limit his mobility. There had been some signs of early arthritis in his left knee joint, presumably triggered by the broken leg, but again it was nothing to concern anybody. In short, Captain James could probably have taken us all on during a bar fight and won without much trouble.

“Everything continued to look normal on the Explorer until the landing. The medical telemetry indicates that the landing was soft, with no abnormal physical stresses.” George looked at me and I spoke up. “Yeah, their landing went smooth as silk. No problems at all,” I said.

George went on. “Just after landing, I noticed a slight adrenaline spike in James. This could have been a precursor to problems, or it may have been the excitement of finally making landfall on Harvey’s. They had not yet breathed any of Harvey’s air, so any infectious agent probably could not have gotten to them yet.

“Eight hours after landing, they left the ship, and the ‘shirt’ hit the fan.” George stopped. I think we all tensed up around the table. I felt my bowels contract, and I noticed the Captain sat up more erectly in her chair. “Bosko was the first one out. He wore a standard environmental isolation suit, with complete breathing and fluid/vapor barriers. As you know, all the initial biological assays had been negative, so there was no reason to suspect any biological concern, but Bosko still followed protocol and wore the isolation suit. Theoretically, this would prevent contamination from anything larger than a DNA molecule. Bosko was out for four hours that day. Looking at his bio-telemetry, I noticed a couple of funny readings which probably weren’t detected by the ship’s medic.”

“What were the readings?” Janet asked.

“Well, his adrenaline level was elevated. In fact, everybody’s levels were high. Again, this might have been due to the excitement of landfall, but I don’t think so. Typically, adrenaline levels jump up in response to stimulation, then decline slowly. In fact, all of our adrenaline levels jumped when we did our loop-de-loop around the Gas Giant, but then quickly fell to normal once we learned that the Chief had performed his usual magic and we had survived the maneuver. Our guys had the opposite curve: the levels slowly rose to an elevated level. Maybe this is an effect due to prolonged

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time in space. The Explorer's crew spent fourteen months in space, which is a pretty long time, but no other colonization reports I've seen have ever shown even a hint of this adrenaline profile. It's the type of thing which would have been documented in the reports and made it into the scientific literature. Yet every member of Explorer's crew showed similar patterns in their adrenaline levels.

"The other strange thing about Bosko was his endorphin level. He wasn't stoned on endorphins, but he was definitely feeling a rush. Once again, elevated endorphins are a natural reaction under some conditions, especially during 'great' [George formed quotation marks with his fingers] emotional moments. Mountain climbers get a rush reaching a mountain peak, sky divers get it when they jump out of the plane, and it floods your system after sexual orgasm. Rarely does trudging around in an e-suit on a new planet provide this much fun; there's too much work to do. Remember, Bosko was the scout, purposely looking for trouble. His job was to decide if it were safe for the rest of the crew to disembark. Adrenaline makes sense in his blood, endorphins might make sense, but only if he was super gung-ho. And I checked his psych profile. He was cautious, and somewhat pensive as a rule. He was not the kind of guy to get a natural high from walking on a new planet."

Janet said, "so he was unusually tense, but somewhat euphoric while he walked around."

"Yeah--" George started to say, but then I interrupted him.

"I don't get it, George. What does all this mean?" I asked irritably. I think the place was already starting to get to me, and we hadn't even made landfall yet.

"I don't know what it means," George shot back. "It's totally bizarre. I can't think of a good explanation for it, pathological or benign. Even if you accept that his environmental suit had failed, and some type of local biological infection had gotten to him, I can't even think of a pathological mechanism which would have caused these readings. There's only one potential explanation, and it scares me almost as much to think about it as it does not knowing what caused the problems."

He stopped. We sat there in a pregnant pause, then Janet said softly. "Ok George, what's the scary cause?" I knew what Janet had been worried about. As I said, I had listened in on the logs she had been listening to in order to be sure she had been getting them Ok. I know, my dedication to my job and this mission is phenomenal; It's just the kind of dedicated guy I am.

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“Maybe they were drugged.” he said softly.

“But even that doesn’t make sense,” George added, louder than before. “I’ve checked with Mother. There are no drugs on file which produce these symptoms. There are a couple of them that were produced for psychoanalytic experimentation over the last fifty years that produce symptoms that are a similar in some ways, but nothing that gets you anxious and euphoric at the same time. And even if there were such a drug, why use it? Or better yet, if you were going to dope the entire crew with it, how would you deliver it in nice measured, even doses to the crew? No, I don’t buy it,” he said flatly. “Something else got them.”

“What if Mother wasn’t allowed to tell you what she knew?” I asked somewhat quietly.

Janet burst in with “That’s paranoid bullshit and you know it, Chief. Now you guys are getting my adrenaline up, and I can testify that my endorphins are not peaking and I’m not enjoying it. Get back with your report, Mister Wendt.”

“Yes Captain,” George replied sharply, and then got stuck in that whole snuffle/cough reflex again. Seventeen days later, after our fusion reactor had exhausted its supply of hydrogen atoms and our ship had made a spiral-in crash onto Harvey’s World, George finally continued. “Bosko returned to the ship. As far as I know, all the correct anti-contamination procedures were followed. Bosko’s blood chemistry remained stable throughout the next day. Captain, can you verify that Bosko followed decontamination procedures?”

“Yeah, George. I’ve watched the video logs of Bosko’s entire excursion, including the decontamination at the end. The external surface temperature of his e-suit hit two thousand degrees and burned off the outer two microns. There are no known organic molecules that can stand that temperature. I also looked closely to see if he might have been sloppy and missed something, like the bottoms of his feet or something. Bosko was a pro. He got it all.”

“But what about contamination from something smaller than DNA?” I demanded. “Could a single small molecule have penetrated his suit?”

“It would have to be really small, Chief. Trust me on this. There are no known molecules so small that they could pass through an e-suit and still have any pharmacological effect. That’s too

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far out.”

“You’re the weight-lifting biologist,” I quipped. “I’m just trying to keep my mind open.”

Janet interjected, “Ok, Ok. I guess it’s time for me to start with my info. I’ll begin with Bosko’s logs. Then, we’ll let George go back to talk about Captain James. Bosko’s logs suggest he was everything George mentioned. You get no sense that he’s some wild-ass cowboy out to have a great time on Harvey’s World. In fact, when he first suits up, you’d think he was doing his ten thousandth training exercise, he’s that cool. He followed protocol very well, and always had his e-suit camera active so we can follow along. I made a summary of the recordings of his first excursion. Let’s watch it.”

We all turned our heads to the monitor on the wall. We saw and heard Bosko matter-of-factly getting into his e-suit. We saw him check its functioning, then step outside the double-doored airlock onto Harvey’s World. We listened to his color commentary as he methodically wandered around outside the ship. His first task was to look the entire ship over to be sure it was in good condition, which it was. Then he started walking in a large circle around the ship, forty meters in diameter. He’d stop often, zooming in on the grass or insect life on the ground. Everything looked just fine; All you had to do was spread a blanket and lay out the picnic basket.

He expanded the radius to fifty meters and continued around the ship. This brought him to within about ten meters from one of the cows. He stopped and spent a considerable amount of time describing it’s form. The cow paid him absolutely no attention; It kept its head lowered and slowly grazed on the grasses at its feet. Occasionally, Bosko would look away from this cow and zoom in on some distant animal to compare them. He was able to identify a clear dimorphism in the cows, which everybody guessed to be proof of their sexuality. Occasionally, Janet stopped the video and made a few comments, like how skin patterns varied between individual cows, and how nobody ever got any kind of reaction out of the cows, even after physical contact. “They don’t even seem to notice when you pet them,” she said.

At one point, Bosko zoomed in on one of those clumps of off-white vegetation that was about four-hundred meters away from the ship. Lying next to it, were a half dozen sleeping cows. Bosko made some comment about how he was going to try napping in one if he got a chance, since the cows sure seemed to enjoy them.

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We heard the intercom traffic between Bosko and the rest of the crew. It all seemed pretty normal. I've never been on one of these first explorations, and had always wanted to. But if this was how exciting it got, I'll stay home and snooze.

We then saw how Bosko returned to the ship and dutifully performed his decontamination sequence. It's pretty weird to see the skin of the e-suit burn away like that. I hate to admit it, but George was right. There was no way any biological agent could have survived decontamination.

"As you can see," Janet continued when the video stopped, "It was a textbook first excursion. Bosko's soil and air samples didn't show anything unusual. They cultured the microbes in them and got the same data as they got from atmospheric sampling. Harvey's could have been the picnic capital of this corner of the galaxy. It actually amazes me that they didn't abandon protocol and all stream out in their space fatigues the very next day, but they maintained discipline and Bosko went out alone again."

