

CODA

Book 1

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G. M. Ellerbeck

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To my wife
Mary

Acknowledgements

A very special thanks to my wife Mary and my children for putting up with me while writing this book. To the ladies of the Aisling writers group; without your help this story would never be told. To Nicola Jennings for your invaluable advice and editing. To Pierre Maré for the early days.

● Prologue

Perhaps an hour, he thought. That's all he had, to prepare for his final crossing to the altered state. He would finally join the ones he loved and contribute his life energy to the fabric of creation. He was not afraid of death. It was the challenge of life that held the most pitfalls for him. His wet body, strapped into the battle station seat, seemed to be floating in outer space. He looked down at his bare feet resting on the rudder pedals and the fantastic vista of stars beyond. None of the constellations were familiar to him and directly ahead was a massive black cloud that he was powerless to avoid.

He checked the Universal compass reading and realised where he was...the first Universe. Galaxy sized black clouds, with temperatures of minus 250 degrees Celsius and below, plagued its outer reaches...one of which was about to engulf the remains of his now crippled ship. He was doomed with no escape. Even with his capacity to endure extreme temperatures, this was beyond his formidable strength. The Universe he was in was almost entirely depopulated except for its home world, Moeba, the first world, the one that had started it all. It was not the Universe he would have chosen, but the unstable vortex that had brought him here had been his only escape from certain death.

It had jettisoned his war ship directly into the collision path of an enormous asteroid, which had torn off the aft end and ripped the main engines out like a tooth violently extracted. He sealed off the bridge and activated the explosive bolts. As they exploded, his smaller ship separated from the remains of the wrecked war ship and floated free.

He tried to start the engines but nothing worked. The smell of melted circuitry and burnt metal sowed a sense of foreboding.

The bridge was uniquely designed around a large glass ball water tank. The entire structure was a plasma touch screen he would operate from the inside, while he was submerged. To engage in battle, he would eject through the battle hatch, directly into the external cockpit seat, which was not under water. Once in the seat, a total surround screen was activated from the base. The view was generated by the ship's vision sensors. The seat was designed as a battle station, with controls on the armrests that would steer the ship and rotate the screen in the direction of flight or fire. Its controls were compatible when connected to the superstructure of a bigger war ship with its more powerful engines and armaments.

With most of the ships solar skin ripped off and the power packs damaged, there was maybe two hours of power left to run the emergency lights. The oxygen would last maybe five hours, after that...there was only the oxygen left in the water. Ultimately, none of it mattered, as the inexorable momentum of his wrecked ship took him directly into the gaping black maw of death. With no power to run the survival systems, his body would freeze in the cloud...suspended in darkness for hundreds if not thousands of years before it exited on the other side.

He removed the target specs; fatigue and tension etched deeply into the contours of his face. His glowing red-brown eyes held a profound sorrow for his comrades who had died this day. Among them was his closest friend who had been there with him from the beginning and had saved his life on countless occasions. He felt consoled by the knowledge that he would join them soon.

He hit the button on the left armrest console and the screen retracted into the base of the seat, to reveal the observation deck. It was sometimes used as a war room, but mostly, he would just sit in the old red leather wing-backed chair and contemplate the view in the wide half surround observation port. The darkness was illuminated only by the glow of the emergency runners and a distant star now partially obscured by the black cloud. Everything loose was floating in the air permeated with fine drops of water, which meant the gravitation drive was also lost.

He sighed and punched the harness release buckle on his chest and floated free of the cockpit seat. He made his way to his space boots, moved over to the observation port, put them on his bare feet, activated the magnets and put his feet on the metal floor. He took hold of his coat and put it on. For what seemed like an eternity, he stared out of the observation port at the fast approaching cloud. So this was how he would die, he thought, alone in space, in a hostile universe, in a dismembered ship. Was there

any reason to live...now that they had all perished? After such long lives, it had all come down to this. It was not a bad way to die; after all...he was used to the cold.

He picked up his father's flute. A unique instrument his father had made of ditholium, a very strong alloy used in aqua mining. He had modified it after his father's death. It now not only made beautiful sounds, but also made terrifying ones that could jar the bone of the staunchest enemy. Occasionally he had used it as a weapon...but now he would play.

