

Science Fiction  
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THE TRUTHS THAT WE BELIEVE

I lay on my bunk, its rivets and bolts poking me through the centimeter-thick foam pad that passes as my mattress. The bulkhead shudders with the engines, reminding me that its thin wall is all that separates me from billions and billions of miles of space vacuum, here in The Reaches.

Staring into my comm tablet, I see the familiar face of Tred, my Bureau Chief.

"So tell me why again Skyzlik is covering the new orbital resort out of the New Amsterdam colony," I say. "And why you're keeping me out here?"

"Skyzlik was in the area," Tred says, his image flickering with the long distance comm signal. "Besides, you'd have too much fun there."

"Only cause I know how to have fun."

"Skyzlik is responsible."

"That's a way of saying he's no fun."

"You hired hookers on your last story assignment."

"So? I paid for them."

"Look, just do this," Tred says. "I told the CEO of NewsFeed I'd put you on this. Come back, I'll get you an assignment to that new deep space habitat they're throwing up in a few months."

"The Pleasure Ring?"

"No. The retirement platform."

"You sure I'm your favorite reporter?"

"You're not a reporter," Tred says. "You're a correspondent. A reporter reports. You suck it all in and spin it out with your own view on the subject."

"Well, the public seems to like it," I say.

"Yeah," Tred says as he rolls his eyes. "Proof the public are idiots. Just get out there for a few weeks. Interview some contactees, search for alien life. And if you can find out what happened to all the people who disappeared, even better. So get to work!"

The screen on my comm tablet flickers and then goes black. I'm not sure if the channel broke or Tred cut it. It doesn't matter. I'm here and there's not a lot I can do about it.

"Hey, Marcus," Cora's voice calls from about three meters away. No need to yell, but she doesn't seem to have a volume control.

I grunt, getting off my sleep deprivation bunk and exit my quarters. I've sat on portable toilets that offered more elbow room.

I crawl into the 'bridge,' actually a pilot's chair surrounded by obsolete equipment and occupied by this dinghy's owner, Cora Foraesten. It does provide a good view of space.

She looks back at me, her ample love handles spilling over the sides of her worn arm rests. The last time this woman got any exercise is a mystery, but she's been in that chair for days now, ever since we left the last frontier outpost.

"We been on station here for several days," Cora says.

"Ain't seen nothing. Where's yer friend at?"

Cora pivots in her chair, her oily strands of blonde hair peeking out from under the oversized flight goggles resting on her head. They look more at home on some character in a steampunk novel. Her flight jacket might have fit her at one time, but no more.

She's referring to Nate Freemantle, the freighter captain I use for a lot of my assignments into the nether regions. More of a shame I missed him when he left port, and had to pay a steep price to Cora to play catchup and meet him out here.

"He'll be here," I say. "We just need to wait."

"Hey," Cora says, her pudgy face lighting up with a crooked-tooth smile. "For what yer payin' I'll wait a solar week."

As if I had a choice. Cora was the only ride out here and she knew it. She factored that into her price.

Ordinarily, I'd stay clear of bathtub-sized ships with the name *Pride of Patagonia*, but a correspondent's life requires sacrifices sometimes. So here I sit on a transport pod built for one, crammed with two, and held together by alternating layers of rust, corrosion and peeling paint. It has all the flight characteristics, of say, a bathtub, and nowhere near the feeling of safety or cleanliness.

"You know, while yer here, you might as well do a story on

me," Cora says. "I mean, I got lots of exciting stuff too that's happened to me."

I don't think so.

"Can't right now," I say. "Not enough room on the camera. I have just enough space on the drive for the alien abductees." A lie, but she can't prove otherwise.

She shoots me a frowny face anyway.

This is not the first time she's brought this up on this long-seeming trip.

The tense standoff brakes with a whistle out of her antique scanner. It's been a while since I've heard one of those, and I don't really get what the tone means, but Cora knows.

"I got a transponder signal from the *Bayern*," Cora says. "I'd know Nate's ship anywhere. You sure you want to do this? I can take you to the edge of space, too, you know."

"No," I say. "You've been a good host, but the *Bayern* has the contactees. Right now, I need to be with them."

God, I hope no one ever takes that out of context.

"Getting a docking signal," Cora says, her tone one of lightly masked anger. She's not getting the extended fee that would come with such a trip. Cora punches the keys at her control console. "Better get yer shit."

The *Pride of Patagonia* locks with the *Bayern's* docking port. The docking ring flexes like a stress test. A stress test it almost fails. But the ships manage to link up and the

respective hatches hiss open.

The first thing I notice is how fresh the air is as it rushes into the the *Pride*. It's a wonder what a modern and regularly-changed environmental filter can do.

There's no one at the other end of the hatch, but that doesn't stop me. I bolt into the *Bayern*.

"It's been a real pleasure," Cora calls after me. "Be sure and tell your friends--"

"I sure will, bye," I say as an afterthought. I slam the hatch shut, putting the *Pride* behind me.

I emerge into the *Bayern* as the *Pride* tears itself away. The inside of the *Bayern* reminds me of a basement in one of those light industrial buildings. But compared to the *Pride*, it's a major improvement.

It's got pipes and circuits running overhead and at waist level along the bulkheads. The metal is painted in that prevents-rust-not-to-look-pretty light blue. Every five meters or so is a white stenciled spraying of a alphanumeric combo.

Nate is there.

"Glad you're aboard," he offers a calloused, bulbous, and knuckled hand and I shake it.

"When you sent your communication to the Newswire service, you said you had the contactees."

"I got them," Nate says. "And it is a colorful bunch. I can't wait to see your holovid on them."

Nate is what those on Earth would call an old fisherman. He comes complete with leathery, wrinkled skin, hair as white on his head as in his beard, and an attitude that's seen it all. His faded, broken in shipboard boots clank along the corridor as we walk.

"I just hope there's enough for a story," I say. "My boss is really on me about this."

"Oh," Nate says stifling a laugh. "You got enough to write yerself a novel. Let me introduce you to my passengers."

The advent of faster than light travel brought with it all the normal stuff you'd expect. Exploration, colonies, mining, all made our lives better. It also brought out the crazies. Everyone from religious zealots, conspiracy theorists, and seekers of enlightenment to those looking for or claiming to have life's answers.

And always, there was that expectation of alien life. Not the common bacteria or microbial stuff. The living, breathing, abducting, experimenting, sentient kind.

Problem is, we never found any.

And now Tred sends me out here on this 'while you're at it' assignment. Interview supposed contactees, and while your at it find out what happened to all those contactees that disappeared. Oh, and while you're at it, find alien life.

I think he was just glad to be rid of me for a while.

We emerge from the dim corridor and into the *Bayern's*

common area. This room is about 7 meters long and maybe double that wide. It resembles a break room in that light industrial facility I could easily mistake the *Bayern* for.

By the far bulkhead a series of boxy, neck-high food dispensers, water fountain, and trash cans are lined up. The center of this room is a large, bus-your-tray eating table. This is where the passengers are supposed to gather and bond, but they aren't bonding.

Instead, the three passengers Nate took on board are sitting in various places across the room, meters away physically. Mentally, their in distant star systems.

Nate shrugs. He asks, "who do you want first?"

"Yeah," I say. "I can handle it from here if you want to go back to running the ship."