George interjected, "Oh and by the way, Bosko's medical condition did not change much over night. His endorphin levels dropped a tad, but mostly remained elevated. Ditto on his adrenaline. My guess is he didn't sleep very well that night."

"That checks with his logs the next day, George," Janet said. "As I said, Bosko went out again the next day. This time, he made a one hundred-meter radius around the ship. I'm not going to bother playing it for you, since nothing unusual happened. On the afternoon of the second day is when it got interesting."

Janet paused here, and we all looked at her expectantly. "After noon local time on the second day, Captain James allowed the crew to disembark without quarantine. No e-suits, no breathing apparatus, nothing. He wasn't reckless however. Everybody had to stay with at least two other crew members, so nobody was ever alone. Each person leaving the ship had to be fully stocked with side arms, communications, and survival gear. They had to report back to the ship two hours prior to local sunset. Finally, they had to stay within a kilometer of the ship. Frankly, although this seems a little reckless in hindsight, I think I would have done the same. It was that afternoon that things got a little weird.

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“Since nobody was in an e-suit, nobody had full automatic video logging going on, but all radio traffic was recorded by the Explorer’s Mother, and I’ve been able to listen to it. There were a couple of occasions when somebody in the field recorded video when they wanted to show something to somebody in the ship. Mostly we don’t know exactly what happened to each crew member, so we can’t correlate any specific event on the surface to the weird stuff that happened.” She paused. I could see the worry in her face. I think Janet would have made a heck of a Jewish mother. I know she feels a strong responsibility for George and me, but I also saw the look that said she felt responsible for the Explorer crew too. I guess our bosses back at Deep Star knew how to pick a rescue crew, or at least it’s captain.

“Captain James was a real ‘by-the-book’ kind of guy,” Janet continued. “He recorded extensive logs, at least at first. Let me play you some of his tapes.”

We turned to the monitor with Janet as she started the playback. We saw Captain James’ talking head fill the screen. He said “Since Bosko’s report is so benign, and the biological assays are all negative, I’m thinking of letting everybody out of this tin can. I know I want to get out. If I tried to keep them in here, I’d probably have a mutiny in a couple of days anyhow. I’m even going to go outside, stretch my legs and find out how it feels to breathe real air again.”

“Pretty normal stuff,” Janet said stopping the playback. “The guys had been cooped up in Explorer for over a year. They wanted out.”

“He wasn’t serious about the mutiny was he?” George asked. I looked at him. Sometimes I think George must be the dumbest guy on this ship, or at least the second dumbest.

“No, of course not,” Janet said. “That was just his normal way of speaking.”

“Interesting,” said George. “Because at the time he said that, his adrenaline levels were twenty percent above normal, just like everybody else on the ship. He was tense. I’m trying to figure out why.”

“But listen to what he sounded like that afternoon,” Janet said. “He recorded this just after getting back into the ship after a forty-five minute excursion. As far as I know, he never got more than about one hundred meters from the ship.” She played the video and we all looked at the screen.

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“I just had my first trip outside today,” the talking head began. The easy confidence that James had previously radiated was gone. We saw worry and confusion on his face. It scared the heck out of me. “Ornstein is really starting to piss me off,” he said. Janet stopped the playback and explained that Ornstein was one of the mechanical engineers. He had also been outside the ship. She restarted the video.

“I told him that I didn’t want to hear about his girlfriend,” Captain James continued. “But he just wouldn’t stay off the comm channel. I’m putting a notation in his jacket about it. We’ve got to keep some kind of discipline on the comm channels. Well I’m not going to put up with this crap. Ornstein is going to have to learn that he’s a member of this crew.”

“Gee Captain,” I said. “I thought you were tough.” Janet and George ignored my smart aleck comment, as usual.

Janet stopped the playback. “I listened to every transmission made that day. Ornstein hardly said anything over the radio, although I gather that he tended to be a little talkative normally. I had Mother double check me to be sure I hadn’t overlooked something, but this is the only time he mentioned his girlfriend. This is Ornstein here.” We listened as Janet played the audio-only radio transmission. “. . . going to walk up that small hill over there. I bet my girlfriend would have liked to see this. Come on guys!”

George said, “Captain, at the time this was recorded, Captain James had blood levels of cortical steroids that were sixteen percent above normal. His blood pressure was hovering around 230 over 190. Something was wrong.”

“What about the rest of the guys?” I asked. “What about Ornstein? or Bosko?”

George answered, “Seventy percent of the crew were showing similar symptoms. The severity of the symptoms were generally worse for those outside the ship. Although there were exceptions.” George shuffled some papers in front of him, pulled one out and handed it to me. “Ornstein, for example,” he said, “was actually showing minimal effects.”

Janet said, “Bosko sounded bad too. Let me play something he said just before sundown.”

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“Wait a minute,” I said. “I thought everybody was supposed to be back at the ship two hours before sunset.”

“They were supposed to be back, but Bosko ignored the order, and James never called him on it. In fact, six crew members in a single party never returned to the ship at all. Let me see if I can get the Bosko recording.” She pressed a couple of buttons on the panel next to her.

“As you know, normal protocol is for the public comm channels to remain clear. James was right about the excess chatter on the comm channels, but Ornstein was never the culprit. Bosko in fact, was one of the worst offenders. He apparently thought he was recording personal log data, when in fact he was broadcasting to the whole crew. Listen to this.”

Bosko's voice came out of the speaker. “. . . plant life seems mostly narrow-leafed with a single tubular support structure. The slightly blue color tinge tends to indicate a relatively primitive chloroplast, but I'll have to take another look under the microscope to be sure. The absence of RNA in the plants was a surprise, so the mechanism of genetic replication will have to be studied further. I'm not sure why some vegetation displays no chlorophyll at all, unless the clumps I see are actually just the flowering part of this grass I'm standing on. Perhaps it's kind of like the Century Bush of New Earth where a single organism can take up several square kilometers and have a massive reproductive organelle. If it wasn't so darn dark all of a sudden I could tell more about the . . .”

Janet stopped the playback. “That was the first recorded mention of darkness,” she said. “I double-checked the time stamp on this file, and checked the Lookout's orbital image recorded just a couple of minutes before hand. It was mid afternoon when Bosko made this recording, with almost no visible cloud cover. It was so bright that Bosko should have been wearing sunglasses, which I don't think he was.”

I got a chill up my spine that did not want to let go. It's bad enough listening to dead guys. But crazy dead guys were worse.

“Captain,” I asked, “what about the group that did not come back that night?”

Janet swallowed. This was going to get worse. “It was a single group of six. They were the fourth party out of the ship that day. They didn't make many transmissions during the day, so we

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don't know exactly what they were doing. The best I can tell, they were just out for a nice stroll. The first hint of trouble came an hour before sunset. You'll have to listen to this, because my description could not do it justice. The voice you'll hear is Morgan. She was a biologist. I guess she was kind of your equivalent George. She also doubled as the crew's assistant medical officer. Doc Peters had remained in the ship, as per protocol. Here it is."

The voice sounded panicked. I've heard people talk like this. I heard it in that empty fuel tank I got trapped in when my ship got damaged. The best I can tell, the universe is a fair place in some type of cruel and insane manner, and it lets you know when your end is near. I could tell that on some visceral, unexplainable level, Morgan knew they were about to die. Morgan had that sound. I know that sound. At least, if it weren't for my Space Fairer's Amnesia, I would know that sound. It's funny the psychiatrists never asked me about this. It's one of the things I would have asked about if I were a psychiatrist.

Janet played the recording. "... supposed to stay near each other. Where are you guys? We should have gone back to the ship before it got dark. Christ, I can't see a thing. Joe? Joe? Where the hell are you? I'm going back. I'm not going to--" Suddenly she screamed. Morgan's scream was worse than anything I ever heard in that fuel tank. I've heard the sound a person makes at death. I've heard the sound of total panic. I've heard the sound of total desperation. I've heard the sound of total capitulation. I've never heard this sound before. Her scream came from the deepest, oldest, most primitive parts of her mind, parts that had remained dormant in every member of mankind for the last ten million years. But she found that hidden portion of animal intellect, and we heard it in her voice. Her scream was the sound of entire planets dying in a supernova. Her scream was the loss of an entire race, lost across an entire galaxy. I felt myself die with her in that scream. I hope my amnesia was still working. I was going to need it.

