

Drip... drip... drip

It's amazing the things that wake us up. Don had become so accustomed to the roar of the ship's engines and the vibrations they caused, that it didn't so much as cause him to briefly wake before going back to sleep and forgetting that the entire incident had happened. But the barely audible dripping of water from the pipes caused him to shoot up. He was happy, as his brain came online, to realize that he wasn't drowning. But the happiness quickly faded as he realized the enormity of the situation. In a closed loop life support system, every drop lost from the pipes was a drop he would not be able to drink ever. Anger simmered, but for now he would have to keep it under control. He needed to keep his cool so he wouldn't make the problem any worse.

The first decision he had to make was whether to alert the captain. Sure, protocol was that a captain be alerted to every little thing that went wrong on the ship. Protocol was also a load of bullshit written by bureaucrats that had never been on a ship. If he went to the captain every time something went wrong, the captain would never get the chance to attend to captain duties. Don decided to figure out just how much was wrong before worrying about letting the captain know. He was the Chief Engineer after all. What a load of crap it was to be the chief of anything if you didn't have anyone under you.

To keep from alerting anyone else that he was even up, he just grabbed a flashlight and his tool belt. With luck he'd just have a joint to tighten and he wouldn't even have to fill out any of the stupid forms mandated by the government. Surely the captain didn't care too much about protocol since Don was allowed to fix all these small problems without bringing them up to the captain. But if something was reported, he had to fill out all the forms and if so much as one field was wrong, he had to find it and fix it. He hadn't determined yet if this was a ploy to keep him from reporting too much or if the captain was in fact a stickler for the rules and actually believed the government contractors who had built it had used some kind of magic technology that didn't suffer problems. Truly there was a thin line between a horrible and a magnificent boss. Don wasn't sure quite yet which the captain was.

As he moved through the hallway he heard the sound getting louder. At least the designers had had a sense of humor and built the ship with exposed pipes like in all the science fiction movies almost since the time of science fiction movies. In a way, when we finally had the technology to build the ships it would have been a shame to make them all sleek and deny our ancestors their visions of the future. So it was that Don would not have to make a hole in the wall just to find the leak. He saw the leak at the same time that his sock-enclosed left foot became saturated with water. Crap! This had been going on for long enough for a puddle to form. Don's thoughts began to cloud as the panic arose in him. As both his feet, now wet, began to become super-conductors for cold of the metallic floor he finally gave in to the chemical solution. He brought up his neural interface and requested the release of chemicals to counteract the adrenaline. Within seconds he was able to think clearly once again.

Now that his neural interface had finished loading, he loaded ship schematics as well as

eyesight enhancements. This told him that the pipe he was looking at was the recycled water. Given the gravity of the situation, he was embarrassed at his great relief that he wasn't not standing in a puddle of urine. The eyesight enhancements helped him find the source of the leak. There was a small crack in this section of pipe. He swept his gaze left and right and he was not informed of any other leaks. He had some adhesive in his belt that he could use to temporarily stop the leak. It would eventually come loose as the water stripped away the stickiness of the tape. He'd have to go to the supply room to get the crack sealant. At least the agency that stocked the ship hadn't been so short-sighted as to believe the contractors who assured the government that the ship was perfection itself.

After applying the tape, Don connected his neural implant to the ship's computers and requested a mop be sent to clean up the floor. He took off his socks and wrung them into the puddle. He didn't feel like carrying them around, so he hung them up on the no longer leaking pipe. He'd get back to it after repairing the pipe. He called up the time and was informed it was an hour until the lights would be turned on to simulate diurnal cycle. The supply room was right next to the cafeteria. He'd grab a quick breakfast before dealing with all this crap. It was better to be cognizant because you were treating your biological system correctly, not because some chemicals were being blasted into your brain. As he walked away, the thought of causing some stress for the mop by leaving a track of wet footprints gave him some joy.

He walked into the combined kitchen and dining area and saw Jessica sitting there. She had her eyes closed and her hands embraced a cup of tea. Unlike the women in days of old before ships with gravity had become cost-effective, she had long hair that went beyond her shoulders and covered her breasts when she was naked. Don didn't utter a greeting as Jessica often arose early specifically to meditate before everyone was up. He tried to tiptoe towards the pantry but the squeak of his wet feet gave him away. Slowly she opened her eyes and they focused on him. "What're you doing up?" she asked. She knew everyone's sleep schedules. It was hard not to when you were in close quarters week after week. But she was especially observant about these things. It was in her nature.

As Don debated how to answer, another part of his mind continued on the quest to get some cereal. He settled on the non-committal, "A noise startled me." The longer he could keep this going, the greater his chances of getting to eat.

She was suddenly behind him. He'd heard many people's movements described as cat-like, but he'd always chalked it up to exaggeration. Jessica had changed his mind. She embraced him from behind and cooed in a mocking tone, "Aw, was Don scared by the big ship?" Her tone shifted as her hands found their way under his shirt. "Need to talk about it?"

Don didn't need anything else clouding his mind now. He'd delayed long enough. Putting his cereal bowl on the counter, he spun around and saw her eyes looking up at him. Knowing he'd be cursing himself out for it a few hours from now, he swallowed and began, "Captain, there's a leak in the life support pipes. That's what I was investigating before I came in here." Whatever had been behind her eyes before disappeared - she was instantly a different person. If Don

hadn't already had a few women in his life, he would have sworn this was proof that Jessica was a bot. He'd never be able to figure out how women did that. His own body still hadn't gotten the message that it was time for action of a different sort.

When Don came out of contemplation he realized she was standing a few feet away and was speaking, "stomach. Don, are you listening? Look, I understand you need to eat, but this is the top priority. Grab a nutrient bar and get to work. I want a full report by lunchtime. As soon as this is over you are to fill in all required incident report forms as well as forms explaining why I was not immediately alerted." She was throwing the full force of the bureaucracy at him. He'd pissed her off really bad. It'd probably be a while before they were speaking as anything other than a Captain and her Chief Engineer. "We are to keep this incident a secret from all on board as long as possible. That is all." And she turned, her hair whipping around as a bit of physical punctuation, and left towards her quarters. Don let out a huge sigh, put the bowl away, grabbed a nutrient bar and headed for the supply room.

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Jessica was fuming as she headed to her quarters. Her meditation had been interrupted; there was a potential disaster going on and Don decided to fill his belly; they were on a very important mission. She hoped Don could work quickly so they could keep this under wraps. She'd make him fill out all the forms, but she would delay sending them. She had built up a bit of a queue, but it didn't matter at this point. The engineers had made great strides and they had finally conquered faster-than-light travel, but they were still weeks away from Earth and weeks away from their destination. Also, no other ship on Earth was as fast as the Hermes. So there wasn't anything they could do. By the time she got back, no one would care as long as the mission went as planned. Of course, there was also the whole relativity thing screwing up time. She didn't understand it - she was an electrical engineer not a physicist - but basically while only a few weeks had passed for her, years were passing back on Earth. The clever scientists hadn't yet figured out super-light speed communications, so she was actually traveling faster than any of her messages could travel. It was annoying to think about that so she stopped.