"How'd you guess?" Nate asks, though he knows the answer, I'm sure. "Your stateroom is set up and ready."

Nate flips me the card key as he pivots to leave, a motion he accomplishes with all the speed of a maglev rail car. I don't blame him. If I didn't have a deadline to meet I wouldn't be hanging out with these guys, either.

My first interviewee is a woman in her mid-thirties (I'm guessing). She's tall, thin, and wears a long flowing dress that looks part silk and part emofiber. Her long, brunette hair frames her angular face, but her eyes are closed. Based on the monotone groan coming from her half-open mouth, I'd say she's

meditating.

Around her neck is an oversized (for her neck, anyways) pendant of three starbursts. I recognize this as the symbol of the Zeta Reticuli Brotherhood. Despite the name, the Brotherhood is about seventy percent female.

"I know why you're here," she says. She opens her eyes. She's staring at me with two deep brown eyes, which match her hair.

"Really?" I say. "Do I need to introduce myself or do you know that too?"

"You're from News9," she says like she's giving away some kind of sensor-evading technology. "Marcus Brogan. I recognize you from the Vector In The Sector specials you did a long time ago. I love your humorous take on things. I'm Sister Eldrina Rinfield."

Huh. I guess someone did watch those broadcasts after all. Better off then. I hate long introductions.

"I'm glad you know my work," I say. "I see you're a member of the Brotherhood."

"Yes, for nearly a decade," Eldrina says. "I am on sabbatical, though. I needed to be free to follow my calling."

Eldrina starts talking so fast, I barely get the holocamera out in time. After five minutes of talking without coming up for air, my distinguished interviewee shows me two things. One, talking about herself is her favorite subject. Two, she loves

the sound of her own voice.

Turns out, Eldrina is the trust-fund child. She's been on many spiritual retreats. And not just any retreats, either, she stresses.

No, the kind she's been on features holoivid stars and famous musicians. I've done a piece or two on these outings. They claim they'll illuminate your life. All I found is they clean out your bank account. Sort of a 'we'll give you inner peace if you give us money' type of arrangement.

"And it all started when I was walking naked in the park," Eldrina says. "I was dancing on leaves and branches, calling for my salvation, as you know, people do."

I nod, though I have no idea what she's talking about. Last time I danced naked was in a hotel room, playing air guitar to the Space Casers on the entertainment center's audio feed. And I'm pretty sure I had some cheap scotch to get me on that stage.

"And then there was this brilliant flash in the sky" she says. "And I knew then the truth. The aliens are angels, sent to aid us."

"Okay," I say with a lot more control than I thought possible. "So if they're sent to Earth, why come out here?"

"Because I want to find them," she says. Those eyes are as big as solar pinwheels now. "Think about it! What if I go to them?"

"Still might be cheaper to do it on Earth," I say.

"Yes, but out here is where the Angels live," Eldrina sweeps her arm over the room. "It's heaven, don't you see? That's their message."

Assuming the message is to fly out into space aboard the first freighter she could find. If that's the case, I'm sure she's in good with the Angels.

The man in the corner to my left has his holotablet in front of him on a small table. The image is one of a star cluster. Its shaky resolution and pixelated ID number tell me it's an illegal version of some federal or corporate charting mission.

"You see?" The man points to a blurry image, lost in the miniature constellations. "It's right there!"

The man gives his name as Louis Lipkins. Lou was a minor functionary in the Bureau of Stellar Cartography. His Moe Howard haircut and beige dress shirt are proof of that. Add the brown pants and I can see he doesn't get out much. A man who doesn't know how to dress outside of work is a sad creature indeed.

Louis, not one for introductions either, starts into a pre programmed diatribe about how humans are hurting space. Louis has just retired from the Bureau. He's been collecting proof of what he claims is a lot of unregistered garbage dumping on the fringes of known space.

"And that's just the beginning," Louis says. "Look at these holovids."

To prove this, Louis inserts another vid cube. As before, an image swirls into semi coalescence. This one is of a kilometers-long mega freighter ejecting a field of garbage into a star.

"You see?" Louis asks. "That freighter's ajaxing. Right there!"

Which, from what I can see in the grainy image, means the freighter's doing nothing.

"Well, that ship is dumping its load into a sun," I say. "That's legal."

"But he's not," Louis says. "You see the angle of the holovid? He's ejecting away from the sun, not into it."

"Won't the sun's gravity just pull the garbage in?"

"Oh, you don't know," Louis says. "I do, though. No, this is just one of many such violations the cargo haulers are guilty of. And that doesn't even include the smaller ship operators."

I nod. And nod, and nod. I could bring up the fact that most refusers, or wreckers, or dumpstars, dump into the sun. It's efficient. It's cheaper, and they don't spend all the time journeying to the fringe.

Radioactives, human waste, food wrappers, old satellites, a sun will burn it all. No more land fills. No more pollution. No more clogged storm drains or quarantined beaches. I like the sun solution.

However, I hold my tongue for two reasons. One, I'm here

for an interview, not a debate. And two, he wouldn't listen to me anyway. Louis' chair is really more of a soapbox at this moment.

"Is that why you're out here, then?" I press the issue when I get a chance to interject. I waited for ten minutes for just such an opportunity.

"The aliens don't approve of how we're trashing their space," Louis says. "Someone has to speak to them. That's why I brought all this proof. I need to let them know someone in all of humanity is taking notice of what's really going on."

"What then?" I ask. "What happens once you meet them?"

"They look over the proof," Louis says with a smile. "Then decide humanity's fate, which I will deliver."

"So you think they'll pick you for this?"

"I know they will," Louis says. "I am the only one of my kind to put this kind of data together and bring it to them. They'll see what I've done. My place in history is nearly made."

Louis face goes from delighted to a scowl.

"But you," he says. "You're a Federal operative, aren't you?"

"No," I say.

"You must be," Louis says. "You ask too many questions."

"I'm working on a media piece," I say. "It's hard to get material without questions."

"I think I've said enough to you," Louis says as he shuts

off the bootleg holo vid. "You can't prove anything. These vids are mine. You can't prove otherwise."

I want to open up with a full charge on this guy. The Feds or anyone else have better things to do than track down one lone vacuum head with some grainy holo vids out here in the Reaches.

But I leave him to his own little mental star cluster and move to the next guy.

My third interview is a dark complexioned Asian gentleman wearing a custom enviro suit and has enough cyber enhancements to classify him as a cyborg. His holo player is one of the top Mutsuhito implants that plays the video on the inside of your eye. He appears to be staring straight ahead with one brown and one orange eye. I don't know if I'm interrupting his reverie.

His private holoID flashes on my own retinal receiver. His name is Trent Shuang-Tan. Next to his name is the logo of Synteron Pharmaceuticals

"I see you picked me last," he says, answering my question. "That's too bad."

Trent was last because he was the furthest away. His left eye returns to its normal brown color and he turns his attention to me. I pull up a footrest across from him. His face is one of perfect symmetry, with a pronounced jaw and high cheek bones. Only the silvery implants mounted flush on his face break up an otherwise perfect, dark skin tone.

"I find it really amusing," the man tosses his head

toward the rest of the room, which I assume means his fellow passengers. "They sit there, looking at those old holovid emitters. No privacy with those old things."

"I'm sure they find them useful," I say.

"Those old players don't even self compensate," Trent's mouth curls as he frowns. His judging gaze sweeps the room.