We all sat there for a long time. At one point, George started to try to talk but was thankfully choked off by his coughing reflex. I think I saw the crows feet at Janet's eyes transform into canyons, and the rest of her auburn hair turn grey. And she had already heard this before. I'm glad I'm not captain. I wouldn't want to hear it again.

Finally, George said slowly, "What . . . what . . . was . . . the time stamp of that recording?"

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Janet looked at him quizzically for a moment, then looked at the operations panel in front of her. “Uh,” she said pressing a button or two, “it was 17:25:13 hours local. Why?”

George didn't say anything. Even though this didn't count as a “presentation” for George, at least not as far as I would have thought, George got one of the worst cases of the sniffles I've ever seen. He blew his empty nose a dozen times, and wiped what otherwise would have been a mucus-filled handkerchief all over his face. He stumbled around trying to put the handkerchief back into his pocket, then just as quickly tried to pull it out again, neither operation being completed. This sequence took so long, I could feel the protons in my body decaying into their constituent quarks. He finally coughed a couple of times and said, “At precisely 17:25:09 hours local, our first fatality showed a significant change in body chemistry. That crew member died within twenty-three minutes of the onset of symptoms. By 17:59 hours, virtually every member of the Explorer's crew was showing some clinical sign of Harvey's Syndrome.”

Nobody said anything for a few minutes. I could feel my Space Fairer's Amnesia slipping away. The worst part of being in that empty fuel tank was the smell. The ragged hunk of metal that had snagged and bled to death my chief apprentice had been white hot due to an oxidizer fire. When he got stuck on it, I could smell his flesh being burned. For a while I thought he was going to make it, since the wound had been cauterized by the heat. But I was wrong. The cauterization only added to his pain. He bled well enough, only it was hard to tell because the blood just floated next to him in the weightlessness. In a gravity field, you see the blood pour away from wounds, but in space you get a false sense of the benign. My amnesia seemed to be failing me, because I remembered all this. And I thought I had developed my amnesia pretty well with all those trips to the psychiatrist.

I looked at Janet, and then at George. Janet was in her own world too. I don't know the demons that possessed her world, but judging by the look on her face, she knew them all too well and was having some type of deep philosophical discussion with them right now. George too, was in deep conversation with some inner companion, although seemingly less so than Janet or me. More of his time was spent sniffing and coughing. If my amnesia goes out completely, I'm thinking of taking up sneezing instead.

Finally, after an eon, Janet lifted herself out of her reverie and said to George, “George, tell us more about the victims.”

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I knew what was coming, since I know George pretty well by now. Janet and I endured the mother of all sniffles. I swear the universe stopped expanding, fell back into itself, then was reborn in another big bang while we waited for George to work his way through the entire snuffle/cough/gag reflex of his. Eventually, he pulled himself together and told us the story.

“The first victim of Harvey’s Syndrome was Patrick Kalinski. As I had mentioned, everybody’s bio telemetry data were showing some crazy changes. Exactly four seconds prior to Morgan’s scream, Kalinski’s adrenaline level went off the scale. His cardiac telemetry shows severe myocardial disruption which began thirty-five seconds after that. He died within twenty-five more minutes.”

Janet asked, “Did you say Kalinski?”

“Yeah,” George answered. “Why?”

“Because he was with her; in the same party as Morgan. Whatever it was that scared the bejesus out of her also killed Kalinski.”

“Tell us how Kalinski died,” I said.

“Well, like I said, everybody’s body chemistry had been more than a little strange that day. His adrenaline levels had been high for the previous twenty-four hours, higher than most of the rest of the crew. During the last few hours, this level increased, as did his endorphin levels. He was really sailing. His heartbeat was exceptionally fast, and his blood pressure was around 240 over 198. This was especially high for him, since he had absolutely no history of hypertension. Just when we hear Morgan’s scream, we can see a definite spike in Kalinski’s EEG readings. Thirty-five seconds later, his heart began fibrillating. I estimate he lost consciousness in about two minutes, and died less than twenty-five minutes later.”

“Was Kalinski the only fatality at that time?” Janet asked.

“No,” George replied. “Although he was the first, three more crew members succumbed that evening. Two others were stricken shortly after Kalinski. Another was hit about a half hour later. Interestingly, however, (and I don’t know what this means) almost everybody had an EEG spike at

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the same time that Morgan screamed.”

“Even those who were not present with Morgan and Kalinski and the others?” I asked.

“Exactly. Even the guys in the ship showed a marked spike in their EEG telemetry. I can’t explain it. I’m still not sure that the equipment didn’t malfunction on the Explorer, although Mother says everything checks just fine. Maybe you can help me look into that possibility, Chief?”

I nodded my agreement.

“What was the nature of this ‘spike’?” Janet asked.

“It really was a spike,” George replied. “It’s not like anything I’ve ever seen before. It’s almost as if the victims all received an electrical shock at the same time. The normal EEG readings are there, then all of a sudden there’s a blip which overwhelms the normal rhythms, then it’s gone. The whole event only lasts about a half second. It’s not like an electro shock, however, since there is no evidence of neuronically convulsions in any of the victims. It’s just a loud bang. In Kalinski’s case, it sent his heart into fibrillation, and it killed him. Other victims seem less effected, but everyone felt it, even the guys in the ship.”

We sat there a while. Janet resumed her conversation with her demon. George fiddled with his hands, but mercifully, he did not sneeze. I thought again about my assistant in that fuel tank. God, his flesh stank when it burned. I sniffed again at my sleeve. I could still smell that odor. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to wash it out.

Finally, Janet pulled herself together and said to George, “Tell us about Captain James.”

“Captain James’ EEG showed the same spike as all the others, although I think he was inside the ship at the time. His adrenaline levels jumped about thirty percent after the spike, and only drifted downward slightly over the night. I’m sure he didn’t sleep that night. The next day, I think he left the ship, although maybe you can tell that from the logs, Captain.”

“Yeah, he was worried about the crew members who did not come back. Also, he was pretty agitated. He left the ship. Here, let me play you part of one of his logs.”

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Janet punched a few controls on the panel, and then we turned to see Captain James' talking head on the wall monitor again. He looked horrible. He hadn't shaved, and it looked like he hadn't slept in about four weeks. I've seen guys look better after heavy-duty bachelor parties. Once again, his self confidence, the thing most captains and explorers have in metric tons, was completely gone. He was scared, and very worried. ". . . last night's exploration team never checked in. I'm . . . I'm thinking of sending another couple of guys out looking for them. I've been trying to figure out why it's so dark this morning, but Mother doesn't seem to know anything today. She hasn't seen Kolowski . . . or, uh, what's his name? Uh, Kalinski. Mother said something about Kalinski. I've got to get the Doc to find out about Kalinski. Mother's been acting kind of strange lately. I'm thinking of sending a couple of guys out today. I've got to find Kolowski. Mother sounded a medic alarm a couple of minutes ago, but now I can't seem to get her on line. I can't see a damn thing with the lights off like this . . ."

"Mother's logs show that James left the ship ninety-five minutes after making this recording," Janet said. "He never returned."

"He fell into our typical coma about an hour or so later," George added. "The third day on Harvey's World was D-day. All but three of the crew members fell into a coma. Eighty percent of those in a coma died before the following dawn. It was a pretty rotten picnic."

"What about those who were not affected?" I asked.

"The three were Alexander, Sarco, and Zweibel. You remember that Sarco is the one in the fully armored e-suit at SN1. Maybe the Captain can fill us in on the details of what happened to him."

We looked at Janet, who had a very pained expression on her face. I had heard enough of Sarco's last logs to know they were not pretty. At least we weren't talking about Zweibel, although God knows it was going to come up soon.

Janet spoke. "Sarco knew something was wrong. I won't play you his last logs, since they really don't make any more sense than the others, but he was trying to rescue the guys at SN1. Despite the darkness, and the stupor he found himself in, he managed to get into the armored e-suit, which is no easy feat even under good circumstances."

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This fact, of course, I knew well. I had tried to get somebody into an *un*-armored e-suit when our ship was damaged. You can practically hit the ground from orbit in one of the armored suits, and it won't even be scratched. Of course, as the content of such a suit, you will be splattered beyond recognition, but the suit itself will be fine, and it will keep your remains nicely contained inside. It also has small projectile armaments, extra oxygen and rations, and enough communication gear to call back to Deep Star. The thing takes about three hours to power up and get into, although the book says you can be safely inside one in about ten minutes. Damn engineers! You can't even read the friggin' introduction in the operating manual in ten minutes. If those things hadn't been so darn complicated, maybe my assistant would have survived our catastrophe. Thank God for Space Fairer's Amnesia!