She only had twenty minutes before everyone else would be awake and she'd have to taken on all the responsibilities of being the captain again. That was perfect. She had found that, for some reason, meditation at hyper speed was orders of magnitude more intense than on Earth. It was more satisfying than any Earthly feeling. She had never used recreational drugs back home, but she sometimes wondered if she was becoming addicted. She craved meditation with nearly the same intensity and urgency that she had once felt for oxygen when she almost drowned as a child. Twenty minutes was just enough to reach peak before she had to come out of it.

She set her neural implant to give off a soft alarm in twenty minutes and, given the privacy of her quarters, stripped and lay on her bed. She started her mantra before she had even closed her eyes. Within seconds she was connected to the universal field.

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Of course, part of taking orders is parsing the contradictions in those orders. While Don was ordered to take care of the issue as soon as possible, he was also ordered to be discreet. He didn't think anyone would believe his cover about routine repairs if he was still in his boxers and t-shirt. So he first went back to his quarters to change into his work clothes. This would also help him out since it had tons of pockets for holding the various tools he'd need. Passing by the leak, he noticed that the puddle had been cleaned and the adhesive was still holding. So far so good. He had about fifteen minutes to do as much as he could before the lights came on. With only the emergency lighting on no one would notice the adhesive. He'd almost passed it and he knew where it was.

As he dressed, he requested for his neural implant to begin searching the ship's documentation so he would know which tools he needed to grab when he got to the supply room. Even though it wasn't required by protocol, he also had his implant draft Jessica a message of apology. Since he didn't want to be too formal, he sent it to her personal account rather than the official account that would be part of the official records of this trip and subject to government review.

Jess,

Sorry about this morning. Maybe I can make it up to you later? q;o)

Then he thought about her temperament and how big of a screw-up it'd been. He erased the second sentence and sent it. He grabbed the tools he thought he might need to supplement whatever he needed in the supply closet and headed out of the room.

With his visual enhancements he could detect a microbulge starting to form in the adhesive as he passed it again. It would probably have held for a few hours without problems if they weren't able to repair it. After that, things would get hairy. There was only so much adhesive. That's the problem with a trip this long - you don't know how much to pack and the more mass you have to move the more energy you use. Don was a mechanical engineer so he wasn't sure of all the details, but he was sure when they were accelerating that they were using something equivalent to all the power generated on Earth every couple hours. And, eventually they'd start the deceleration process and it'd be the same all over again.

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Jessica's alarm brought her out of her deep meditation. She turned it off and brought herself the rest of the way out. She tried to grasp onto the ethereal feeling of literally being one with the universe. But, as with sexual climax, it was like grasping at air. The feeling was quickly gone and any attempts to remember it were so inadequate as to be laughable. She was more alert and full of energy than before, but the high was gone until he next time. The energy welled up and required release so she jumped out of bed and was thankful to still have such responsive muscles. She quickly dressed and nearly ran to the front of the ship to expend some of the

energy.

The lights were slowly increasing in intensity in an attempt to mimic a sunrise. The psychologists had said it was important. Jessica wasn't sure of that, but it definitely helped the eyes adjust better than instantly coming on. She entered the navigation room and found Serge asleep in his pilot's chair. "Serge, are you asleep at the wheel?!?" she barked. She had to suppress an un-captain-like giggle as he literally fell out of his chair.

In reality there was no reason for her to care whether or not he was attending to his duties. The course had been carefully plotted out before they left the planet. At any rate, it would be ludicrous for someone to attempt to pilot a ship at hyper speed. Let a human drive at that speed and they'd be deep in some star's plasma in no time. His job was to ensure the ship was proceeding along the guided path and to steer once we were within two planetary orbits of the destination. The rest was just waiting. But Jessica ran a tight ship and so he had to be awake and staring at the console whether or not he was engaged in navigation. After all, on a trip this long, if you went soft too early, there would be complete chaos by the time the ship arrived - perhaps even mutiny. Unlike the ancient days of sea travel on Earth, a captain put into a lifeboat was as good as dead.

She watched as he tried to gain control of his limbs, his consciousness, and protocol all at once. It culminated in a wild-armed salute that nearly knocked him back onto his rear. "Sorry, Captain," he apologized. She started at him until she was sure he got the point that she should not find him this way again and that perhaps he should set his alarm next time.

"How are we progressing?" she inquired, softening her tone while remaining official.

"I had a bit of insomnia last night, so I decided to check over the charts," he started. Jessica made a note of the fact that two people had mentioned trouble sleeping. She filed it away so she would later be able to tell if a trend was forming or if this was just an isolated incident. "We appear to be progressing a bit," he paused, making sure his wording was as precise as possible, "a bit more slowly than we should be."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Well, I started to notice things looked a bit off about three days ago and I've been tracking our progress since. I still need to do a few more calculations, but I'm starting to feel more confident that we are a bit off track."

This was starting to be a very trying day. Two instances of being undermined. She was the captain, dammit! She was supposed to be told things like this right away. She opened her mouth to express these very thoughts in, perhaps, a less professional way than she should, when she was interrupted by the sound of the door opening.

In the doorway stood their primary payload, the main reason they were on this mission that was

beginning to get out of her control. She quickly changed her demeanor and hoped that Serge wouldn't be too dense to do so as well. "Ambassador," she smiled, "What brings you to the navigation room?" He waddled in, extending an arm towards her. He was fat, almost comically so as the current food shortage on Earth made it vogue to be rotund as a symbol of wealth.

"It is just, dear Captain, that we were supposed to have breakfast together and I didn't see you in the dining area," he said, returning her smile. At that moment Jessica finally allowed herself a second to check with her implant. Of course, it had a suppressed alarm for breakfast. She'd turned off all notifications so she would be able to think clearly about the leak and had forgotten to turn them back on. She also noticed a message from Don that would have to wait. And, as if he knew she was checking her messages, Don appeared in the doorway.

She quickly brought up a private chat with him.

you: Well?

"Ambassador, my apologies for keeping you waiting. I merely had to speak with the pilot this morning and was just about to head over to breakfast." She reluctantly allowed him to take her hand.

Don: We're good. Repaired. I'll debrief you later.

you: Good. Meet me in my quarters in two hours.

She hoped it really wouldn't take two hours to dine with the Ambassador. She loathed everything about him. His slovenly figure was an affront to the hours she put in at the ship's minuscule workout area. It didn't help that it was the best way to show off among the much thinner crowds on Earth. And it positively irked her that he was constantly flirting with her and making sexual advances even though his wife was also a passenger on the ship. Clearly his years of diplomatic immunity on Earth had made him brazen, thinking he was above all rules. He also loved to sarcastically pay lip service to her superior role on the ship. He knew, as far as the government was concerned, he was the most important person on board.