"You see this?" Trent points a slender, perfectly trim forefinger at his left eye. "This is the S2000 prototype retinal implant. They don't even make it for the public yet."

I can see getting this fellow to talk won't be difficult. Getting him to talk about something besides himself, however, is another task entirely.

Every implant he has is of the latest edition, some only installed a matter of weeks ago. His flawless brown skin tells me Trent has had some rejuvenation work done. He's obviously older than he lets on, but takes effort to speak and act like a much younger man.

"Here I am stuck on a common transport," Trent motions around the room. "Like I wouldn't even be on this trawler unless my father needed our personal yacht."

About midway through his diatribe on the *Bayern's* horrible food I get an opening.

"So why didn't you just wait till the family ship was available?" I ask.

"Yacht," Trent corrects me, as though I insulted him. "An

OverLord Model 7A. One of only three made."

"I see," I say. "So why are you out here? Why not just wait till the yacht's available?"

"Not my choice," Trent's left eye sparkles for a second. "Oh wow! I just got a transmission. You know with this new retinal 'plant I can pick up personal messages even way out here?"

"You said it wasn't your choice?" I ask as much as tell. Keeping Trent on point is proving a difficult task.

"Oh, yeah," Trent comes back to me. "Yeah, they picked me. I am to be their guide to the rest of humanity."

"How do you know this?"

"I mean, c'mon," Trent shrugs, his custom tailored enviro-suit not wrinkling. "It makes sense, doesn't it?"

"I'm going to need a little more to go on, Trent."

"Mister Trent Shuang-Tan IV," Again I am corrected. "Or T-Tan."

"T-Tan," I say. No way am I calling this guy 'mister.' "You said you were chosen. Why?"

"They're looking for the best we have," Trent says. "It helps that they're going to weed out the Alphas from all the rest of the chum in the gene pool."

Unsure if I'm an Alpha or chum, I press on. "So how did they contact you?"

"Oh yeah, that," Trent says. "It happened while I was at a

Metro Party. You know, the biggest damned social event on the Lower Continent? I was there with 110,000 of my closest friends."

"They contacted you at a party?"

"You know those satellite feeds that broadcast live video from deep space? It costs like half a mill a month for those things. We were the first to get it. It was showing on a giant screen over the party. I had the best seats, and—"

"Sure," I say. "So they contacted you through the screen feed?"

"Uh huh," Trent slows his speech. "I'm looking at the screen after like my fifth Starburst Mist shot. And this light, millions of miles from the camera, starts flashing."

"Okay."

"Three bright flashes," Trent holds up three fingers. "Then two. Then three again."

"So it was a code?"

Trent stares down at me like I'm some fifth grader who got a math problem wrong.

"Hello? It was the Camden Code? You've heard of that, haven't you?"

"Should I have?"

"Ugh," Trent says, shaking his head in the negative. "The Camden Code is from the Camden Yacht Club. It's only the most exclusive space club in known space. They sponsor the annual

Galactic Gala every year."

"I stand corrected and edified."

"What?"

"I get it now," I say. "You saw this code on the screen?"

"Well, nobody gets the code anyway," Trent says, dismissing my lack of refinement. "The aliens obviously want to transmit a code only the best on Earth would notice. Don't you see? They want me!"

By the end of my interviews, I feel exhausted. I drop my pack off in the cabin and head to the bridge for some normal conversation.

"That took a while," Nate says. His grin tells me he finds this funny.

Truthfully, if this wasn't my job, I'd be entertained too. Then again, if this wasn't my job, I'd be working in an environmentally controlled office on Luna like my mother always wanted me to.

"I think those 'passengers' don't even have to leave the Core Worlds to be in outer space," I say. "Where are we going, anyway?"

"To a little ball of nickel in the Leyte-45 system," Nate says. "Just like last time out. It's a UFOSHS."

"A what?"

"A UFO Space Hotspot."

"Oh."

"Yeah," Nate says. "They claim dozens of people have been abducted from Leyte."

"So you do this a lot?"

"One of a hundred hot spots out here," Nate says. "Everyone thinks they'll find aliens at Leyte. So that's where I take them."

And those passengers are paying a lot. I have to hand it to Nate. Beats in-system cargo runs.

"It's in the early stages of conversion," Nate says. "Dust storms kick up constantly. Clogs my sensors."

"So how do you keep track of everyone? Or is that the cause of the disappearances?"

"No," Nate says. "If I lost tourists, there'd be lawsuits. I don't need that."

"Then...?"

"Right here," Nate produces an injector. He takes this little clear tube, about the size and diameter of a writing stylus, and pokes one end into my forearm.

"Ow! Damn," I say as the thing makes a sickly audible click when it contacts my skin. "You could have warned me about that."

"Sorry," Nate says in a tone that is anything but. "I just gave you a P-TRAN. Its narrow channel can break through all the atmospheric conditions. That way, I'll know where you're at at all times."

P-TRAN. A personal transponder. I haven't had one of those

implanted on my arm since my days as an embedded reporter with the 234<sup>th</sup> Regiment during The Perseus Outpost Uprising. I hated them then and I hate them now. They itch. They cause rashes.

The voyage to Nate's little destination takes a few days. I spend most said days in my cabin preparing newsfeed. Mostly, I'm thinking of ways to show my bureau chief what a waste it was sending me out here. In that light, I'm really not doing what I want to. On my fourth rewrite in as many days, the FTL drive gives us that characteristic clunk it gives when it cuts speed. We must've arrived.

The ball of minerals, mostly nickel I assume, looks like a swirling mass of dust storms from orbit. It has an atmosphere, the first stage of any planet being colonized. Of course, given the long lifecycle of any Terraforming, this could take decades to complete.

"This is where unknown signals have been recorded," Nate's voice fills the cabin on a ship-wide intercom. "As well as abductions and disappearances." He sounds excited.

*Sounds excited.*

Of course, the signals could be anything. The missing 'abductees' on planet could be anything from a wrong turn into a gorge or an oxygen tank not being topped off. With all those storms down there someone would be near impossible to locate with even mil-grade sensors.

The *Bayern* bumps as we enter the atmosphere. I'm glued to

the porthole in the common area. We land without incident, right in the middle of a dust storm. Of course on this planet there's two types of weather: dust storm and going-to-be dust storm. And the two literally change as the wind blows. Or to be fair, winds. Why the middle of a dust storm? There's more to see here, according to Nate.

We gather in the cargo hold. The ramps lowers and we descend into the swirling sand of the storm.

Before me, I see a faux winter wonderland. Everything is covered in white. Amongst this scenery is an old mining camp, made in a standout gray metal of several prefab Quonset huts and a storage shed.

"They've been abducted," Louis says, standing next to me. "They always hit the edges of society."

"They were saved," Eldrina says, her voice muffled behind a filter mask.

Trent grunts at the other two through his custom mask.

I opted for my network-issued mask. It's a full face model, but it's seen me through some nasty environs.

Out we go.

The squatter camp looks like a throw-away hovel for jumpers. Namely, illegal miners that set up shop on someone else's planet and do some digging. They sneak in, grab what minerals they can find, and sneak off.

My fellow passengers head their own ways. Eldrina kneels in

front of a disposable extractor after using a can of instaphitti to impress a Brotherhood star map on it.

"They've been here," She says, placing her hands on the pitted side of the mining device. "I can sense it. This area has been touched."