"I guess Sarco was unsuccessful," I said quietly.

"It wasn't for lack of trying," Janet replied. "Mother reports that he fired twenty-three explosive projectiles. His logs don't show very clearly what he was shooting at. His audio is incoherent, and he kept complaining about the darkness obscuring his vision. The video log shows bright sunshine however, so God only knows what he thought he was shooting at.

"Eventually, he too fell into Harvey's coma, and he has not moved appreciably since that time. He is right now almost exactly where he fell, almost a year ago."

"So we still don't know squat," I said irritably.

Janet answered me, and I could feel the exhaustion in her voice and see it in her eyes. "We don't know squat," she agreed.

Chapter Five

“I Am Become Death”

Just when you think you've seen everything, and you think that nothing can get any weirder or worse, the Universe senses this and throws you a complete curve. We had been in orbit over the Explorer for five days. We had downloaded every bit of every log ever recorded by the Explorer and all members of her crew. We had sent all this data home on the gigabyte data stream, but Deep Star wouldn't even see our report for a couple of days. Any answer Deep Star might have for us would be weeks away. Actually, it probably was a waste of time to send the data back. I know there are some smart guys at Deep Star, but they're not so much smarter than us that they can figure out the unexplainable any better than we could.

We had therefore re-trained our attentions on Survivor Number 1. Greer, Sarco, Jones, and Hasbrough were still immobile at SN1. Hasbrough continued to be the most desperate, with medical telemetry that hovered just on the other side of death. He was exothermic and comatose in an endorphin holiday.

George's voice pounded over the intercom, waking me out of what passed for sleep these days. “Emergency meeting. Come NOW!”

I rushed to push my floating body into the control room, still pulling one pant leg over my left arm. (The phrase “Sartorial Splendor” has never been used as an adjective in my presence.) George and Janet were already there. I presume they had been talking about me, since they shut up as soon as I had arrived.

Janet said angrily once I had taken my place at the table, “Chief, I thought I asked you to program Mother to inform us of any changes at SN1?”

“Huh,” I answered. I always sound so intelligent when I don't know what the heck is going

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on. "What are you talking about?"

"Hasbrough and Greer are both dead," George said. "And all hell has broken loose at SN1. It looks like there's been a tornado or something. It happened last night. The Lookout caught the beginning of it, then slipped out of orbital range just when we might have learned something."

"Well, didn't Mother see anything?" I asked. "We're directly overhead. Mother should have seen the whole thing even when the Lookout was out of range."

"I think 'should' is the apropos word here, Chief," Janet said. "I asked Mother, and she said she had not been instructed to watch SN1. Didn't you program her like we all had discussed?"

"Of course I did," I said angrily, then paused. "I'm pretty sure I did. I don't remember . . ." I stopped. I couldn't actually remember telling Mother to watch our guys. I guess I figured she was smart enough to monitor it on her own. "I guess I forgot with all the other stuff going on," I said. "What else do we know about SN1?"

"Not much," Janet answered. "Hasbrough and Greer are dead, and their bodies are gone."

"What?" I bellowed. "What do you mean gone?"

"Just what I said," Janet answered, her captain's calculated anger replacing the real anger she had felt just a few seconds before. "The medical telemetry units are nearby. Both units are reporting redlines. But we can't find any trace of Greer or Hasbrough. Their bodies are gone. Here, look at the photos yourself."

It was somebody else's arm that reached out and took the photos from Janet. That foreign arm held them on the table in front of me, but my eyes weren't focusing too well at the moment, so I didn't really see them. My entire system seemed to have shut down. I couldn't see, I couldn't think, and I'm not sure if I was even breathing. And then, as if things weren't bad enough already, I began to feel my amnesia slipping away . . .

The ship was coming in fast on the asteroid. Density measurements had marked it as a prime mining candidate. The skipper called back to the engine room on the intercom,

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"Keep a sharp eye, Chief. We'll need full power to reduce our Delta-V when we get close to this puppy."

"Aye-aye, Skipper," the Chief replied. Then he turned to the engineer's mate and said, "I'll show you a little trick, kid. This one isn't in the book. If you ever tell anyone about it, I'll deny it on my mother's grave and call you the damnest liar this side of the Proxima sector."

The mate grinned and nodded, while the Chief removed an access door from the control panel. "The trick," he told the younger man, "is to bypass the fusion reaction damper control, then dampen the reaction manually."

"Doesn't that make it kind of unstable?" the younger man asked. "I always thought it needed to be over-dampened because otherwise it was possible to flame-out the ion stream."

"A bit less stable, perhaps," conceded the Chief. "But it lets us increase reactor power by about twenty percent, and it lets us modulate the output a lot faster. Remember, these things are built with a colossal safety factor. If I dampen the reaction by hand, we can go from dead idle to full-plus power in half the normal time. Relax, I've done this dozens of times. Also, remember, the faster we come to the asteroid, the quicker we'll get our business done, and the faster we'll make our share. There's a bar at Baikonur that I want to show you as soon as we get back." This bar talk was bluster, as they both knew, but it was how space rats were supposed to talk, so they all cultivated the image, no matter how absurd it was.

The Chief had unbolted the damper control just as the annunciator called for full retro thrust. Instead of allowing the engine to respond, the Chief held the manual over-ride. The ion jet remained quiescent instead of gradually rising to life as the Skipper had expected. A few seconds later, the Skipper called on the intercom, "Hey Chief, what's going on. We need full thrust, or we're going to blast into the big bird otherwise. Gimme the power, for Christ's sake."

"Slight problem here, Skipper," the Chief lied. "We'll get you power in a second. Hang on though, since it may get a bit rough."

"Don't give me that shit Chief. Gimme the power now!"

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"This is no shit, Skipper. But I'll get it for you in a second. Just hold on."

The Chief and his mate watched the navigation screen monitor as it recorded the rapidly approaching asteroid. When even the mate had gotten frightened that a collision was inevitable, the Chief released the override control and the ion jet roared to life. Instead of a gentle, slowly increasing thrust, the power output jumped off the scale almost instantly. The Chief ran his nimble fingers expertly over the controls, making small adjustments to manually modulate the reaction which generated the ion thrust that began to slow them.

The ship shuddered in the g forces created as the ion jet thrust reduced the velocity difference between the ship and the asteroid. The navigation radar screen showed the ship slowing markedly. The mate was just about to relax when a loud gong sounded and red lights lit up the control panel. The g force created by the ion jet wavered, then abruptly ended, spilling everything in the room into zero-g chaos. Instantly, the intercom came on. "Chief, what the hell is going on? Give me thrust. We're twenty seconds away from impact!"

"Ion's down, Skipper!" shouted the Chief as he frantically tried to relight the jet and get the genie back into the bottle. "You'd better give us full side thrusters. Maybe we can skim the side of the--"

The side thrusters cut in and the collision klaxon sounded before the Chief could complete his suggestion. The Skipper made a desperate attempt to alter the ship's trajectory around the asteroid. Since he could not slow sufficiently to prevent impact, perhaps he could steer around the asteroid and avoid the impact entirely. The side thrusters created a pseudo gravity ninety degrees from normal, and pushed the Chief and his mate against the side bulkhead instead of the floor panel. "Ten seconds to impact!" shouted a voice over the ship-wide intercom. Feverishly, the Chief crawled in the newly created "upward" direction against the g field to the control panel. His hands were a blur as he worked the panel. The ion jet sputtered, coughed, then roared back to life just as the ship impacted the asteroid.

"The telemetry units are old," I said, almost shouting. "They've been sitting out on Harvey's World for almost a year. They're probably malfunctioning. The redlines are wrong!" My mind wasn't working so clearly at the moment, so I couldn't explain very well to George why I knew his medical telemetry readings were nonsense. I was sure that our guys were not dead. Too many people had died on Harvey's World; I was not about to lose anybody else on this planet.

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“They’re gone Chief. Trust me on this one,” said George quietly. That bastard George! Why couldn’t he at least stutter or sneeze before he said that?

“Screw you!” I shouted. “I’m the gadgeteer around here. Those units are malfunctioning until I say they’re not. You both know that. So let me check the data, and I’ll let you know.”

I started to rise to go check out the telemetry system, when Janet pulled me down. “Relax Chief,” she said softly. “I’ve got another job for you. I want you to set us down. I want you to set us down right next to SN1. George, break out the armored e-suits. We’re going to need them. Let’s go get our people.”