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Like many science fiction authors before him such as Clarke and Verne, Stephenson had been right about the dissolution of the nation-state. As the countries in the mid-21st century lost their traditional identities as immigrant populations swelled while retaining their home cultures, the meaning found behind physical borders grew pointless. So people founded sovereign entities based on religion, race, profession, class, and every other category that had ever divided humanity since there were enough humans that family ties were no longer enough. This did not remove the need for trade, inter-sovereign law, and mediation in disputes. So the United Nations morphed into the United Enclaves. Given that these new entities were based entirely on otherness, this new body was able to get even less done than before. But it did provide a framework for cooperation on the day of First Contact.

No, we didn't suddenly form one world government in a unity of humanity against the alien. But it was agreed that no enclave wanted any of the others to be the one to represent Earth to the rest of the universe. The First Contact was a message from the Others stating they had received our radio and television programming as it had bounced off into space. Once they had been able to figure out that this was a signal and not just background noise, they spent several years reverse engineering it. After that, they listened for a few more years to build up the vocabulary to contact us in a language and format we could understand.

Of course, that led to a strange vocabulary of words from the past few decades and, of course, skepticism that the signal was genuine. Scientists devised a series of tests to prove to themselves that they were not the target of an elaborate hoax. Once they were convinced, they listened to the full, repeating message. It was an invitation to send an Ambassador to a universal governing body. There it would be evaluated whether they would share some technology with us, allowing faster interstellar travel as well as faster-than-light communication. It contained instructions on how to reply and where to head. For solar systems in our neck of the woods that meant an orbital station near Alpha Centari.

The governments immediately decided that we had to go. We couldn't be left out of this technology transfer and the ability to see the stars. And, of course, some Enclaves dreamt of conquering those stars as well. They eventually decided upon using the United Enclaves as a neutral body for creation of the Hermes as well as for selection of the diplomat to represent Earth. A message was drafted affirming that we would be heading there as soon as we could get the technology ready. Four years and 10 seconds later, we got confirmation of the receipt of our message.

And here Jessica was, Captain of this ship at 26. Chosen as much for her degrees and career as for the fact that she had neither husband nor child that would suddenly be much older thanks to relativity. Walking through the hallway with Frank, the person Earth somehow chose to represent them to the rest of the galaxy. As he prattled on about something, she sent a message to Serge telling him to be ready with his best explanation of what was going on by the end of the day. The best the engineers had been able to do was to get the ship to Alpha Centari in six months. She couldn't stand being with Frank any longer than necessary. At these speeds, a slowdown could lead to another month or so with him. She was really hoping that, slowdown or not, Frank would be staying on the station rather than coming home with them.

When she reached the dining area and saw the quantity of food spread out on the table by the ambassador's fat wife, she almost hit the roof. But she just didn't have the energy to tell them, for the umpteenth time, that they needed to conserve food for the trip. They were used to such an abundance back on Earth that they couldn't fathom a limit to the food. They weren't stupid, but for some reason their minds were unable to process this fact. They probably reasoned that Jessica was being stingy and keeping some for herself. They'd get frugal for a few days after each reprimand before going back to their insane habits. At this rate any delays might result in her having to barricade the ambassador and his wife in their room to keep them from eating all

the food. She cherished the thought and allowed a smile to creep onto her lips. The wife began some story of a diplomatic mission to some Confucian Enclave and Jessica wished that an alarm bell would go off somewhere so she could excuse herself.

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Don was wandering the hallways looking for other cracks. After all, if there was one cracked pipe, there could be others. So far he hadn't spotted any other problems. That made sense, because if a dramatic amount of water had gone missing from the system, an alarm would have gone off. An alarm went off.

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Jessica looked up from her food. She wondered if perhaps her meditation had given her some kind of causal powers before dismissing that as ridiculous. She ignored the sounds of the alarm, the ambassador, and his wife. She called up the ship's computer on her implant and saw that the alarm was coming from the navigation room. She mumbled something about a government mandated drill in an attempt to placate them and she bolted towards the front of the ship, leaving the two dead weights to eat their food.

She arrived seconds before Don. She bolted the door to keep the cargo from finding out what was going on. They both looked at Serge. "Well, it looks like my theory was right. The question is what we do about it?" he said.

"And what was your theory?" Jessica asked, impatient that he didn't begin with this relevant information.

"Well, it appears that the navigation system was slowing because it was discovering objects it didn't know about." He was met with nonplussed stares from Jessica and Don. "Well, you guys know how the computer was programmed to do all the navigation until we got close? The reason for that was that we're flying at more than four times the speed of light. There's no way I could respond to that. Technically, there's no way the computer could respond to that either, so they had to program in all the stars, planets, comets, and other junk we have to evade up here. It looks like the computer has been discovering objects it didn't know were out here. So it's been slowing in an attempt to not turn us into a metallic pancake."

This didn't make sense to Don. After all, what the hell did astronomers do if not stare at the sky all the time. "How could there be planets we didn't know about?"

Serge looked to Jessica for help, but she hadn't put the dots together in her head yet. "Think back to elementary school, man. Planets don't emit light - only stars do. All we see are stars. For the planets we just have to guess based on how much they make a star wobble around. So there are multiple solutions to that question. One massive planet or a bunch of little ones are going to tug in ways that perhaps we can't see. Now, if you take into account comets and other

things that are cosmically tiny, we aren't going to be able to see finely enough to detect them. So the computer is slowing the ship to compensate. The problem is two-fold. First of all, this magnifies how long it takes to get there and I'm not sure we have enough supplies. Second, if we waste our fuel to lower our speed we may not have enough to raise it again later and still have fuel to get back. I'm not sure they are planning to have a way to recharge our ship."

"OK," Jessica said, taking all of this in, "what are our options?"

"Well, we can override the safety system and tell the ship to get back to the right speed or we can let it continue to slow us until it feels comfortable at its present speed."

"Don?"

Don shook his head, "This ship isn't made of any kind of super material that can survive any impact of that kind. Shoot, even something the size of a basketball could do some serious damage if it hit in the right spot. It's obviously for you guys to choose, but I'm for allowing the computer to slow itself, at least for now."

Jessica silenced the alarm. "OK. I'm not going to say anything to Frank for now. And I don't want any of you to speak of this to them. We don't need the non-techies screwing anything up. Serge, I want you to see if you can think of any alternatives, but for now, let the ship continue to slow. Keep me updated and let me know if it falls below half speed. Don, you owe me a debrief, let's get that over with." And with that, they left Serge alone, wondering what had happened with Don's systems and what he was going to do about the ship.

Jessica figured Frank would probably be waiting outside her door with questions, so she led Don to his quarters. She locked the door and sat on his bed. "Alright, so what's up with the pipes?" He recounted what he had done to fix the leak how he had walked the hallways and was unable to find any other sites of leakage. Afterwards, he sat next to her. Grabbing her shoulder, he caused them to both lean back. Exhaustion overcame them both and within seconds they were fast asleep.