Louis is off following a handheld sensormatic device. I catch up to him as he heads into a large barren area behind the squalor camp. This was probably where the miner ship landed to pick up the ore.

The ground is covered with white dust, but Louis' handheld beeps as he walks over a spot. He sweeps the ground with an archaeology brush. This reveals a blackened blast mark on the stony ground.

"Look at this burn mark," Louis says. He wipes away the chalky ground covering. Maneuver jets, most likely. And based the extended fan look of the burn, not very well calibrated jets.

"There's a lot of trash," Louis says, I assume, to me.

It probably was tossed from the same rust bucket that made those burn marks. Jumpers aren't renown for their cleanliness. They're more than happy to leave a mess for someone else.

I don't speak. My job is to be spoken to, and get in the questions when I can. And right now I don't have too many, aside from his sanity and mine, for being here.

"Trash everywhere," Louis says.

Okay, so it was a big rust bucket.

Louis is all over the mounds of garbage. It's mostly dented ore canisters, ration seals, overloaded mining lasers, pitted hoppers, and a few burned out grav jacks. It's nothing to broadcast home about, but Louis goes at the flotsam like he's an explorer on a scouting mission.

For those of moderate intellect and mild sarcasm, this can be pressing. I like to think I have that much intellect, at least. But what I do have is a lot of pent up sarcasm. It's like a pressure seal that's about to blow. I'm going to say something any second now.

I spot Trent some distance away. He's clamoring over a cluster of boulders several dozen meters high. I join him. It doesn't take long to catch up.

Whatever youthful appearance he paid for was just that – an appearance. Inside, he's out of shape. And for me to say that, it is truly an insult beyond measure.

We crest the rock mound. Below us is a flat area. This one appears ringed by five circular concavities, each maybe two meters across. They must be deep, since even with the chalk covering the ground, they make an obvious depression

We get to the bottom and Trent's arm computer/scanner combo gives off a piercing shriek. It's so fast and so intense my mask's audio compensators don't react quick enough.

"This site has got some background radiation," Trent says.

He's right. My sensor is showing some tiny levels of radioactivity. I scroll through my HUD users manual to check up just how much of this I can take before I have to take my AntiRad pills.

The circular impressions aren't just big, they're deep too, at least half a meter when we shove away the chalk powder. Whatever landed here was large and heavy. And I don't know how it landed or took off again. No burn marks anywhere.

I'm still scrolling through my HUD manual when the power zips off. The backup batteries click on. This saves me from death by chalk, but my heart is pounding.

"Damn," Trent says, waiving his computer-wrapped arm. "How did this happen? My gear is self charging. I paid serious money for this."

From the look of Trent's custom mask, he's on backup power too. Of course, Trent doesn't seem bothered by that. His new toy, though, is a source of immense frustration.

"I have battery power for another eight hours," I say.

"Uh huh," Trent snorts. "My mask is good for another twenty hours. But what cut the power?"

"Not sure," I say.

"Well I picked up a signal about half a klick from here," Trent says. "Before the power cut, but I know where to go."

The walk there isn't much to talk about. Except for Trent. He always has something to say. We are in the middle of his

tirade on the merits of designer envirosuits, when we see it.

It's round, about the size of a compact ground car. It's silvery. It sits on the ground like some giant just placed it there and left.

"A probe," Trent says. He bashes his combo onto a rocky outcropping. "A damned probe! Can you believe that? Shit! And we walked all the way out here."

I contemplate telling Trent that neither the errant probe nor his scanner should be blamed. But I don't think that would get through to him right now, or ever.

The probe has a sand-encrusted look to it. I would expect that one a world populated mostly by sand. But it kind of glitters. I look closer.

I notice the probe has a crystalline look too it, kind of like those x-mas balls you dip in glue then roll around in glitter. I think two hundred years ago people used to hook something like this up to the ceiling, shower it with multicolored lights, and dance under it.

"Wait a millisec," I say as Trent storms off, his heavy boots stirring up dust where the wind doesn't.

I would love it if the gravdoc camera was working. I could get some vids and stills of this probe. But I don't, so I have to go about this the old fashioned way - mental notes.

"What is it?" Trent asks. "Did you find something? What did you find?"

"Not sure," I say.

I reach into my thigh pocket and retrieve my knife tool. I chip at the crystals. A clump of them falls to the dirt.

"What did you get?" Trent asks. "Is it alien? Remember, I led us out here. I was my reading that pointed the way. I should get most of the credit."

Like the Devil I'm giving this dingus any of the credit. Maybe a mention in my videoscape, but that's it.

I hold up a crystal on the tip of my forefinger. It's actually a millimeter-thin square, about five centimeters on a side and very shiny.

"I don't know what they are," I say again. "We need to get them back to the ship."

It's probably just some minerals that got crystalized during the probe's reentry. But then again, how did a long-range probe land so cleanly? Probes aren't even designed to land. At worst, they're designed to crash into asteroids. This thing sure didn't crash.

So far all I've found is some shiny stuff. All that proves, really, is I'm bored. About halfway back, our gear powers back on.

#

We arrive back at the *Bayern*.

"I can't legally leave you here," I see Nate talking to

Eldrina. She stands there with her arms crossed and a scowl on her face.

"Yes you can," she whines. "The angels have been here, my inner spiritual guide tells me that. I need to wait for them to return. We all do. Don't you see?"

"Oh, you'll meet the angels pretty quick if I leave you behind on this rock," Nate says. "Which is why you're coming with us."

Eldrina punches the bulkhead. Her eyes are fast filling up with tears, and she drags her feet to a corner chair and plops down. I get the idea this argument has been going on a while.

The material is clear, shimmering and smooth. Like glass, but tough like durasteel. I drop some of the material on the sensopad and the touchscreen lights up.

"What is it? What does it say?" Trent asks. He's never been more than arms distance from me since we left that probe. Annoying doesn't even begin to cover it.

Without answering, I concentrate on the readouts. It's not much of a response.

Material Composition Unknown

Trent humphs and plods off to the food dispensers. Louis is there too, now drawn into our little inquiry.

"May I see that?" He asks.

He's polite, so I motion with my hand 'go ahead.'

"I've seen these before," Louis pulls out his loop and

examines the crystals. "At a Conspiracy Convention 114. The guy had a bunch of them. He said they came from this planet. Found them stuck all over this old cargo loader."

"Then I'm going back out," Trent says over his shoulder as he waits for the dispenser to pour him some iced tea.

"Angel's dust," Eldrina shrugs off her pout. "It's a clue. We have to revisit this."

"Oh, would you stop with the Angels stuff?" Trent shouts to her.

"Leave her alone!" Louis stands up, puffing his chest out.

"Oh, so you're her 'savior' huh? Well I got news for you--"

"Knock it off," I say in my best indoor voice.

"But he said--" Louis and Trent say simultaneously.

"I don't care!" I scream at both of them. "Just sit down."

They might be willing to go to blows with each other, but not me. I use that to calm the 'children' down.

"I think we should head out now," Trent says.

"Yes," Eldrina agrees. "The angels are calling us. Just like I said, we need to stay on this planet. Let's go!"

"I'm all for that," Trent says. "I paid enough for this ride. I want my money's worth."

"We're going to find the truth," Eldrina says.

"I can hope," I say.