Chapter Six

Landfall

As usual, Janet was right. I forgot about how my amnesia was starting to fail, and got to work figuring out how to put down at SN1. I had already scouted a couple of landing sites, but SN1 had never been one of them. Luckily, the topography of Harvey's World is so nice and gentle, it's actually pretty easy to put down almost anywhere. The only hard part is finding a spot on dry land, since most of Harvey's is ocean, and our ship was not designed to float. And although it was a new spot to pick, SN1 was pretty close to the Explorer, so the delta from my originally planned trajectory was not very big.

You might think that landing out of a geosynchronous orbit from directly over your target is pretty simple, but actually it's harder than from a conventional orbit. In a normal orbit, you first figure out how many orbits it will take to get down. Usually, it's something like 3.7292 trips around the planet, and then you're on the ground. The exact number of orbits is based on the mass of the planet, the altitude of your orbit, and the strength of your retro burn, and a dozen other factors. All you have to do is calculate the number of orbits the descent takes, back track in time from that point, and fire the retro rockets at the correct moment. In a geosynchronous orbit, you've got to do your descent in two steps. Since the number of orbits to come down is never a whole integer, you'll never end up directly below your starting point. The trick is to first descend into a conventional orbit, then calculate the number of orbits to touch down from that altitude, then execute the descent.

Orbital mechanics was never my specialty, but luckily Mother knows how to do those calculations in her head. I just followed along as she did them and made sure she didn't slip a decimal point or anything. Anyway, in about two dozen orbits I had us down, about one hundred meters from SN1. I didn't dare get any closer for fear of frying our survivors with our engine blast. As it is, I think we took out about fifty of the cows. Those dumb things just sat there, even with our ion jet screaming over their heads.

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Janet wasn't taking any chances. She and George had drawn up a pretty detailed rescue protocol. George was to be the first, and only, crew member to leave our ship. He was to suit up in the armored e-suit, and would never return into the main part of the ship; he was going to spend the next ten months on the trip home in the airlock. Janet wanted to be sure that there would be no chance of an infectious agent entering the ship. I had to rig up a mini-airlock into the airlock chamber so we could feed George while he was in there, and then another mini-airlock so he could dump his waste into space.

Janet was taking every precaution to ensure that nothing, no matter how small, would ever travel back from the airlock chamber into the living areas of the ship from Harvey's World. She had me boost the air pressure in the airlock by 10 KPa over the atmospheric pressure on the planet, then I had to boost the air pressure in our ship to 10 KPa over the airlock. This way, air would always be forced out of the ship, rather than being sucked in. Hopefully, this positive pressure would keep any of the nasty little microbes on Harvey's World out of the ship.

As I worked on the new mini-airlocks, I kept on thinking about how the victims from Explorer started showing symptoms even before they had opened their hatch. Ok, so maybe the Explorer leaked a little, and some outside air got inside the ship before they had opened the door. I personally doubt if this had happened, but it was possible, and Janet wanted to be extra sure. And so what was I doing? I was cutting new holes into the airlock!

Airlocks are another of the thousands of mundane technologies widely used in space travel. "Mundane" perhaps, but not "simple." Whatever the pathogen was on Harvey's World that had wiped out the Explorer, it had to be pretty darn small. I'm a pretty versatile mechanic, but I've never tried to rig a hatch seal that has to prevent individual gas molecules from leaking across it, especially a seal that has to open and close routinely. I figured my chances of success in creating this seal were pretty small, not that it really would matter in the end. Oh well, who wants to live forever?

Janet also made us all take antiviral injections to rev up our immune systems. I hate these things, since they always have to shoot me in the butt, plus it gives me a low-grade fever and a horrible headache for about six hours afterward. I'm pretty sure the injections were George's idea, but Janet made it seem like hers so I couldn't complain too much about it. Also, since I knew the mini-airlock seals wouldn't hold, it did kind of make sense to try to inoculate ourselves against whatever viral microbes might have caused Harvey's Syndrome. I just hope that the pathogens that

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existed on Harvey's World were at least slightly susceptible to our artificially invigorated immune system. It would really aggravate me to learn that I felt like crap for six hours -- hours when I was supposed to be concentrating on making our descent -- and that the stupid shot did no good in the end.

While I worked, I also had time to think about Zweibel. He was the guy who died in Explorer. Thankfully, we never talked about him. Janet and George both knew what happened to him. I did too, since I was such a hard-working guy and had listened to all the log entries. I'm pretty sure that George hadn't pulled the psych records on Zweibel like Janet had. George wasn't the type to want to know what went on inside somebody else's head, like I was. Zweibel had been rock solid. There were no recorded instances of any type of emotional instability or psychosis either in him, or any members of his family. Zweibel hadn't made many log entries near the end, but the Explorer's Mother had been sufficiently alarmed at the events on Harvey's World that she was recording everything that happened in Explorer. Whatever demon had infected Zweibel, I'm sure the exorcism of it was quick, painless, and effective. A projectile weapon works pretty quickly and doesn't leave much behind when it blasts through the side of your cranium.

Janet's plan had George suiting up prior to us even breaking orbit. I kept our landing as gentle as possible. Janet wanted me to make it easy on George, who didn't even have a g-seat to ride in. I kept it gentle because I worried about damaging the delicate mini-airlock seals I had installed. On the back of George's e-suit was a big hook, to which we attached about two hundred meters of cable which was in turn connected to a winch which I rigged in the airlock. If George passed out, we'd just haul him back inside. George also carried a grappling hook which he planned to heave onto the prostrate bodies of Sarco and Jones. I'm not sure where we were going to put their bodies, or how we were going to give them medical attention, since there was only enough room in the airlock for a couple of people to stand. I guess Janet figured we'd deal with that problem when the time came.

Despite my familiarity with our ship, I've always been nervous about piloting the ship through major maneuvers. I was scared when we did our super-orbital loop around the Gas Giant, and I found myself pooping bricks during our descent to Harvey's World. I kept an eye on George, suited up in the airlock. The telemetry of his suit worked perfectly, so Janet and I got to see exactly what he saw, and we also had continuous readouts of his medical condition. Of course, I had Mother programmed to record and analyze each bit of data the e-suit produced. I had been a little annoyed

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when I saw Janet double-checking my programming of Mother, but I guess I had it coming to me after my last screw up.

George had instructed me to have Mother pay special attention to our adrenaline and endorphin levels, and well as our heart rates and EEG readings. She was to announce any unusual changes in these levels, and make period announcements of our status even if no changes were noted. At first, I was going to have her monitor and announce only George's physical reactions, but Janet suggested (correctly) that Mother should keep an electronic eye on all of us. Janet was not going to let some disaster sneak up on us. Maybe with enough warning, we could figure out what was going wrong and get the heck out of Dodge before we actually succumbed. It was obvious to all of us that the Explorer crew had not understood what was happening to them, at least not until it was too late. Of course, I pretty sure Zweibel knew what was happening at the end. I guess that's why he took the easy way out.

While George was getting suited up, Janet had me rig a deadman program with Mother. I was going to have to manually cancel a take-off order to Mother every thirty minutes. If not, the ship would take off automatically and head home, with distress signals blaring. I looked at Janet when she said this. "I don't have any way of making sure George's lifeline has been winched back in first," I told her.

"You'll have to sever it then," she replied icily.

"I don't think I can do that either," I said. Janet didn't say anything. We were mercifully interrupted by George's "all ready" signal, and she and I never discussed it again. I tried not to think about George being dragged into space at the end of a two hundred-meter line. Of course, he would first be burned to a cinder by the ion jets, so after the initial shock when the line went taught, he wouldn't have much time to worry about it.

We came down softly, landing just as I had programmed. Our touchdown tipped the load cells at less than 1.8g's, pretty good in this gravity field. Almost immediately, Mother started blubbing about our blood chemistry going haywire. Well, no shit, Sherlock! Of course our adrenaline levels and heartbeats were elevated; we had just landed on a death planet. Dumb stupid bitch computer.

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Once we were down, Janet called to George to get the heck out of the airlock and get our guys. George seemed a little confused at first, and I must confess I was feeling a little strange. I had always wondered what the end of my life would be like. Would Death bring some bright light that I would walk into? Or would there simply be an enveloping blackness? I sure hope it will be the former, since I swear Mother turned down the lighting levels just after we hit ground. Normally the ship is kept very brightly lit, but Mother had inexplicably turned all the lights down to a dim twilight right as George was about to step out of the airlock.