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There were two other government employees that everyone had forgotten about. That's because they were lying in deep sleep in a room in a hallway that had not been walked since the first week or two of the voyage. This did not involve some kind of science fiction suspended animation state. After all, they were only traveling for a total of six months. Instead, they lay in coffin-like beds where they were drip-fed nutrients and their neural implants kept them in a state of deep sleep. Small, simple nano-machines sent periodic convulsive electrical signals throughout their muscles to keep them from atrophy. To anyone who would have looked into the beds, they would have seemed to be very restless sleepers.

With two months to go, the programming in one of their implants changed. It was time to begin

slowly bringing Fatima back to consciousness. As the ship's psychologist, she was supposed to evaluate their condition and whether the mission could go forward. After all, we wouldn't want a delegation of mad men to be our first impression upon the galaxy. Of course, with the government's decision to save money on food by having the psychologist travel unconscious for the first two thirds of the trip, they had left open the possibility that she would awaken to a ship full of crazy people. Being the government, no one had thought of that. Being a psychologist, it had been in her nightmares for the past four months. She would certainly be quite glad to be awake.

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Jessica awoke from a nightmare of Frank forcing himself upon her. She shuddered, waking Don. Desperate to get the image out of her head, she started kissing Don.

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In order to allow for maximum privacy with minimal chances of problems, each living space had a small shower built into a closet. It was only big enough for one person and as Don showered, Jessica mused about how Frank or his wife were able to fit into the showers. She definitely had to talk to the scientists when she got back to Earth about the effects of hyper speed travel on the mind. Just the amount they had slowed already made her recent orgasm feel so dull compared to the one a few days ago. Now she somewhat dreaded meditation. It would be like suddenly finding that your drugs had had their potency cut in half out of nowhere. She still craved it like a junkie and wondered if she'd just go for longer to compensate. She was dragged out of her thoughts by the fact that Don was staring at her with a dopey grin. "You look cute when you're deep in thought," he said and she threw a pillow at him and got up to shower.

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The ship's computer detected the shift in its speed and linearly adjusted the sequence of chemicals arousing Fatima. For the time being she was stuck in a lucid dream. She had been dreaming for so long that her consciousness and unconsciousness weren't quite synced up to what was happening. In her dream she had suddenly gained the power to affect the normal rules of causality.

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When Jessica emerged from the shower, she found her clothes in a pile at the corner of the bed and Don was bent over the side of the bed looking for something. He sheepishly sat up, having found her underwear. He handed it over to her and sent her a chat.

Don: Wow.....I should hope for leaky pipes more often
you: jackass. It's not like it was that long since the last time. Go check if the door's clear.

She had no idea whether or not it was an open secret that she was involved with Don, but until she found out that others knew, she'd keep up the act. It certainly made it easier on a three person crew if it didn't seem as though anything was going on between the boss and the underlings.

Don: No sign of Frank. Any cover story for where we've been?

you: Is the engine room kept locked?

Don: Yeah, don't want anyone accidentally walking in there.

you: Then we were working on making sure the engines were working correctly. See you later.

And with that, she left towards the navigation room.

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As soon as Jessica stepped into the room, Serge declared, "Great news. We've been contacted by the Others. They want to know why we've slowed. They knew we wouldn't be able to answer right away, so they sent this," and he punched up some electrical schematics on the screen. "It's lucky as hell that you're an electrical engineer."

"Is this what I think it is?"

"Yeah. They said in their communications that they'd gone ahead and fast-tracked their deployment of the near-instant comms to us. After all, at the our current distance from Earth, they'd know something was up before we could get the message out back to Earth if we decided to double-cross them."

Jessica almost wasn't even paying attention to that last part. She was dialing into the ship's computer to figure out what modifications she had to make to the current comms technology to implement their solution. "OK, I'll get to work on this back in my quarters. You're on duty to babysit the ambassador during lunch. Clean up this area in case he wants to come in here after lunch. I don't want anyone but you and I to know about this. I am not to be disturbed. In fact," and an evil smile crossed her face, "if the ambassador insists on knowing why, tell him it's female problems." She had discovered that he was especially squeamish on that topic and figured it would keep him out of her hair long enough to do what she had to do.

She left the navigation room and took the most direct route to her quarters. Luckily, Frank was not waiting there. She quickly ducked inside and locked the door. She set the locks to the highest authorization code so that no one else would be able to open the door but her. Finally, some peace. She silenced all comms in her implant and looked at her bed. It called to her. So she decided to go ahead and take the plunge and meditate for a little while. She removed her clothes quicker than she had ever done for any lover, got into bed, and began her mantra.

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Serge didn't despise the ambassador. He found him a bore, but that didn't bother Serge too much. He had long ago figured out how to entertain himself in his implant while still hearing enough of the conversation to have plausible deny-ability if he were accused of not listening. It also helped that he recorded the conversation so he could play back a short segment while he pretended to think about what had just been said. It had helped him with his mother and with his ex-wife. It was doubly useful on the ambassador. While the women in his life had talked on and on in an attempt to connect emotionally, the ambassador seemed to just like the sound of his own voice. The flimsiest displays of attention were enough to keep him going.

When he arrived at the dining area the Frank was talking with his wife. Serge couldn't ever remember her name, but it didn't bother him because no one else seemed to either. If he really wanted, he could call it up on the manifest, but until he needed to get her attention, he figured he wouldn't bother.

He cued up one of his favorite films while he got into the right rhythm of nodding his head and making acknowledgement noises. The ambassador was retelling his favorite story about being ambassador to the Muslim Enclave. Even though he had told everyone on the ship at least twice, he would always begin with, "Stop me if I've told you this one before." Serge smiled. It was always easiest not to pay attention when people were telling their favorite stories.

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Jessica's cover story had inspired Don to go ahead and take a look at the engine health. He pulled up the logs on his implant. Everything was working correctly although the fuel source was lower than it should be due to the adjustments to the speed. Serge was a good pilot and he had put the ship into a mode where it would only lower the speed, but not try to increase it again if it thought things were clear. That could lead to a serious lack of fuel when it came time to decelerate near their destination.

Well, he was out of stuff to do again. In a way, now that he looked back on it, he had really enjoyed the stress of fixing the leak. It had been weeks since he'd had anything serious to attend to. The only thing that got him out of his quarters most days was a chance that Jessica would be in the right mood. He pulled up the time, and figured he probably had another hour until Frank would leave the dining area. He just didn't feel like dealing with the bullshit today. Perhaps he could just relax for a while and explore the ship's computer. He'd been exploring the various subsystems that ran the ship because he figured it might actually turn out to be useful if something really out of the ordinary happened. He'd been surprised, delighted, and then annoyed to find that one of the programmers had hidden a game of tic tac toe in the code. After a while he got so angry that he began to plot the revenge he would exact on the programmer if that game turned out to be the reason something important on the ship malfunctioned. He wondered what he might find today

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The next morning Don's alarm woke him up as the lights were coming on. He'd fallen asleep exploring the system and had missed lunch and dinner. His stomach growled louder than he'd heard in a long time. He managed to drag himself to the shower first. Afterward he headed to the dining area, hoping to finally satisfy his craving for some cereal. After all, he'd been denied since yesterday. Serge was sitting there, staring into a bowl of pho. "Wake up!" Don joked. Serge jerked his head up. His eyes were bloodshot. "What's the matter, no sleep?" Serge nodded slowly. "What kept you up?"