"Faith," Eldrina corrects me. "You can have faith."

My instaweather projector shows the white sand storm will

move off soon. If we go then, we can dispense with the masks. Another storm isn't set to blast in here for several hours. In the meantime, the storm has become too intense to risk it right now. Last thing I need is my power to go out again in the middle of a maelstrom like that.

So we wait it out. Louis keeps busy by doing what he seems to love most. He flips through black-market video cubes. He only pauses to eat and slap notes on his tablet.

Eldrina sit cross-legged on the deck in the middle of the common area. The calm during the storm, as it were.

Trent rifles through a holographic representation of the latest electronic copy of the Regal Catalog. He spends a lot of time on the new cyber enhancements, punching up product details and grinning. Apparently this one's addiction is shopping.

I examine the crystals under the magnifier. The edges of my little discoveries seem very smooth, almost cut, in appearance.

"Something naturally occurring wouldn't look like a finished product," I say to myself.

"No," Eldrina stands behind me, having met her prayer quota. "That's only how we see it. It is from another dimension altogether. Don't you see? They left us breadcrumbs to follow."

"You don't have the sensors of a halfwit," Trent stands behind Eldrina.

"Once again, you are so arrogant it blinds you to the truth," Eldrina says. She turns her back to me as she speaks.

"Uh huh, right," Trent says. "They're angels sent from God, right?"

"Yes they are," Eldrina says.

"The government is hiding all this," Louis says, pushing his 3D video of a star map on the table beside him. "It's all their lies and conspiracies that keep us in the dark."

"Spoken like an ex government wacko," Trent says.

"They fooled you, didn't they?" Louis laughs.

"Okay guys," I say in a loud voice over the now very crowded side of the common area. "The storm is about over. Go to your cabins. Get your gear on. Head to the cargo ramp. You can continue your shouting match down there."

The triad of vaporheads file down the corridor. For once, they do something together and do it quietly. I smirk. I handled it well. Not bad for a correspondent with an on-the-job training in childcare.

When the ramp lowers again we're greeted by nice, crisp air. The storm has left everything clean. There is still some white chalk covering everything, but it's nice to look at things behind my sunglasses instead of an electronic mask. Before it was like Christmas on Pluto. Now? Imagine walking on a big dirt clod.

And not those small dirt balls, either. No, this would be that big one you found at age 12 in the edges of the flower garden in the parents' back yard. You know, the one loaded with

rocks. And yes, the one you through at that irritating neighbor kid or that girl you liked.

I produce my scanner and look for pings. I am convinced my people side of the story is over. More interview time is just going to allow them to talk about their own little universes.

But, we're all headed in the same direction. I think everyone's scanner is picking up that reading. All except Eldrina, who trusts in her spirit.

This is like a trip to the psych wing at the Institute. Only I had to travel billions of miles for this. The Institute is only an hour away on the tube from my apartment block.

We walk to the probe. At least, to where the probe was. I recheck my bearings. We're in the right spot. Instead, splayed out in front of me is a gelatinous mass. It's the color of ochre, bubbling up from the ground like some kind of plastic lava.

My retinal display shows that the orb cam is getting all this. I send the cam circling around the pool, analyzing its size and possible depth.

"What is that?" Louis' voice asks from behind me.

"I don't know," I say.

My scanner tries to decipher the chemical makeup of what is bubbling before us. No surprise, it comes up unknown.

"It's going to reform," Eldrina says. Her eyes are wide as she points to the bubbling mound. "It will take the shape of an

angel. It all makes sense, now!"

"What makes sense now?" Trent says. "This is a trail left for me to find. You don't know shit, Angel Girl."

"When the angels come, you'll regret your hubris," Eldrina shouts. "You'll soon know your station!"

"Get spaced!" Trent raises his voice against her's.

"Will you two stop arguing?" Louis says as he comes forward. He jostles past me with a clear plastic specimen container the size of a big salad bowl.

I agree with Louis' words, but not with touching the bubbling concoction.

Louis leans over with the open container. His actions are slow, shaky. The clear plastic receptacle approaches within centimeters of the mass.

A bubble starts to blow up at the edge of the stuff. Louis pulls back and the bubble grows to the size of a kid's party balloon. Only this is no fun party accessory. It is a deep amber. The walls of it pulsate, oscillate. I spot something dark clamoring around inside. A giant kelp pod sans the salt water.

Like it's plugged into a leaking helium tank, the thing keeps on expanding. I find I'm not the only one backing away.

Then it blows.

My vision goes dark as I throw my hands over my face. I feel mucus slap onto my arms and chest. There's a mist, of sorts, and a smell like copper.

Even with my eyes closed, my retina HUD tells me the cam got the whole thing. Whatever this is, humankind's first encounter with it will be on video.

I lower my arms. The bubble/balloon is gone, but its remnants are splattered everywhere. Behind me, Louis stands with his arms outstretched, covered with brown mucus. His clothes are drenched like he was hit with a giant ochre-filled water balloon.

Eldrina is splattered dead center. It slides off her, leaving a slime trail of equal color. Gone is her serenity. It is replaced now by a scrunched up face and gritting teeth.

Trent peeks out from behind a rock. Said rock seems to have taken all the slime for Trent, who is unscathed. "What is that?" He asks, pointing back to the bubbling cascade.

I glance down to where Trent is pointing. Skittering across the dirt is what looks like a black rat with six legs and a forked tail. It stops about a half meter from me and looks up at me with multi-faceted green eyes at the end of writhing stalks protruding from its octagon-shaped head.

I don't know if this little creature is fast, but with six legs that'd be my bet. I grab Louis' container and scoop the little guy up. The pseudo rat tries to escape his new prison, but I snap on the lid before it can react. My knife tool makes some impromptu air holes.

"It popped out of there," Louis says as he scrapes a dark

membrane off his cheek. "That bubbling shit created it."

"This could be a new species," Trent says as he puts his face up close to the container. "I claim the right of its namesake. You name it after me. You all know I paid for most of the trip. It's mine."

This wannabe rodent is a biological organism. My analyzer isn't designed to handle that. Frankly, neither am I. I comm in Nate and have him get the biolyzer ready to go.

I run back, followed by my three fellow passengers. They have no trouble keeping up, but I don't care if they do. My story has changed from a people piece into a new species science piece with a pop of a bubble.

Nate has the bio analyzer set when we trot up the ramp. Right away, the analyzer tells us this is not a member of any known Earth species, extinct or otherwise.

"It shares some DNA with the genus *Rattus rattus*," Louis points to the DNA readout on the flatscreen.

"That's not a rat," Trent says.

"I know that," Louis says, casting a dark glance at Trent. "I said it shares *some* of the DNA. Not *all* the DNA!"

"What is your botheration?" Trent places an unwanted arm on Louis' shoulder. "You always have to be right."

"My botheration?" Louis says as he shrugs off Trent's hand. "You're the one with the ego complex. Like anyone would leave a message for you to follow!"

"I'm about to follow my fist--"

"Enough!" Nate shouts over the din. Everyone aboard is silent. "That will do."

"This is about all the analyzer is going to tell us," I say, breaking the quiet. "I think we need to get this little thing back to a lab someplace."

We have that bubbling amber crude on video. We can scrape off enough goo splatter to fill a storage bin. That should be enough proof right there for anyone to take notice. Especially when it comes out in the evening newscast.