George opened the outer airlock door, paused just a moment, then jumped down. There was a built-in ladder to help negotiate the 1.3 meter drop to the ground, but George ignored it for some reason and let gravity do its dirty work. He landed kind of hard; I could hear him grunt. Something seemed wrong with his comm equipment, since the sound of his voice was kind of muffled. But he picked himself up and headed directly for SN1, playing out the line behind him. I watched him on the monitor and muttered to Mother, "Hold auto return." I think I heard her say something about acknowledgment, but I'm not sure because at that exact moment the lights all went out. Instantly, I was thrust into a smothering darkness.

The ship had slowed considerably, but was still closing on the asteroid at several times the normal touchdown speed when it hit. It had been in a tail-first retro configuration, but the side thrusters had added a horizontal velocity component, and spun the ship slightly off its vertical axis. The three legs of the landing empennage, which had been designed to support the weight of the mining ship only under the low gravity fields typical of asteroids, were far too fragile to absorb the impact energy at this high velocity. The leading leg, which contacted the surface first, simply snapped off and fell away. The second leg was ripped from the ship when its landing pad snagged on a small outcropping of rock. The third leg hit the surface and spun the ship into a wild tumble, then buckled under the load. A main support beam that formed a central member of the landing gear truss was sheared intact from its mount at the base of the ship and pierced the ship's hull in the lower deck. Water, the ship's principle reaction mass, poured from ruptured storage tanks in the lower deck and instantly froze into a fine snowy powder, creating a fog which drifted slowly in the low gravity field of the asteroid. The ship tipped over sideways and smashed into the asteroid. It tumbled end-over-end a few times, then came to rest upright, hidden in the center of the enveloping fog. The microscopic ice crystals in the fog slowly sublimated into invisible vapor in the cold, dry vacuum of space and disappeared, revealing the broken, dying ship stranded on the surface.

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Had the ion jet not been functioning during impact, the damage would have been severe, but potentially survivable. Unfortunately, the jet had stormed back to life a half second prior to impact, and without the automatic dampening controls in place, it overboosted and released more energy than the damaged reactor walls and waveguides could contain. The cracked flanges of the ion waveguides spewed ultra high energy protons upward into the ship, slicing directly through the main crew quarters and the bridge directly above it. In an instant the living quarters were consumed in fire, which was quickly extinguished by the vacuum of space as precious oxygen fled through the disintegrating hull.

I'm not sure if Mother had noticed the lights going out. I think she may have said something to me, but I was having trouble concentrating. I heard Janet's voice from far away calling to George, and George's reply saying something about the darkness. I think my mind must have wandered, because I noticed that almost a half hour had passed and that George was no longer heading toward SN1. I felt like a fog had settled over me, since I wasn't able to keep my mind focused on any one thought for more than a second. I haven't felt this bad since the last time I woke up hung over in a Baikonur alley. I wasn't sure where George was going or why the lights had gone out, so I went to find Janet to ask her if she knew what was going on.

Mother kept up a steady stream of worthless alarms. Everything from EEG numbers to blood pressure to acetylcholine data. Finally I had to tell Mother to keep quiet. I used language one does not normally use in the presence of a lady, which Mother most definitely is not. I finally got her to mostly shut up, but even then I often heard her annoying either me or Janet or George with her nonsense.

"Lifepod! Get to the lifepod!" screamed the Chief to his mate. The Chief looked around at the remains of the engine control room. The asteroid's low gravity now gave a semblance of up and down, and this seemed to clear the Chief's head as he struggled to make sense of the chaos around him. Even here, in the strongest part of the ship, everything was in shambles. The floor plates under him had buckled, and pipes and equipment protruded through a ghastly rip in the wall. A thick black smoke poured from the ventilator. The lights had failed, replaced only by the dim emergency lighting which was further dimmed by the smoke which hung in the air. The constant clanging of the evacuation alarm overwhelmed all other sounds, including the creaking and groaning of the ship's broken

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keel as it continued to settle lifelessly onto the asteroid's surface.

The mate lay dazed on what once again made up the floor. The Chief grabbed him and shook him to consciousness. "Get to the lifepod!" he screamed again. Then, looking in the direction of the escape pod, he realized that it was gone, blocked by a pile of rubble and bent, broken pipes. A fire started to burn near one wall where some lubricant dripped from a broken pipe. The Chief looked around in a panic, eventually spying an e-suit which had been brought down into the engine room for some preventative maintenance. It hung on one wall near the crumbled pipes.

The chief pushed the still dazed mate toward the e-suit. "Get into that thing!" he shouted. The mate stumbled awkwardly in the low gravity toward the suit, and started to fumble with the seals. Mercifully, the power to the evacuation alarm failed, and a strange silence filled the control room, only to be replaced by a hissing sound which grew steadily louder. A large crack was spreading along the floor beneath them. Through the crack, the Chief knew, the air that kept them alive was quickly leaking. "We'll be dead in a minute if I don't do something quick," thought the Chief.

I knew I had to find Janet, and together we had to figure out how to get the lights on. At the same time, I knew I had to keep Mother from doing something stupid. Unfortunately, my Alzheimer's was acting up, and I couldn't for the life of me remember what stupid thing Mother was going to do. This isn't as silly as it sounds, since there was always such a long list of idiotic things that Mother did, it was kind of hard to keep them all straight, especially with that blasted klaxon sounding in my ear. I probably could have thought this problem through, except for that stupid electronic bitch and her aggravating alarms. Still, I knew I had to get to Janet. She was the only level-headed person on board. She'd know what was going on.

The hatch to the lifepod was blocked by two meters of debris, and the lifepod itself was probably destroyed. The floor was cracking and hissing like a venomous snake. The Chief had to do something, and fast. The mate still was fumbling with the e-suit, unable to get both arms through the tight fitting opening. The Chief grabbed the man's arms and pushed him into the suit, only to hear him scream in pain and smell burning flesh. Quickly the Chief yanked the man out of the suit, then spun it around and saw the reason for the man's agony. The rear of the suit had been hit by a large hunk of jagged metal, and the suit's powerpack was glowing white hot.

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I wandered all over the ship and finally found Janet sitting in her command chair in the main control room. She looked horrible. Those demons were present once again, involving her in some intense philosophical discussion about the nature of life. I'm pretty sure I called to her, but since she never responded, and I wasn't feeling too well, it may be that I just *wanted* to call to her and never actually said a word.* In any event, I never got through to her. Her eyes were glazed over. Her hair was a mess and half covered her face. I was just about to shake her when I smelled that smell. The ship, or more properly, someone on the ship, must be on fire because I smelled the unmistakable odor of burning flesh.

Suddenly, through the smoke and noise, the Chief saw a way out. A small maintenance access hatch to one of the reaction-mass tanks lay at his feet. It took all of his strength, but he was able to rotate the handle which held the tank hatch tightly closed, and pulled open the hinged door. His mate, who now lay crumpled on the floor, had to be yanked by his hair to get into a standing position. The Chief shoved the nearly limp man through the small hatch opening, then dove in himself. He re-dogged the hatch just as an explosion shuddered through the remains of the ship. The shock propelled him headfirst into the bulkhead. His forehead slammed into the wet inner wall of the water tank, and he was knocked out cold.

* How could I be sure that I was hearing the sound of my voice with my ears, instead of the sound of my internal monologue with my mind? Ever since the accident at that asteroid, I've had hundreds of nightmares where I try to shout warnings to my crew mates, but they never seem to hear me. Was this the same thing happening now? Was I dreaming now, lost in a solipsist nightmare, or was Janet just too involved with her demons to respond to me? It probably was a sign of my current dementia that I bothered to even wonder about this stuff. Normally, I just push these thoughts away with the rest of the mental baggage I refuse to face.

Chapter Seven

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Janet was sitting in her chair crying softly. I heard her mumble something, but I couldn't understand what she said. I shook her a couple of times, but I couldn't get her to respond to anything, no matter how much I shook or how loudly I shouted. I had a headache like no other I've ever had, and my feet and the tips of my fingers felt numb like they were wrapped in great wads of wool. On top of that, now George wasn't responding on the radio. I asked Mother if she knew what was going on and she answered me, but she was acting so wacko I couldn't understand what she was talking about. All I heard was something about programmed limits and emergency procedures. Heck, I was the one executing the emergency procedures and that stupid electronic bitch didn't have a clue what was going on.

Then, even though I felt myself shrouded in a mental mist which made it hard for me to remember my name, I somehow remembered that George was out of the ship in an e-suit trying to do something important. I called again to George, but he still didn't answer me. Why they ever picked that weight-lifting quasi-military fitness nut for this mission, I'll never know. But he was out there, and as far as I was concerned, he better get his rear in gear and answer me. Mother apparently wasn't able to get anything out of George either, so I figured it was going to be up to me.