"I don't know. I just couldn't sleep. I usually just sit in my seat and eventually fall asleep. Instead I just stared at the the star charts."

Don sat at the table with his milk-drenched cereal and asked, "Where's the Captain anyway? She's usually sitting here when I get here."

"Haven't seen her," he looked around to make sure no one else was around, "I guess she's deep into working on her project. I thought she might have figured it out by now, but it did look like some pretty complex stuff." As though he had suddenly figured out that he had food in front of him, he plunged his chopsticks into the bowl and began to eat.

Don shrugged and dug into his own breakfast.

**

"You know, you'd think this was something the designers explicitly wouldn't have allowed!" Don was yelling at the air, but Serge was the only one around to hear it. It had been two days since anyone had seen or heard from Jessica. He'd tried leaving her messages for the past few days, and eventually noticed that she must have had notifications turned off. He decided to go and see what was going on, but now he discovered that her door was locked to anyone but her. "Are there any overrides?"

Serge shook his head, "As the Captain, she's the one with ultimate access. None of us could override her. Makes sense, mutiny-wise."

Don paced back and forth. There had to be SOME way to override this. He looked over the door, but there weren't any hinges or other structural features to take advantage of. "Look, I'm going to go back over the engineering manuals in my quarters. Maybe something will come to me. I'm giving your implant access to the doorway monitoring so you can see if this one opens. Let me know right away if she comes out." And Don turned and ran to his room. Something there had to help. What if she'd had a heart attack or something?

Sitting on his bed, he started constructing searches through the manual to try and figure out how to override the doors or, in the worst cast scenario, how to physically defeat the system. He even started fantasizing about an action-hero-like sequence in which he went through the ventilation system. Laying on his bed jogged some synapse in his brain and he suddenly had an

idea. Perhaps his weeks of prodding the ship's computers would prove to be fruitful. It already gave him a leg-up in knowing where to look within the system. It might take some time, but at least he didn't feel impotent anymore. "I'm on my way, Jess," he whispered.

**

Serge had gone to his quarters. It'd been days since he'd really used it. The bed was neatly made, having remained unused for weeks. He just found himself falling asleep a "the wheel" more often than not. And, it allowed him to already be at his post if something happened.

Looking into the bathroom mirror he realized he had a week's worth of beard. His ex-wife would not have allowed him to get to this point. After a day, she would complain that it poked her lips when they kissed, poked her back when they spooned, and it interfered with her enjoyment of intimate moments when it poked her legs. When they'd divorced, he'd grown it for two months out of the freedom to do so. Then it got too annoying to maintain it to where he didn't look like a kung fu villian and he shaved it all off. Around that time he'd started working in space and it was discouraged for 'nauts to have beards. Wasn't considered professional. Technically he shouldn't have one now, but the Captain was in a bit of a frenzied state when she'd last seen him. And now she'd been locked up for a while. He was surprised that they didn't have a mental health professional. Every time he'd been on an extended space mission there'd been someone there to make sure no one in the crew got the space crazies. And, if they did, the doors were usually locked from the outside. Something tugged at the back of his brain, but he chalked it up to the sleep deprivation. Well, he figured he was due for a shower and a shave and maybe that'd wake him up.

**

Don had finally figured out a hole in the system. But he didn't want to exploit it until he was at her door. He wanted to be the first one in. In fact, he revoked Serge's access to the doorway monitoring. Once he was standing right outside her door, he activated his exploit. The door opened. He quickly went inside and locked the door again. Looking into the room, he saw he laying naked on her bed. She seemed too still. Moving in closer, he saw her chest was moving, so he sighed in relief that she wasn't dead. But it seemed too shallow. "Jess," he called out. No response. He didn't want to shake her at first in case she had somehow suffered a spinal injury. It didn't seem likely since she was not laying there as if she'd been in an accident, but he decided not to chance it. Lowering himself to his knees, he put his lips to her ear and spoke, at a normal volume, "Jess."

She shot up, gasping. She looked around wildly and fell out of bed right onto Don. He grabbed her to keep her from thrashing about and hurting herself and noticed her eyes seemed unfocused. He held on a little tighter until she stopped moving. She blinked and seemed to see him. "What's going on?!?" she said, a bit too loud. "What am I doing on the floor? Why are you in here?" He released her and slumped back, unable to answer. Just happy she was acting normally again. She stood up and repeated, "What's going on?"

“You were lying there and when I tried to rouse you, you went all nuts. What the hell?”

“I was deep in meditation, I need to come up gradually so it’s not too much of a shock. Why did you wake me? What’re you doing in here anyway? I thought I locked the door so that only I could open it.”

“Jess, it’s been two days.” Watching her face, he realized this was a revelation to her. “Have you been in a trance for 48 hours?”

“Oh god. Oh god.” She collapsed to the ground repeating the phrase.

Don was immediately at her side. “What is it? What’s going on?” And she explained to him how she’d become addicted to the euphoria and how it’d diminished with the slowing of the ship.

“Oh crap! The ship! I need to get the solution documented,” And she annotated it in her implant and beamed it to Don. “Get this to Serge right away. The two of you can get started while I get cleaned up.”

Don shook his head. “No way. I’m not leaving you alone until we figure this out. Go shower. I’ll wait here.” She opened her mouth to argue, but she knew he was right. She mouthed a ‘thank you’ and entered the shower.

**

As Jessica dried off, she tried to focus on the task ahead and not on the fact that she was not officially an addict. She steeled herself, something she prided herself on being able to do, and walked out and into the room. After dressing she nodded to Don and they headed to the navigation room. As soon as they entered, Serge looked at her pleadingly. In front of him, with his back turned to her was Frank, yelling something at Serge. “May I help you?” she asked.

“Just where have you been for the past two days? I have knocked on your door and left you messages and yet I have been ignored. Have you forgotten that I am the Ambassador-”

“No, I have not,” she cut him off, “however, it appears you have forgotten that I am the captain of this ship. That means I am the supreme authority on this ship. And if I am unable to attend to your every whim, that is just too bad. And now I must ask you to retire to your room because I have business to attend to here.” The Ambassador fumed and did not move. He looked as though he might strike her, and looked for support from the other men in the room. Serge was looking elsewhere, but something in the look in Don’s eyes put him at great unease.

He stomped out of the room yelling, “There will be a cable back to the United Enclave about this!”