He thought of his father and the haunting mysterious notes of the tune he'd always played, before and after meditation. Those notes started to flow with the memory of his father's gentle encouraging voice and his gift of music. He remembered his mother's loving face, her soft hair, and her passion for mathematics. The tone of the notes darkened, as he recalled his enemies and their treachery. War notes ripped into the melody, as he paid tribute to those worthy adversaries on the battlefield. The mood changed with a frightening cacophonous crescendo, as he recollected the monsters of the deep. The tune lifted and thundered with joy and fascination at the wonders of space and the adventures of his life. The loss of his comrades and friends brought a more pensive and sorrowful tone, like a soothing salve after the lash.

The melody ended abruptly, the air in his lungs choked off as he remembered...her... The vision of her death was still vivid in his mind. The pain of it was overwhelming. A soft, agonising wail escaped his throat, that once free, grew into a frustrated and angry roar that ended in a pitiful sob. He could still feel her sensual touch; smell her musk and feel the glow of her intimate love and understanding. He could still see the grace with which she moved and feel the power of her soul. With suffocating heartache...he missed her.

The observation port had become dark and ice was forming around the edges. In an almost trance-like ritual, he slowly removed his clothes except for his black leather loincloth. Once undressed, he drifted across to the top of the tank, opened the hatch, and submerged himself into the water. It was a soft embracing cocoon, illuminated only by the shafts of light from the emergency runners.

As he started to meditate, in his mind's eye, he saw the vast expanse of his father's aquatic origin. He felt the peace of its beautiful under-sea mountains and valleys. As his thoughts drifted in, he let them pass until his mind was still. To the sound of a bubbling brook in his ears, he slowed his bodily functions down, until his heart rate dropped to one beat every two minutes. As the ship's power ran out, he felt the water slowly freeze. He watched it solidify around him and take hold of his body. As the emergency lights faded, a bright white light grew in his mind. As he moved into the light, he felt free at last, a release from the physical burden of pain and suffering and left his body in the blackness, preserved for eternity, in the confines of its glass custodian...

●

Present

Planet Moeba, Mt. Ross, Ajari Province.

Looking through the immense oval window, at Var, the moon of Moeba, Captain John Masters' attention was drawn by a small patch of clear crystal glass. Like a stain on a pure white sheet, he thought. It remained unaffected by the constant battering of sand storms that pitted the rest of the glass and turned it almost opaque. It obscured a breathtaking view of stony planes and rocky outcrops, illuminated by the enormous opalescent moon. Its warm incandescence filtered into the room and filled it with the deep amber of early evening twilight through a thin dust-laden atmosphere.

He took a sip of his drink. The liquor rasped down his throat like a jagged rock and ignited that familiar fire in his corpulent belly. Its weight seemed to counterbalance his deceptively powerful shoulders that supported the heavy round head on its stump-like neck. He looked comfortably tailored in his lightweight dress uniform. His balding, neatly cut red hair with the greying temples, blended well with the now unbuttoned collarless jacket. It was waist length and the colour of rust with blood maroon brocade on the lapels and cuffs. The matching maroon silk shirt collar with the gold Captains' tri-circle insignia was unbuttoned. His broad back was turned towards his guests when Ehzhu Moriwe, his guest of honour, had put the question to him.

‘So, Captain...do you believe there is such a place?’

Ehzhu was an influential Sabalian trader, who had graced his table before, with very profitable results. The heavy perfume he wore on his toxic fat body, failed to compete with the pungent odour of stale sweat on his shiny blue skin. He had seven wives, two of whom always travelled with him; his head wife Uli and his latest Feen.

Captain Masters turned to face the oval room. It was a double height room, carved into the gold coloured marble of Mt. Ross. Its cold polished surfaces would not be softened, despite the warm exterior glow. The walls and floor were made luminescent with subtle embedded lighting. Rows of lit alcoves in the walls proudly displayed artefacts, hunting trophies of aliens and animals he had killed and collected from exotic worlds. Like macabre spectators, each had its own story to tell.