I stumbled down to the airlock, and somehow found the presence of mind to check the panel display after I had bumped into it with my forehead. The outer door was open, and I could see the emergency cable which was attached to a winch mounted to the inside bulkhead. I was about to winch in the cable, but I couldn't find the stupid button in the dark. Then it hit me that there were two other guys sitting out on that planet. "Shit!" I said. "Come on George. Get those guys!" When George still didn't answer, I knew that I had just gotten a new job to do.

The mate's body floated in the micro-gravity as the tank slowly orbited the asteroid.

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The explosion had thrown the tank, and what was left of the ship, into a low orbit. Mercifully, the seal on the hatch had held. The Chief slowly came back to consciousness. He wiped moisture from his forehead, and discovered that the moisture was his own blood. His watch told him that he had been unconscious for over twelve hours. He called out into the darkened tank, but all he heard was his own echo, and his own excited breathing.

I tried to open the airlock, but Mother got snooty about not violating protocol. Also she said something about automatic blast off in three minutes, so I told her to shut up in no uncertain terms. This time she simply refused to shut up, insisting I sit in one of those idiotic g seats. I was too friggin' busy to sit in one of those things, I told her, but she ignored me and kept on talking about acceleration limits and then went on again about blood chemistry and emergency procedures. Finally, in desperation, I told her to execute my "Sleepy Time" program.

I had never let anybody know about this special program. Every time I find a smart-aleck computer that thinks it's smarter than I am, I always install a "Sleepy Time" program. Mother clearly struck me as a such a computer, so I gave her this program early in the flight and kept it dormant in case it was needed at a later time. This seemed like such a time. The program basically shuts down the whole darn computer, except for some really low-level kinds of processing functions, and puts it into the computer-equivalent of a deep hypnotic slumber. Finally, with her in La-La Land, she shut up and left me alone to try to figure out how to open the airlock in the dark.

Without Mother as a distraction, I eventually figured out which buttons to press on the control panel. I overrode the lock-outs on the airlock, and opened the inner door. It sure was nice to smell real air again. I realized that I had been in this tin can for an awfully long time. I kind of wished I had brought a picnic lunch, except that it was too darned dark to see whatever it was that I would be eating.

I just about broke my neck falling out of the airlock, since either they moved the ladder or my feet no longer worked properly. I cursed myself for not bringing along a flashlight in the darkness, although something told me that it wouldn't have helped. I think my mind wandered again, because all of a sudden I tripped over the line that George had left behind, and I remembered that I had to find him before I could do anything.

Stumbling along in the dark while I held onto the line, it seemed to take forever before I

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finally reached George. He had fallen onto one of those off-white patches of vegetation. Just ahead of him, I saw the naked form of Jones lying on the vegetation. Next to him was Sarco. Jesus, that white vegetation looked comfortable.

Then, I suddenly felt more tired than I ever have ever felt in my entire life. The broad patches of leaves, or whatever they were on that patch of off-white vegetation, looked very inviting. Now I knew why the cows like them so much. If I hadn't stumbled over George, I probably would have forgotten myself and taken a nap, but the sight of George in the armored e-suit made me remember what I was trying to do. It took every gram of my concentration to continue, but I took the grappling hook from George's belt and looped the line from it around Jones' left ankle. Moving was hard because my feet felt like they were hip deep in thick mud, but I was able to take the end of the grappling hook and attach it to one of Sarco's belt loops. I tried to pry Sarco loose from the vegetation, but he was entangled in it, and I was just too weak to budge him.

"Mother," I called on the emergency comm channel. No answer. "Mother, Respond!" I said again. Mother still said nothing. "Mother!" I called again. Was she mad at me? I knew she could get snotty, but I figured she'd always answer me when I called. Then my brain fell back into gear; I had forgotten that I had shut her off! "Mother," I called again. "Wake Up. Authorization: 'Mechanical Bitch'."

Mother quickly came back on line. Immediately she started to talk about "emergency procedures" and "automatic this" and "automatic that" and "ninety seconds left," so I had to shout her down. "Reel the friggin' thing in!" I ordered. She was confused and didn't understand, so I lost my temper for the 72nd time that day. "Wind in the winch wire!" I shouted. Apparently she finally got it, because the line got taught, and George, Sarco, and Jones all started to move.

Then that wonderful, nice, comfortable patch of vegetation that had looked so inviting suddenly changed.

The mate continued to float gently near one wall of the tank. The smell of cauterized flesh filled the entire tank and mixed with the odor of sweat, urine, and feces. The Chief gingerly poked at the mate, who softly protested the intrusion, assessing the extent of his injuries. There appeared to be no serious broken bones, and the little bit of blood which oozed out of the gash above the man's eyebrow was dark and well coagulated. The

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Chief made a slight sigh of relief; the mate would survive. This thought was quickly extinguished however, when he gently pulled open the rip in the mate's space fatigues near his waist. The mate's skin was completely obscured by a large pool of blood that floated in the micro-gravity, right next to his body

Over the next fourteen days, the mate twitched and moaned periodically as he drifted into and out of consciousness before death finally claimed him. The Chief could do nothing but watch in the damp silence, his hunger growing by the day.

The appearance of the off-white patch of vegetation changed. Don't ask me exactly how it changed, since I can't explain it in anything close to words. It reminded me of Morgan's scream that I had heard on that recording. It was like I had seen with my eyes the scream that I had previously heard with my ears. I suddenly knew what it was that made her scream. I felt the same terror deep in my bones that Morgan had felt. The vegetation was not some nice simple plant, it was a monster. Although it had no teeth, it had fangs. It had no intelligence, but it had an evil genius. It was light in color, but it was darkness incarnate. It was animal, not vegetable. It was cognitive, not inanimate. It was not a plant, it was a carnivore. And it was hungry!

I think I must have passed out for a while, because the next thing I knew I had been knocked over by Jones' body being pulled back by the winch line. Luckily, I fell on him, and I think that I got dragged a few meters by the winch. My head seemed to clear a little, and I heard Mother say something about thirty seconds until lift off.

I don't believe in divine inspiration, or cosmic enlightenment, and any of those other major revelations that seem to come at regular intervals to the people on video talk shows. Because of this, I can't explain how it is that I gained the knowledge that suddenly popped into my head. But in a flash of insight, I knew where I was, what I was, and I understood the horrible secret of Harvey's World. I knew why the Explorer had been destroyed, and I knew why all the lights had gone dark. I also knew why I was having so much trouble concentrating, and I knew with absolute certainty that I had practically no chance of surviving and rescuing my diaspora-mates.

"Mother," I called. "Hold auto return!"

"Acknowledged," she replied in a strangely emotional voice. Did she somehow understand

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also?

Chapter Seven

Amnesia Forgotten

I was able to get George, Sarco, and Jones back into the ship. I'm still not sure if the cable winched me back, or whether I staggered along next to my colleagues while they got dragged along. Jones' leg got dislocated by the winch cable, and I cracked three of George's ribs heaving him up the ladder into the ship, but they didn't complain much since I saved their lives. Mother, God bless her gallium arsenide soul, was actually somewhat useful. She was able to get the ship into orbit, with only minor verbal abuse from me. She kept insisting that we all sit in those darn g-seats for take off, while I told her to just get the friggin' ship off the ground.

Once in orbit over Harvey's, I programmed the Lookout to broadcast a general "stay away" message. I locked its control module out, so the only way to disable the warning transmission was to destroy the Lookout. The message was even modulated on the Lookout's squawk signal. It would be broadcast for as long as the Lookout's thermionic generator continued to operate, which should be good for a couple of decades. Then I duplicated this whole exercise with our Lookout, since I knew we wouldn't be needing it after all. Now there were two of the sentinels orbiting the planet. There was no way any visitor to Harvey's World in the next decade or two could say they weren't warned. I doubt if the warning will be effective, but it was the least I could do before we left.

We boosted from Harvey's orbit into a parking orbit around the Gas Giant, then when the position was right, we boosted again for home. I got us to about 0.8g's, since I wanted to get home fast. I had to dump a lot of stuff first, of course, but I didn't think we'd need all those supplies now. All I kept were the reaction mass, some food, and our emergency medical supplies. I did not expect to have to build a second Explorer-class ship, so it was kind of silly to hold on to all those extra parts. This technically made our return journey less safe, but I figured it was better (and safer) to get home fast. Besides, I was tired of this whole adventure by now and wanted to see the "green hills of earth" again.