Jessica locked the door. "Ok, enough of that crap. Here's what we have to build. It's mostly some logic changes and a few other tweaks we can manage. It's going to take a while, but we can do this. Don, I want you to get into the ship's systems and disable Frank's transmissions. Make it seem like they're still getting out. Just route them to a temp queue. Once we get this working, Earth is going to know something weird's going on if they suddenly start getting instantaneous communications from us. Then we need to draft an answer for the Others."

**

Twelve hours later they had the design complete. Jessica had decided they would send out a test message first. They decided to keep it nice and simple, "Test. Did you receive this?" They all looked at each other. She nodded and Serge sent the message out. A simple reply arrived:

YES

So they sent out a message explaining the situation. A few minutes later they received a message.

ATTACHED ARE THE LATEST STAR CHARTS. PLEASE ENTER THEM INTO THE NAVIGATION SYSTEM. CONTACT US IF ANYTHING ELSE IS NEEDED

And so Serge got to the task of converting the star chart into a format that the computer could use. "Man, why couldn't it be like the old classic, Independence Day? Aliens use a computer system compatible enough to ours that we could send them a virus."

Jessica and Don retired to a pair a seats in the corner of the room.

you: Thanks for that before. But now what?

Don: I'm thinking I need to revoke your ability to lock doors that I can't open. But otherwise we can keep it between the two of us.

you: OK. Thanks again.

Don: Of course. At any rate, it shouldn't be a problem now that we'll be going back to hyper speed. It doesn't mean I don't want to keep an eye on you. But, at least temporarily it shouldn't be too big of an issue.

"Hey guys, I got it all entered in. The computer's updating the program based on the new charts. I think, within a few minutes, we should be back up to speed. I'll have to double check, but I think we only lost about a week."

**

A few weeks later the computer determined it was time to wake Fatima. She woke up... or did she? She'd had so many dreams where she'd woken up that she couldn't tell. And what about the team, would they be crazy? She hoped not. They'd done all kinds of horrible things in her

dreams. They'd become cannibalistic and eaten each other, with the Captain coming after her and chasing her all over the ship. Another time, the government had lied about the radiation safety of the ship design and they'd all become grotesque monsters. Yet another dream involved the men having resented taking any orders from women and had brutally murdered the captain.

As she entered the hallway, it was dark. Was this a good or a bad sign? Had the crew all died and left the ship in such disrepair that only the emergency features were still functioning? She tip-toed towards the center of the ship. Suddenly she came across one of the men. He whipped around with his knife, ready to plunge it into her. She shrieked and turned to run. She looked behind her and saw him following her with the knife. Oh god! Why hadn't they had her awake the whole time? The whole crew had gone crazy. Such thoughts occupying her mind were what kept her from seeing the one pipe that the inspectors had allowed to go across the hall because it was vital for the navigation systems. Everyone had hit their head on it during the first week on the ship and made a note to be careful in the future. The more computer savvy had set their implants to give them a warning to remind them to duck. None of them had run into it going at their top speed. Which is why no one except Fatima was ever knocked out cold.

**

The crew was gathered in the Captain's quarters, the largest room on the ship. On the bed lay Fatima, brought there by Don after he saw her run straight into the pipe. The crack of her skull against the pipe had led him to believe that she must have busted it, but she only appeared to have a nasty bruise on her forehead. "So," asked Serge, "why do we have a naked chick running around our ship?"

"It's the ship psychologist," Jessica answered.

"Dummy," Don added under his breath.

"We have a psychologist on the ship? Where's she been?" Serge still seemed a bit uncertain of the whole idea as if it were more plausible that they had a random stowaway that he remained undetected all this time.

Don answered him, "Didn't you pay attention during our briefings? She's been unconscious the whole time so she wouldn't need to eat anything." Which was a good thing given how the Ambassador and his wife ate.

Fatima's eyes began to flutter and she cowered away to the corner of the bed, yelling about not being eaten. The three of them exchanged nonplussed looks and when they looked back, Fatima was standing with Jessica's chair over her head, "Don't come any closer!"

Serge smirked, "So where's the naked psychologist for our naked psychologist?" Jessica glared at him and he apologized.

Jessica searched through the manifest and located her name. "Fatima, what's the matter? What's got you spooked?" She didn't seem responsive, although the sound of her name did seem to have calmed her a bit. Fatima continued to hold the chair above her head. Jessica decided to do something she was against, but it seemed to be the only option. She used her position as captain to override Fatima's implant and triggered it to release opiates. Everyone waited in suspense for a minute until she lowered the chair as it became too heavy for her drugged muscles. Don was quickly behind her to keep her from getting yet another head injury. "Put her on my bed and look up where her living quarters are and bring her uniform. Serge, get back to your position and make sure everything's ok there."

After Don returned with her clothes and they got her dressed, they debated what to do. Eventually it was decided that Don would gently tie her to the chair so that if she woke up spooked, she'd be restrained while they talked her back to reality. Just as Don was finishing up, Fatima began to wake. "Fatima," Jessica said in what she hoped were reassuring tones, "hello. Are you alright?"

She started to yell incoherently and Jessica put her finger to her lips. "Ssh. It's ok. Fatima, it's us. Remember Don? And I'm Jessica, the Captain?" Slowly Fatima calmed and nodded. "What happened?"

"He came after me with a knife," she said, looking at Don, "Have you all gone mad out here in space? Are you cannibals?"

"No. Everything is OK. Everyone appears to be sane. At least, no one's done anything crazy." Jessica replied. Well, except you running around naked. "Don was just working on lunch when he saw you run naked through the hallway. He forgot to put his knife away because he was in shock. We'd all kinda forgotten about you and Nadine. After seeing each other constantly every day for the past few months, we can barely even remember our old acquaintances back home. Listen, I'm a bit worried that the way they had you guys traveling might have messed with your head a little. That's why we have you tied up. You hurt your head really badly running away from Don and we don't want you to get hurt. Do you think you're OK now?"

"I know it's cliché, but can you pinch me?" Fatima asked. When Jessica and Don looked at each other quizzically, she continued, "You know how they always say it's the only way to know you're not in a dream. It's actually true. And, all this time that I've been asleep, I've had constant dreams and nightmares in which I thought I had woken up only to end up in another dream. So..." Jessica decided to comply. Fatima winced, "OK, OK. I'll accept that this is real. I might need a few days to get my head straight. Please forgive me if I do anything strange between now and then. And please, Captain, give me some time to get collected before I do my scheduled evaluations."

"Fine with me," Jessica said and hoped that, finally, everything that was going to go wrong had gone wrong.

**

Jessica was feeling pretty good again. There were only two weeks left until they reached their destination and nothing else had gone wrong. Fatima had slowly gotten better and was participating in the daily activities with everyone. She had scheduled everyone's evaluation and Jessica had agreed to post-date it so that the government wouldn't give her a hard time when they got back to Earth.

They'd looked on the computer and found out that today Nadine would be waking up, so she was waiting in the room with Nadine's uniform in an attempt to prevent a repeat of Fatima's situation. The top half of the bed raised up and her head poked out. "What day is it?" she asked.