He surveyed his six guests with pale blue eyes. His face was fleshy and his complexion ruddy with a boxer's nose and thin lips. It was a face that belied his intelligence. He was a difficult man who had come up the ranks the hard way, but who had grown into a comfort zone and had become bored and restless with the confines of Mt. Ross. On his left were Ehzhu Moriwe and his two wives. On his right were Lieutenant Shay Duncan and Dr. Monica Lynn. Directly in front of him was Mentor Etha Dax. They were seated on oversized sofas and armchairs covered in luxurious bottle green silk and arranged around a golden onyx table. It was a low table that served up drinks, snacks, sociable drugs, music, and 3D holographic entertainment, controlled by small touch pads along its outer edge.

The Captain took a handful of nuts, popped one in his mouth, chewed on it noisily, and answered with disdain. ‘The 100th Universe is a myth. There are only ninety nine Universes with twelve realms of life.’ He chewed a bit more, relishing the taste and texture of the nuts. ‘To think that there might be a thirteenth realm in a Universe that doesn't exist is absurd. Throughout the eons we have extensively explored the Multiverse and there has never been even a hint that this Universe exists. Unless it's somewhere out there beyond the Multiverse; in the Megaverse perhaps. We know all the passages, known and secret, even where most of the unstable vortexes occur. So...believe me, the 100th universe is a figment of your imagination.’

His response was not directed at Ehzhu, but rather at Mentor Etha Dax, but his eyes were on Feen. If she had not been dressed in that skin-tight cat suit, he thought, one could have sworn she was sitting there naked. It was emerald green and offset her challenging green eyes and striking red hair. Her choker, bracelets, and loose fitting thigh-high boots were of raw sienna suede with gold loops attached. At sixteen, her golden brown skin glowed with youth. She looked up at him and her smile was like a

warm caress. A stirring in his loins made him tear his gaze away. He looked straight into Ehzhu's cunning black eyes that held a subtle amusement at the lust he saw there.

Captain Masters flushed and to cover his embarrassment, vented his frustration on the Mentor who sat calmly in the oversized armchair. 'You mentors have always perpetuated this fantasy of a watery green utopia with its stable climate that "could sustain the human race as we once knew it."' Captain Masters' annoyance became manifest as he continued. 'Well, no one alive has ever known this planet or ever will. In search of this non-existent mirage, our ancestors left us for dead on a planet they had destroyed. All based on a fictitious novel, created in the fevered mind of an ancient old pathfinder who went mad from all the time spent alone in his tiny little spacecraft!'

He looked around the room and took note of the expressions on their faces. 'Now...you brandish this book as the definitive text on a planet that doesn't exist, with a nonsensical navigational code that no one can understand or interpret, on how to get there.' Captain Masters sat down in his huge wing backed chair that dominated the room. He finished his drink in one gulp and tapped out another from the table's service hatch. He could barely contain his intolerance for these so-called psychics. 'You have taken this story-book, embellished it with all kinds of psychic rubbish, and turned it into some sort of religious philosophy. This is now used as the prime justification for the aimless wanderings of the Pathfinders' guild.' He pointed his chin at Monica. 'Anyone with even an inkling of psychic ability, you draw into this brainwashing web and they then spread this fantasy tale like an insidious cancer.'

Monica looked at him with indignant fire in her cautious blue eyes. 'On the contrary Captain! The Pathfinders are a noble group of sages that have brought light and understanding throughout the multiverse. They have done excellent work at mapping out the Megaverse and improving our understanding of different alien species and cultures. Speaking as a scientist, Captain, their contribution is of infinite value,' she ended with a sarcastic tone.

The Captain's lecherous eyes roved her taut body, dressed in her knee length plain black dress with its square front and bare arms. His gaze rested on her small but shapely breasts. 'The only true value

is that which can be seen, touched, and turned into hard currency.'

Before Monica could respond, Mentor Etha Dax interrupted with his deeply timbered voice. 'As you know Captain, the price of currency is dependent on your intent. You can never escape appropriate consequence, no matter how well you cover your intent. It is only intent that will generate true proportional value.' His bald head seemed to glow with an inner light and his ageless black eyes taunted him with their tantalizingly humorous secret. At sixty-two, his six foot five athletic body still held a slumbering power that hinted at his warrior prowess. 'And keep in mind Captain, that the very star charts you use on your travels, were explored, and mapped by the Pathfinders of old on those so called "aimless wanderings."'