The alarm erupts. It's not one of those military-edge klaxons that booms from everywhere to everywhere. This one is more of an oversized personal comm unit going off, largely beeps and more beeps.

"Another ship just entered orbit," Nate says as he sprints to the bridge. The ramp raises up.

"Why are we leaving?" I ask when I catch up to Nate. He's already strapped in and going through preflight in a hurry.

"It's a big, ship that's comin'," Nate says. He's not looking at anything but the controls. "That means it's either a corporate miner arriving at a claim, a Fed picket ship, or one prosperous pirate."

I get his meaning. In any of those cases, we don't want to be caught here. At best it's a fine. At worst, death.

The *Bayern* lifts off. There's a lot of dust out the front

viewport, and plenty of shaking, but the old freighter does its job.

We now have a hazy readout on the vessel. It's big alright, and not a configuration I know of. In fact, this ship is reading a few kilometers ahead, then a few behind, then all up and down. The sensors don't seem to be able to lock onto it.

It's then I realize this large ship is almost over us.

"How did it move that fast?" I ask, knowing Nate doesn't have the answer but secretly hoping he does.

"It's a government ship," Louis says.

"No it's not," Eldrina says, her hands full of crystals. "I took some from that analyst thing. The angels hone in on these."

"Time to go," Nate hits the thrusters.

And nothing.

"The angels don't want us to leave," Eldrina places the crystals in a circle on the deck.

"The Spec Ops Fed units," Louis says. "They can immobilize us. That's what they're doing."

"Shut up!" Nate blasts them verbally. He turns to me. "Go aft and check the engines. See if the power relay has blown out."

I'm not sure what he's talking about. But I head aft to the engines and with the intent to figure it out. Right now Nate probably doesn't trust anyone else. I don't blame him. That's probably the main reason he doesn't have a crew. Well, that and

he makes more money with no one to pay.

I head aft to the engines, but see Nate coming forward. His face is one of satisfaction. I'm used to this. What I'm not used to is the meter long clear flexiplast cable that dangles from his right hand.

"I'm guessing that's the relay cable," I say as I point to his right hand. "You realize we can't get away now."

"I don't want us to," Trent says. "If we leave, they'll just keep searching till they find me. So I incapacitated the ship."

"You're an idiot, you know that?" I say. I look over my shoulder. Nate hasn't seen Trent yet. "Nate will kill you for sabotaging his ship."

"Relax," Trent sweeps the *Bayern* with his free hand. "Once they have me, they'll just let the rest of you go."

Uh huh. My mind flits through all the scenarios of what is about to happen to us. What if it's pirates? If I'm lucky, a slave working the ice mines in an asteroid belt. If not, a hostage. My bureau chief won't pay a thing to get me back, either.

A swirling, purple and dayglow blue mist rolls into the corridor. It starts about ankle deep, then climbs till only my head pokes through.

I hear the hydraulic grinding of the ramp. Then there's a sound like a hundred soft footsteps clanging and pattering up

the ramp and into the ship.

It's then I realize they're all around me. Human in shape, they grab me and pull me along. I'm being led down the ramp. I know that much. Am I being abducted by the pirates? I have no idea, but plod along with them. I want to run, to escape. But no, the figures are all around me.

My heart is back to its massive pumping again, and I feel a cold sweat rush down my face. My vision narrows. The hands that touch me are cold, but forceful. I start to hyperventilate. I want to run, but can't.

#

I wake up. This is a surprise to me, since I didn't know I fell asleep. A pulsating orb, green in color, lights up my surroundings. I'd say it's about as big around as a basketball, but the similarities with the sporting good end there.

I'm in a small room. The walls are some kind of plasticized metal, blue-gray in color. I'm on a bunk better sized for a ten year old's room. Across from me is a water-filled basin and an oval protrusion from the wall that could be a toilet. Everything looks like it was molded straight from the walls.

The forth wall is not there. Beyond is a corridor that leads in to my left and right. Trash lines the sides of the corridor. Everything from food wrappers and banana peels to an old shoe and fried circuit panels.

Have I been taken by pirates? Or by the Feds? I bolt from

the bunk and stumble. I realize I'm trembling. My heartbeat is slamming up so hard in my chest I can't breath right.

Sweat gushes down my face. I wipe it with the back of my hand but that fails to stop the cascade. I've been in war zones, hostage standoffs, police shootouts, you name it. But this. . .

I step forward, into the hall. The tip of my boot and then my nose bump into something as solid as those rocks back on the planet, only much smoother.

I press my quivering hands against the invisible wall, acting like a proverbial mime caught in that fake box. Only this box isn't fake. The corridor is right there, centimeters from me. I can see it. No way to get to it.

The orb glows slightly softer as I turn away from this impediment. I walk towards it. The color is now a sedate greenish hue, not unpleasant to look at. I think the enclosure's controls must have something to do with this floating ball.

As I back away from the wall, miniscule jets in the ceiling spray me with some kind of fine, gray mist. Peace settles over me. My heart goes back in my chest and the sweat ceases its river from the top of my head. My shaking hands are now as calm as a surgeon's digits.

What's better, I can think clearly. Whatever that mist is, I'd like to take a hydrogen tankful to go. Here I am in a supposed spaceship in a cell with an glowing orb and I'm not scared. I know I should be.

My hand analyzer is laying on a small shelving. I grab it and flip it on. The readout dances around until it finds a frequency. It's much higher than anything I've worked with before, but it might be a way to communicate with this orb thing. Maybe I can tell it to let me out.

Suddenly, the orb shakes from side to side. The sphere moves from the center of my cell and out into the hall. Only the invisible wall doesn't stop *it*.

The sphere hovers at waist level out there. I reach out to find my hand goes right through this time.

As I move, the glowing green ball moves an equal distance from me to my right. I step to my left, the thing glows brighter. Maybe it wants me to follow it.

The orb glides along at a slow pace. I don't try to rush it. We pass another cell some three meters down the corridor from mine. In fact, there seems to be a cell every three meters going on around the bend.

Eldrina is in the first cell I see . Somehow she was allowed to keep those crystals she swiped from me. She has them arranged on the deck in a circle with her seated in the center. Her legs are folded underneath her, hands reaching open palmed for the air above her. Kind of like a cross between meditating and praying.

Affirmed I'll get nothing useful out of her, I continue with the glowing green ball. It stays exactly two meters in

front of me.

I see writing of some kind etched into the bulkheads. It seems to consist of a series of crisscrossed lines. Kind of reminds me of Cuneiform. I pass by and the characters light up like some blue-green neon sign.

The next cell has a blurry wall. A dark shape, some three meters tall, moves about inside. I can't make out what it is exactly, only the outline. All I can tell is that it's tall and has very large hands. It's either furry or wearing a big hairy coat.

I touch the blurry wall.

Solid.

I jump back when a hand the size of my head slams into the other side of the barrier. I can make out some details. For one, the hand is hairy, like I thought. Two, it has eight fingers.

The orb pulses. Somehow I think this indicative of it getting impatient with me. Is this a warning? What will it do to get me to behave? Zap me? Shock me?

I decide I don't want to know.

The next cell down contains Louis. Louis is pacing around his little room when he spots me. He rushes to the edge of his cell and waves at me.

"What the Hell?" he says. "Why did they pick you first? What are you doing out there?"

"Not sure," I say. "I'm just following the glowing ball."