"We have two more weeks until we arrive. Here's your clothes." Jessica handed Nadine her clothes.

"So, how's the trip been so far?" She asked jovially. Jessica grimaced and recounted the ordeals of the past five and a half months. "Next time you should travel the way I did! Just wake up and everything's been taken care of." Nadine said with a smile. "Well, I'll have to meet Frank again and debrief him on how we're going to make sure there aren't any misunderstandings with our dealings with the Others."

Jessica took her into the dining area where everyone was having breakfast. "Everyone, this is Nadine. Nadine, this is Don, Serge, and Ambassador Frank and his wife. In case everyone forgot, she's on board to make sure we don't embarrass ourselves in front of the universe. After breakfast she has to meet with Frank. Then she may have a word with the rest of us if she feels that she needs to."

**

Jessica was standing with Serge when it was time to begin decelerating. They were on the edge of the solar system containing the station where they were supposed to dock. Although the computer would still be handling most of the steering, he now had a much more active role until they finally arrived. They were also able to open up the solar panels to save as much energy as possible for the return trip. They weren't getting much energy now, but it would steadily increase. As soon as it was possible they would move the lighting systems over to the solar power. Just seven Earth days to go.

When she returned to her cabin Don was there on her computer. Don had been tweaking the new communication design to start sending out the reports Jessica had been holding back so that they would arrive at the right time as if she had been sending them on time. "Almost done," he said, "Soon you'll be writing the official message that we've arrived. Do you know what you're going to write?"

“I’ve got something in mind.” But, in reality, she still wasn’t sure. She’d been wracking her brain for the past week as the deadline loomed closer. Ever since humans had first taken to space, there had been iconic phrases remembered by everyone. It didn’t matter that it had been over a century since we first went up. That just made it even more historic. What could she say that would compare to those? Jessica certainly didn’t want to be like the first human on Mars who’s first words were interrupted by him tripping over a rock and letting loose a stream of profanity. That certainly wouldn’t happen because she wasn’t prone to using those words, but it didn’t seem to make the task any less daunting.

“Even so, you look like you could use a massage to help loosen up that writer’s block.” And he left the computer to start working on her shoulders. A couple hours later they were in bed and he asked how she had gotten involved in the space program.

She thought about it. She’d wanted to go into space ever since she was a little girl. She’d seen every vid about space from classics like Independence Day to ancient movies like Star Wars to the contemporary series of movies about a class of high school kids on a generational space ship. She’d had the lead character’s poster on her wall throughout middle school and the early part of high school. After college, she joined one of the inter-Enclave space agencies.

At age 25 she was captaining ships to the moon and mars colonies. It was thrilling to be in the position of her heroes. Eventually, however, the thrill wore off. She realized that she was no different from the captain of an airline on Earth. Sure, she was going tens of millions of miles, but she was just ferrying humans who were going on vacation or business trips or moving. She wasn’t so much a captain of a spaceship as a glorified pilot.

She’d been in a spaceport bar, contemplating the contents of her 2 week’s notice when Earth was first contacted by the Others. Suddenly she had noticed that everyone became quite and the music in the bar had been shut off. The bartender was looking for the remote for the ancient, non-implant connected TV. It was eventually found and the volume was turned up as high as it would go. A reporter was explaining the message then talking to a pair of scientists. One claimed it was an elaborate hoax and the other that it was true. Either way, Jessica realized that space travel had just become a lot more exciting.

From the time of the announcement until it was verified, seemed like an eternity to Jessica. The news media oscillated between covering the latest progress on the authentication of the message and covering the latest celebrity scandal. She was glued to the news feeds and panicked whenever she was in an RF shadow. Surely, she feared, when she was once again able to get news, she’d find out that a crew had been selected to meet with the Others and she had been left behind because she was stuck on the dark side of the Moon. She’d been seeing a guy each on the Moon, Earth, and Mars. One by one those relationships disintegrated as she became obsessed with getting on any mission relating to The Message. She would constantly get distracted from any conversation they were having if some news came across the wire.

At least that part had turned out to be lucky. After it was determined that the message was

genuine and that a crew would need to be assembled to meet with the Others, a call went out to anyone qualified and interested in participation. Once the first round of potential Captains had been culled, the next round of cuts included anyone with relationships deemed too strong to break. After all, years would pass on Earth, they were told, while only a year would pass for them. It might be too traumatic to the returning person.

Eventually Jessica was chosen because she had the most time under her belt as the captain of a spaceship for someone of her age and fitness level. She was told to report to the United Enclave headquarters at the old UN building in NYC. There she met Don and Serge for the first time. This thought made her turn to Don and ask him how he'd ended up on the ship.

**

Don had just finished up his senior year at Cornell University when the message from the Others was first heard. Ever since he was five he hadn't given space a second thought. It seemed to just be another place to go, like Europe or the South Pole. So he enrolled in a PhD program at Berkeley. It was while in the middle of his program that he heard about the recruitment for the spaceship. They were looking for the best of the best to be the Chief Engineer on the Hermes. He mentioned that he could take on anyone for that position to a bunch of fellow students in a bar. They called him on it and, to prove them wrong, he enrolled the very next day. Each time he would advance to the next level of selection he would get another round of teasing that it would be as far as he would progress. Each time he redoubled his efforts.

Eventually he was selected. He got to tour the facility where the Hermes was being finalized and get to understand the intimate details of the ship he would be in charge of making run. It was being constructed in space to save on fuel costs and it was Don's first trip to space. His name and image hadn't been publicized too much yet, so he was able to ride up on a commercial jet. It was uneventful and just as he was falling asleep, he started to float. A lifetime of air travel had led him to ignore the warnings to put his seatbelt on. He quickly pulled himself to his chair and fastened it before the flight attendants saw him. He didn't want to be scolded on his first trip.

The space station rotated so as to provide gravity although it was still only 0.5 G, so it could still be fun to jump around higher than on Earth. It was explained to him that this was done so that large pieces of the ship wouldn't be too heavy to handle. The ship itself had actually been put together out in space, but many of the systems had first been assembled on the space station.

Eventually he met Serge and Jessica. He remembered realizing he was the youngest person on the ship. Serge in particular seemed to have been around and seen some things. He was proud to be part of this group and he couldn't wait to see who they'd be leading. In fact, learning that he was the Chief Engineer in name only nearly made him furious enough to quit on the spot. In fact, they had to be so specialized that they didn't spend much of their time training together. Each had to master the subsystems they were in charge of. Jessica also had the

added burden of being the face of the mission. So she had to do the news show circuit.

Finally, the time came to go. Don sent out some messages to his buddies about how they owed him some beers when he got back. They were all taken to the ship along with some important government people. There they met the ambassador and his wife and were reminded about Nadine and Fatima, both of whom had already been put to sleep. And the next day they were off.

“Did you ever ask Serge about why he joined up?” he asked her. She just barely shook her head. “Well, we’ll have to find that out some time.” But she was already dozing off.