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Things started to normal-out once we got back into orbit. George snapped out of it pretty fast. I was worried that he'd be stuttering worse than ever after this ordeal, but instead he dove into taking care of Sarco and Jones. That macho can-do good cheer of his returned with a vengeance. Once he had pulled out of his coma, he took a quick shower and gave himself the closest buzz haircut I've ever seen. He looked more GI than any guy I've ever seen this side of a boot camp. Heck, I even felt like I should salute him when we passed each other in the corridors of the ship. Sarco and Jones recovered pretty well with just a few weeks of George's TLC. It took them about a month to get their weight back, but otherwise they seemed none the worse for the ordeal they had been through. You'd never know they hadn't had anything to eat or drink for almost a year. It was also nice to finally have some new faces around here. Not that I spent all that much time with them, but just knowing that there was somebody besides Janet and George on board made me feel better.

Janet seemed completely preoccupied for most of the trip home, but I guess that's to be expected. She did all the captainly stuff she was supposed to do, but she spent more time alone than I did. George tried to pull her out a little bit, but after a while even he gave up. Janet resigned from the service when we finally got back to Deep Star and became a scientist working for the Goddard Institute on Europa. I find it ironic that Janet went to Europa, which is practically a little-sister-planet to Harvey's World. After all, even though gravity on Europa is only about 0.15g, they both have large, deep oceans, receive about the same sunlight, and of course, they both orbit gas giants. Maybe she wanted to be closer to home, since Jupiter is only a couple of days from Earth. Last I heard, she had done some pretty interesting work on xenobiological archeology. I guess a person can spend a lifetime studying fossils on Europa. She had told me that she had always been interested in figuring out why life died out there at the same time the dinosaurs disappeared on earth. She had occasionally told me that she did not believe in coincidences, and of course, I agree with her. Europa had once been a thriving ecosystem, but now was largely sterile. If anybody will be able to figure out why, she will.

My story gave the xenobiologists at home a lot to think and argue about. George's e-suit recorded a lot of what happened at the off-white vegetation, but not enough to answer questions to anybody's satisfaction. It turned out that the brain doctors back home had programmed Mother to report on a lot more about us than I had realized. She had been spying on us and recording everything we ever said or did. If the brain doctors wanted to see what I did in the toilet, I guess that's all right with me. I knew Mother wasn't to be trusted, but I never guessed how devious she could be. I had the last laugh, however. When she had executed my Sleepy Time program, all of

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that special data had been wiped from her memory. It's too bad, because some of that stuff may have been useful in explaining to the science guys back home what happened to us. The lack of information made those paranoid SOBs even more paranoid. They were convinced that I had somehow fabricated the whole mess. I wish I were that smart.

But I know what happened. I don't know why I was partially immune to the effects of that off-white vegetation. Maybe it was because this poly-metallic plate in my forehead had shielded me somehow. Maybe I was just less sensitive to its effects than the others. There appeared to be a natural variability in human susceptibility to the monster, since not everybody on the Explorer was affected to the same degree. Or maybe it was because I'm better than most people in deciding what "truths" I want to believe are "real."* And as you well know by now, selective amnesia has always been one of my better talents. God knows, I've had enough thoughts I've been able to shut out of my consciousness for quite some time. They could probably write a book about my Space Fairer's Amnesia. (Actually, I think one of the brain doctors already has written that book!) Whatever the reason for my immunity, I know I was darn lucky.

The off-white vegetation was the galaxy's only known example of a psychic predator. It didn't have to run faster than its victim. It didn't have to use sharp claws or teeth. It didn't have to trap its victim in some type of sticky web. It didn't have to hunt in packs, or develop lethal technology. All it had to do was sit there, and get its victims to lie down on a nice soft bed. If it wasn't hungry, it could keep them for a while in its own private larder. I'm guessing most of this stuff, because the super-brains back at Deep Star just listened to me, and never explained anything back. But I figure that somehow the creature sent out brain waves (or something) that interfered with the normal brain activity in its victim. The victim was mentally stimulated with copious quantities of endorphins to keep it immobile, and sent into a strange hibernation to keep it alive. My guess is that when the thing finally ate, the mental waves (or whatever) that had kept the victim placid either changed somehow, or were reduced in intensity. This would allow the victim to awaken and finally understand his predicament. Total terror would take over for the last few seconds as the victim's endorphin-flooded coma lifted and the horrible reality of the situation was suddenly understood. Apparently, our ocular systems are the most sensitive portions of our neural anatomy, so they shut down first when assaulted by the creature. Hence, the unexplained darkness we all experienced. The

* If George Orwell's Big Brother ever shows up, I'm ready. I can double-think with the best of them!

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general disruption of our brain's normal thought processes explains why we all were so confused and uncertain. We didn't talk about it much on the way home, but most of us agreed that the creature's effect on us felt kind of like waking suddenly from a bad dream. You don't know where you are or what is happening, but you're scared. That creature is not the type I plan to invite to our next company picnic.

We are probably more susceptible to its influences than the cows on Harvey's World. I presume that the cows have evolved a partial immunity to the predator's attacks, at least at long distances. We human beings have not had fifty-thousand years in proximity to the creature, so evolution has not had enough time to provide us with any natural resistance. These cows were no Steven Hawkings either, so we may have been even more susceptible to the creatures' attacks simply due to our more complex brains and improved cognitive abilities. I guess that's why we succumbed so fast after arriving on Harvey's World, and why we were almost wiped out while the cows survive just fine as a species. We humans, who have never before been exposed to such a creature, were in danger the moment we touched down.

I'm not sure how the organism ingested its meals, but it was quick and very thorough. That's why we never found the bodies. Unfortunately, due to my screw-up in orbit, we never got a video log of the things actually eating. We know it was probably violent when it ate, based on the appearance of SN1 after Greer and Hasbrough bought it. But this violence also may have been due to their thrashing around in terror during the last few seconds rather than being due to the creature's messy eating habits, per se.

My psychic predator theory also explains why there were no carnivores noted on Harvey's World. The xenobiologists had always thought this was odd, and they were right. No world that we have ever encountered has been lacking a predator species. It's the classic food chain of photosynthesizing plants, to animals, to higher animals; every planet has to have one. Harvey's did have carnivores, it's just that we didn't recognize them as such.

Lots of people have not accepted my explanation for the psychic predator, since the video logs from Mother and George's e-suit don't show anything of the monster I saw with my human eyes. Some people have even accused me of fabricating the logs that do support my story. Since they know I messed with Mother once, they figure I messed with her lots of other times too. They say I must have altered Mother's programming, citing my Sleepy Time program and the bizarre

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nature of my tale as evidence. Also, I seem to have some kind of reputation as a rebel, although I'm not sure why. I say to them, "Fine, go ahead and visit Harvey's World if you want to." To my knowledge, nobody has taken me up on the offer and gone back yet.

There are still lots of unanswered questions, of course. Like, how does the psychic predator actually paralyze its prey? Does it send out thought waves? What is the nature of this radiation? Is it electromagnetic energy, or some entirely new form of radiation? Does the strength of these waves at a distance follow an inverse-square law like gravity, or is it linear? If thought waves exist, does this mean that mental telepathy may be possible? Could these predatory waves be shielded? I haven't got a clue about any of this stuff, or how it was that Jones and Sarco could remain alive for almost a year without eating or drinking. The super brains back at Deep Star were clueless about this too, but considering they are clueless about so many things, I guess this isn't so surprising.

Also, unanswered is the whole evolutionary question of how such a unique ecosystem developed. We've visited thirty other life-bearing worlds, but none has had any creature even remotely similar to that off-white vegetation. And what is in the oceans which cover ninety-five percent of Harvey's surface? I'm not going back to find out these answers, but I'm sure some people will eventually.

I'm also sure our military friends have thought of every question I just asked, and then some. Psychic weaponry strikes me as much too valuable to be ignored by the military. My guess is that they'll be the first ones back to Harvey's World. I'm not really looking forward to the advances they'll make to science, but they're inevitable, so there's no use whining over it.

The best thing is that I've completely forgotten about my Space Fairer's Amnesia. I can still see my assistant dying before my eyes, and still smell the odor of his burned flesh. I know that six men died on that mining ship because of my recklessness. Nothing I do can ever overcome that, or bring them back. But I also know that four people are alive today who would not be alive if it were not for me. So I'm still down two, which means I probably have to save three or four to pay back the universe with interest. That's why I'm off on my next rescue. There's a ship that's reported lost 1.4 light months from earth in the direction of Proxima Centauri. I volunteered for the rescue mission even before they could ask me. I don't know what happened to the ship, or if the crew is alive or dead, but I'm on my way to try to help.

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Oh, by the way, I heard that George and Sarco are coming too.