"That doesn't make sense," Louis says. I agree, though probably for a different reason. "I'm the one that put all the clues together. Not you!"

"Yeah," I say. "Well, I'll put in a good word for you."

"No!" Louis screams into the corridor, to whomever might be listening. "Summon me! I found all the clues. I'm understand the message! I can help you! Let me be your representative! I know what humankind is doing to your space!"

Louis continues yelling as I walk away. I come into a cell occupied by Trent.

Trent sits on his bunk. I have to admit, it fits him better than me. He sucks on a tobacco stick and looks for all the universe like he's mellowed out watching holo vids.

"Hey," he says to me as I walk by. "I see the aliens are taking me last, too."

"I don't know if that's how it works."

"Sure it is. That's fine," Trent says as he draws hard on his tobacco stick. "I'll wait here till they analyze us and see who deserves to be first. It's fine, really."

I walk another dozen meters or so. The corridor empties into a large circular room. Lit by five glowing orbs hovering at eye level, I see there's two exits. The arch I came through and one at the far end of the room.

A man is seated at a table in front of me. He is about my height, with silver hair and white eyes. His age is possibly his

mid 40s. His skin has that exposed-to-deep-space-sunlight look. This gives him a gray pallor devoid of wrinkles, so it's hard to determine his age. He's dressed in a gray form-fitting suit and tie, with black piping.

"Sit," he says as he pulls up a small chair.

"Nice to meet you, too," I say.

"Really, Marcus," The man says. "I thought you weren't one for long introductions."

"I'm not one for being held captive on an alien ship, either," I say.

"You're not on an alien vessel, Marcus," the man says. "My name is John Smith, by the way."

"Okay 'John Smith,' I say. "If this isn't an alien ship, what exactly is it?"

"Classified genetic experiment," John says. "And unfortunately, you stumbled into it."

"Stumbled? Its that what you call it?"

"Yes."

"You captured us," I say.

"You interrupted our genetic experiment when you took that biological sample," John says.

"The rat?"

"Well, it has some rat in it," John says.

"I figured that much out," I say.

John punches up a touchscreen on the table. "You're Marcus

Brogan, a field correspondent for the News9 News Service. You are thirty-six and have been on assignment in the Reaches for the last six years. Your correspondent reports reach all of the inner colonies and Earth."

"Okay," I say. "You got a file on me. That tells me you're with the government. It doesn't tell me why I'm here."

"And would you like a repeat explanation?" John asks. "I told you, this is all a genetic experiment. We created a lifeform that can survive on this planet's thin and volatile atmosphere."

"That was no genetic experiment," I say. "Our equipment couldn't figure out what that thing was. And what about that big hairy thing you have wandering around here?"

"There is no big hairy creature, Marcus."

"Yes, there is."

"No, there's not."

"And You *think* you found a living alien creature with that rat," John says. "Actually that is a hybrid genetic experiment we're adapting to live on Leyte."

"I *know* I found one," I say, sarcasm dripping from my lips.

I know this must be a lie. Leyte is in the process of terraforming. In a matter of years, the environment will change. Why synthesize an organism that won't be able to live on the planet for more than a brief time?

"What about the other passengers? Where's the captain?"

"They don't seem to want to leave us," John says. "Except your ship's captain and you. By the way, inventive of you to try and synchronize your scanner with the orb. It wouldn't have worked, but good try."

John reaches into his pocket and produces my now deactivated holocamera. He slides it across the table to me.

"We've deleted all content concerning your latest voyage out here," John says. "We replaced it with our information."

"Your information?"

"Yes," John says. "Too many random explorers show up out here. At first, we simply took them into custody, but that only encouraged more to venture this way. When you report the truth. Namely, that there are a lot of experiments being performed out here to keep them safely away from the populace. It will convince society there are no aliens out here."

"Nobody's going to buy that," I say.

"Oh, coming from you they will," John says. "Your media pieces are trusted by 98% of the public."

"I don't care what you say," I say. "I'm getting an idea what's out here. Once my program airs, every conspiracy wacko, inner peace seeking drifter, and religious vacuum head will head out here like a damned land rush. And so will the Feds."

"You'll forget this soon enough," John says. I'm not too comfortable with the way he says that. "What you will have is a concrete explanation for everything. It will make nice story for

your broadcasts.”

“No,” I say. “I’m a correspondent. I may not like all my assignments, but I report the truth as I see it. I’m no government tool.”

“You’ll have a complete change of mind soon enough,” John says. He gets up and walks out of the room through the arch I came in.

“Just remain seated. I’ll send for you shortly,” John calls out over his shoulder.

I don’t plan on being around for that.

The orbs hover above me. I think mine is the one on the end, but they’ve all synchronized to a glowing green color. I stand.

No movement from the orbs.

I creep toward the archway directly in front of me. No movement, pulsing, or anything comes from the orbs. I would have thought John bright enough to leave these pulsating balls to watch over me. But no, they just hover there.

Still not convinced I won’t be chased, I bolt into the corridor. I clamor down the hall, lit only by the periodic runes that run vertically down the support beams.

A few meters away on my left, is another cell. Something walks past my view. At this distance and in this light all I can see is that its shiny, mottled green in color. About my height, it walks upright on several legs.

I rush to the cell. Like the cell with the hairy beast, the invisible wall goes foggy. I see something walking around in there, but can't make out what it is.

I head down the corridor. Maybe Nate is nearby. So far, he's the only one I haven't seen.

Before I get there I hear some kind of humming getting louder. I back up and brush against a support column. The hieroglyphics light up with a neon green.

Some kind of red stage light from overhead shoots down at me. My vision fills with a like color mist.

Then its gone.

My senses are back. I now stand in another curving hall. Before me are hundreds of human bodies, each laid out face up and side by side. Their heads are oriented toward me. They're in a clear racks, stacked a hundred or more high.

Each of them has an octagonal device resting on the center of their forehead. This device is maybe the size of my fist and about as thick. A glowing red sphere the size of a ping pong ball is inserted in the center of each octagon.

I walk along this rack. About 20 meters down my scanner starts beeping. It's picking up another P-TRAN and leads me to Nate. He's on the second shelf on the rack, about a meter off the deck.

Nate looks serene for a guy who's been officially abducted.

Grabbing Nate's shoulders, I pull. Nate comes out like he's

on a coroner's slab, only there's no slab. He just floats. Whoever these people are, they have anti gravity down to a fine art if they can waste the tech on body storage.

I reach into the octagonal attachment and pull out the glowing red orb. The thing feels warm in my hands, but doesn't zap me or anything. I put it in my vest pocket.

The octagon slides off Nate's forehead and clatters to the deck. Then Nate falls from whatever gravity-defying field the octagon provided. His head makes a loud bonk as his body slams back-first into the deck. His eyes shoot open, along with his mouth.

"Oooouuch!" Nate screams. "What the- God, my head!"

"Quiet," I say. "They'll hear us."

"What the-, who will hear us?"

"Whoever or whatever took us prisoner."

"Who?"

"I don't know. Some guy named John Smith."

"That sounds made up."

"It probably is."

"What happened?"

"We tried to get away from that ship over Leyte," I Say.  
"Only it caught us."

Nate sits up, rubbing his head. He looks at the wall of bodies before us, then at the curving corridor.

"No. . . well. . . . yes, I think I remember," he says.