**

They were both woken up by a scream. They both threw on some clothes and ran out in the direction of further muffled screams. Serge arrived at Fatima’s door at the same time they did. “Open it up,” Jessica ordered. Don opened door.

Fatima’s pleading eyes met theirs. Frank was trying to force himself on her, but was having a hard time with one of her zippers that had gotten stuck. Suddenly he turned around just in time to get Serge’s fist right into his face. He was knocked towards the wall. Before he could regain his balance, Serge hit him so hard on the temple that he fell straight to the floor, barely conscious. One more blow was enough to leave him temporarily immobilized.

During the fight Jessica had vacated with Fatima. Serge looked at Don, “Get some rope out of the storage area.”

Frank came back to consciousness tied to a chair in the dining area. As soon as it was clear that he was back to his senses, Jessica slapped him so hard she felt she might have broken some of the bones in her hand. “I can’t believe you would contemplate such a thing!” She yelled, “Especially with someone who’s suffered so much. You are relieved of your command and will be spending the rest of the trip imprisoned.”

He opened his mouth to speak, but Don immediately gagged it. “Oh yeah,” Jessica replied, “No talking for you. You will remain gagged unless it is a meal time. And you don’t get one tonight.”

Jessica had locked up the ambassador’s suite to keep his wife out of their hair for now. It couldn’t continue that way, but she needed some time to think. The fact that someone would actually try such an atrocity was too much for her. She looked at Don, “Let’s get some sleep already.” The exhaustion in her voice made it seem as though she’d sleep right there.

Don went back to his quarters and she went back to hers where she had invited Fatima to spend the night in the hopes of keeping her from going completely off her rocker.

“Hello, asshole,” Serge whispered to Frank. Frank’s eyes shot open. “I’m sorry, but I can’t have monsters on my ship. It’s against my rules.” He grabbed the hand truck and put Frank’s chair on it. Then he used some extra rope to tie the chair to the hand truck. Frank tried to wiggle and yell, but the ropes and gag were too tight. Serge whistled as he wheeled Frank towards the middle of the ship. He punched his override code into the airlock and it opened. He wheeled Frank inside. “You know, this is almost too nice an act on my part. What I should do is drug you and put you into a space suit so you can be alive for an hour or two with the realization that no one can or will ever find you; living in absolute terror of the time when your oxygen runs out. But I’m not a monster. Anyway, we need those suits and extra oxygen in case something happens so us. So I’ll just have to be content with your instant asphyxiation.” Serge stepped out of the airlock, leaving Frank in there. He stared hard at Frank. Did he need to do it or was this freakout enough? No, seeing that hatred and anger dominated fear for the Ambassador, he knew it was kill or be killed; no bluffing. He punched in his code to close the airlock. Then hit the button to activate it. Finally, he opened the doors to space and the chair and man flew out. Serge reset everything as he heard footsteps behind him.

Don had been woken up by alarms in his implant regarding the airlock. If the airlock was malfunctioning, Don was just about ready to throw himself out of it to be done with this apparently cursed trip. He donned a minimal space suit to be sure he’d be able to breathe near the control panel. Don also tethered himself to an exposed beam in the hallway in case the airlock was stuck open. He wasn’t sure it would help at the speeds they were going, but He hoped it might.

He was surprised to see Serge standing at the airlock; which appeared to be functioning just fine. He tore off the suit. “What the hell, Serge?”

Calmly, Serge turned around and said, “Frank stepped out for a smoke.”

Don was nonplussed. “What?!? Is everyone going mad? What happened with the airlock?”

“I had to take out the trash.”

“Serge, so help me, if you don’t stop talking like a character in an action movie, I’m going to slug it out of you. It’s been a crazy day and I can’t take much more of this.”

For a second, Serge seemed to entertain the idea of a scuffle as something desirable. But he just relaxed and quietly said, “I threw Frank out the airlock.”

“What?”

“We couldn’t have someone like that with us. Not when he was capable of those actions. You know it’s true.”

“We...” Don wasn’t sure what to say, “We have to go tell Jessica.”

Jessica almost jumped back when she opened the door to her quarters. She wasn’t expected both Don and Serge there. Don spoke first, “Can we speak with you in the navigation room?”

The tenor of his voice and the intensity in his eyes let her know it was important. “Sure.”

They walked there quickly and locked the door so they wouldn’t be interrupted. “So? What’s going on?”

The two guys looked at each other and Serge started, “I threw Frank out the airlock.”

There was silence as Jessica tried to process this information. “You ... threw him out ...of the airlock?” she finally managed. She looked to Don for help and he just shrugged. “Why?” she asked Serge.

“There’s no way we could keep him on here. If he ever got loose we’d all be in danger.”

Jessica knew he was right. Part of her was quite happy to be rid of him and his disgusting personality. But this was done all wrong. “Serge, you are temporarily relieved of your duties. All your access codes are hereby revoked. You will assist Don in navigating and flying. While you acted in the best interest of everyone on the ship, you did so by going over my head and, as captain, I cannot let that stand. If you remain stable, you may regain your privileges. Any further drastic actions on your part will result in being confined to your quarters. Do you understand?”

Serge nodded.

“OK, so now we need to figure out what to do about Frank’s wife,” she said. “She WILL notice that he’s missing.”

“I’ve got an idea, offered Don.”

Don and Serge wheeled the unconscious body of Frank’s wife through the hallway. Don had suggested that Jessica use the neural implant to knock her out and they would then put her into Fatima’s old pod. That would keep her out of their hair until they got back to Earth.

The next day they were with Serge when he pulled up the first images of the space station they were headed towards. It looked like a standard spinning torus. In the center was the dock where they would finally get off the ship after all this time. At least, that's what they'd been told. They could just barely make something out in the middle from how far out they were. "This is going to be a long six days." Serge observed.

Jessica could only think about how they should already be there. She couldn't wait to have a change of atmosphere and get off the seemingly cursed ship. Even though the ship had caused her to know Don, with whom she was slowly started to move from affection to love, she couldn't stand being in the ship any longer. She needed some space. She'd never been claustrophobic before, but the confines of the ship were starting to get oppressive. She'd been talking to Fatima about it, but there was nothing that could be done. Jessica could take some relaxants, but given how rocky the trip had been, she didn't want to be stoned if something important was going on.

"Make sure your official uniforms are pressed and ready to go," she found herself saying to the men. In truth, she had a bit of a search ahead of her. She'd put it at bottom of her clothing chest after she'd had to move it out of the way more than a few times.

**

Finally, the day arrived. Everyone was decked out in their insanely fancy uniforms. Don and Jessica had fallen into a uncontrollable fit of laughter when they saw each other. It'd taken everything they had in them not to fall apart again in front of the others. After Serge had docked the ship, they waited while the pressures equalized between the ship and the station. Jessica hoped the upcoming chapter would herald good things for humanity, and, most of all, a speedy trip home.