"That humungous ship was after us in low orbit. There was a mist in the *Bayern*. After that, not so much."

"We've been taken aboard that ship," I say.

"What are all these bodies doing here?"

"I think they're the UFO hunters who got abducted."

"We need to leave."

"I couldn't agree more," I say.

I lead Nate to the hieroglyphs. The characters light up. The last time I thought about Nate and touched these things, I was sent close to where Nate was. So, I reason, if I think of an exit. . .

I reach out and press my palm on the writing. Again, a light - yellow this time - bores down on us. A yellow mist envelops us.

The next thing I realize we're standing in a circular room about four meters in diameter with smooth blue-gray walls. The center of this room is a three meter wide circular hole in the deck. Through it, I see dirt and rocks from about six meters up.

"Leyte," Nate says. "I think we're back on Leyte."

I poke my hand into the the hole. My hand breaches some kind of barrier and feel the wind and cool temps of the planet. Makes sense. I did wish for an exit from those glyphs.

"You are impressive," John Smith says as his form solidifies in a swirling mist column. "You figured out the transit hubs. I think you're the first to do that."

"We're getting out of here, John," I say.

"Of course you are," John says with a smile. "Your ship has been placed back on the planet, devoid of any evidence of this encounter. But first, I'll need the preservation device."

John holds out his left hand, palm up. His expression is one of a criminal who got away with murder. I reach for the little orb, which I assume he's talking about.

"We thought you'd be a lot of trouble, Marcus," John says. "But you just made it so easy on us. I tell you, it's always the last thing you expect."

I throw a punch right to John's jaw. I bet he didn't expect *that*.

The mystery man's head snaps back and he crashes backwards into the deck. By the time he sprawls out, his body becomes blurry, disjointed.

My eyes refocus, and the man I hit is no longer a man. What's sprawled in front of me is a mass of tendrils, supported by a pair of deflating hemispherical gas bags.

"What is that thing?" Nate screams.

"I think that's the alien species everyone's been searching for," I say. That's Eldrina's angel, or Louis' garbage police, and even the Trent's calling. They can appear as anything they want."

"Won't his crew come looking for us?" Nate's eyes dart around the circular room.

I say. "This octopus thing may be all the crew this vessel has. I get the idea those orbs do most of the work around here anyway."

The fact is, if there was a crew, they would be here by now. This guy, whoever whatever he, she, or it truly is, doesn't exactly have a delayed reaction time.

So far, nothing has misted in. Maybe the globes think Mr. Smith is sleeping.

"You know what? I'm taking him and we're getting out of here," I say.

"Are you sure?" Nate says. "What if it wakes up?"

"That's a possibility I'm willing to risk," I say.

Smith is light. I hoist his boneless flesh on my left shoulder. He feels like an unruly, long garden hose with two empty plastic sacks attached at the end. I jump into the deck hole. I blinding flash hits my eyes when my head breaches the barrier. Nate follows.

Glancing up, I see the massive ship I just jumped out of. It's triangular shape is almost a kilometer on each side. It has a number of lights around the edges, but nothing that seems to notice us. It has a lot of landing gear out, no doubt making holes like the ones we found earlier.

Nate's handscan starts pinging. He points to the East and we start running. Smith - and I doubt that's his real name - doesn't stir. Something in the alien pulsates, but that could be

him breathing for all I know.

We reach the *Bayern*. My eyes take it in as we approach. The running lights blink along the landing gear and the engines rumble, showing they're ready. For an abducted ship, the *Bayern* doesn't seem all that bad. The cargo ramp is down.

We run up the ramp. I expect I'll see a number of orbs waiting there for us. Or maybe another Smith-type, though I have to tell myself he's alone. I think that courage mist is wearing off.

Instead, a small podship sits on the cargo deck. It lowered its landing wheels and just rode up the ramp, barely fitting into the cargo hold. It's brown, pitted, stained, and has a name on its stern:

*Pride of Patagonia*

"Glad you could make it," a familiar voice echoes from the front of the cargo hold.

Cora. The woman stands there, plump as before. But this time, she's covered in grime and black servo fluid. Her sausage-shaped fingers hold a giant wrench.

"Cora?" Nate is as surprised as I am. "How did you get on my ship?"

"It was open," Cora says, blowing errant strings of her hair away from her face. "Sorry about that. I been following you guys ever since I unloaded Marcus. Good thing I did, too. Then you were captured by that triangular ship. It didn't notice my

small ship, but-. Did you know your power relay was taken? What's that thing over your shoulder?"

"You mean you fixed it?" I ask.

"No," Cora leans in like she's instructing some child. "It was missing. I found it lying on the deck."

"Good enough," Nate sprints down the corridor to his bridge.

"What are you doing with that thing?" Cora asks. "Is that one of them aliens? How did you get out?"

"I'll tell you everything later," I say as I run past Cora. "First we need to get this guy in suspension."

John still isn't moving, although I can now feel some kind of wiggling from inside him. Again, this is a biological function, I think. Maybe a heat beat? I don't know.

The bowels of the *Bayern* are crammed with suspension tubes. This is a real cut-rate passenger class. There must be at least ten of these clear tubes lined up along the starboard bulkhead. Charge a passenger something cheap, slam them into one of these tubes, and put them in suspension till you get them wherever they want to go.

Often, its called 'on ice' although there's no actual ice involved. But the term stuck.

I pop the nearest one open and shove my alien captive inside. My biggest fear is John waking up and alerting his vessel. The tube, I hope, will keep him knocked out.

I close the door and the tube hisses shut. Clear RubberSeal tubes stiffen as the suspension process activates. The monitor shows the life inside is steady at readings I've never seen, but steady anyway.

"Is it still alive?" Cora asks.

"Yeah, I think it is," I say.

I leave the tube deck. Cora clanks up to the bridge with me. We find Nate staring directly ahead as the star field flies by in the viewport.

"Been keeping an eye behind us," he says. "So far nothing's pursuing."

"I think your tube will keep our friend Smith out cold," I say.

"That reminds me," Cora says. "We got ourselves proof positive of alien life down in there. I think it's time we talked about how we're gonna split the cash."

"We'll head straight home," Nate says, playing with a dangling cockpit ornament of the Earth.

"That'll take too long," Cora says. "I think the R&D of some of those corps would pay top money for what we have."

"No, those corps will take it and sweep us under the deck plates, we need to head to Talan Outpost," I say. "There's a News9 station there."

"The news?" Cora pushes her thick, oversized goggles up a notch on her forehead. "What's in it for me—, uh, us?"

"Once the story breaks, interest piques, and so does the price," I say.

They both seem satisfied with that, Cora in her dramatic way, Nate in his reserved way.

I find my comm tablet where I left it in my cabin. I power it on and find it works, though my notes have been erased. I activate the comm channel.

Tred appears, big bags beneath his eyes as he slurps the remains of coffee in an oversized mug.

"Where have you been?" Tred says. His eyes widen, pushing out the bags. "You were supposed to check in by now!"

"That will take some explaining," I say.

"Well, do you have the piece?"

"Getting there. I need to start over."

"Well get it in drive," Tred says.

"Working on it my head now," I say. "Trust me, this is going to be big."

"Good. The CEO wants to know what happened to the UFO contactees out there."

"Oh that," I say. "I got some bad news about the UFO contactees."

<THE END>