The Captain was a hard man, but not an uncivilised one. He conceded with an evil grin and lifted his glass. He has a point, the Captain thought, as he finished off his drink; however, this is not the end of it.



Mentor Etha Dax hated these private trade dinners, but in this instance he was forced to attend. The detestable Ehzhu Moriwe was particularly instrumental in securing Sabalian trade with Moeba. In order to secure this treaty, as head of the Pathfinders, he had been requested by the guild of Trade and Industry, to maintain a supply of Mannas to Ehzhu for his personal consumption. The secret of Mannas production was held only by a select few of the Pathfinders. It was considered to be an elixir of life, youth, vitality and sexual enhancement. What no one except the select few knew was that it was a corrupted version of the real thing. What was in fact distributed was an addictive drug that strongly enhanced the physical sensations with a euphoric hallucinogenic effect. The real thing was called Manna. It reversed the ageing process and had an intense spiritual effect on a person. His thoughts were interrupted by Uli, Ehzhu's first wife.

'And what say you of the Pathfinders, Lieutenant?'

Undressing Lieutenant Shay Duncan with her lascivious grey eyes, she looked at his crotch and said in a throaty voice, ‘Surely a young man of your obvious attributes has an opinion on such philosophical matters.’ She leaned forward; her heavy sagging breasts shown off by the very low cut cleavage of her blood red dress.

She was past middle age, six foot tall with long limbs and heavy thighs. Her light blue skin contrasted sharply with the big ruby pendant on its long gold chain that drew the eye like a magnet. With her left hand she took her tall drink from the table; her bony fingers with their long red nails like talons, clutching their prize. From her drink she plucked out the small orange fruit with its long glass skewer and sensuously sucked it into her mouth. Her matching ruby earrings offset her close-cropped silver hair and long elegant neck.

Shay cleared his throat self consciously and crossed his legs. ‘Well...yes,’ he said and cleared his throat again. ‘As a navigator, I can only admire the work done by those illustrious men and women.’

To Etha Dax, it seemed like it had suddenly become too hot for Shay in his dress uniform jacket with its ornate navy brocade on the lapels and cuffs. His face was red with embarrassment. His navy silk collar with its double ring Lieutenants’ insignia looked like it had become tight and uncomfortable under the dragon’s breath of Uli’s sexual heat. She sat back and opened her legs just enough for him to view her inner thigh before she crossed them in the same flowing movement. Shay looked before he could stop himself, falling neatly into her trap. She had a subtle, triumphant smile on her full-bottom-lipped mouth.

To recover from his shock and self-loathing he leaned over to tap out another drink from the table. Before he could think of something else to say, he clumsily hit the wrong button and the 3D holographic system came on with “Nebula” blaring out their high-energy club music. With explosive volume, the percussive beat echoed off the hard walls with bludgeoning ferocity. It seemed to go on for an eternity as he desperately attempted to find the “off” button. When he finally did, the shocking silence left the party deaf and numbed.

Etha Dax could not contain his mirth at the expressions on their faces. His deep rolling laughter burst from his belly and washed over the room like a cold shower. Feen erupted with her hysterical giggle that was coupled with Uli’s derisive cackle. Captain John Masters joined in with a loud hoot accompanied by Ehzhu’s blubberous chuckle. The moment was so spontaneous that even the sympathetic Monica could not suppress her shy smile.

While everyone enjoyed the moment, the Lieutenant masked his glowing discomfort with a sporting grin. He was a handsome man, six foot tall with classic good looks. As the room settled down, Ehzhu looked at Etha Dax and asked in his high pitched silky voice. ‘Tell me Mentor; how is it that the Pathfinders exist at all. What was the catalyst that created this unusual band of travellers?’

‘The answer lies in the nature of the human species.’ Etha answered in his enigmatic fashion. The Captain wearily lifted his eyebrows, sighed, and took another sip of his drink as his eyes strayed back to Feen.

Etha Dax ignored him and barrelled on. ‘Our planet had at one time been a green planet with vast seas. It had a thick atmosphere that stabilised the temperature and created an almost global tropical climate. If the resources of the planet had been managed correctly it would have sustained an infinite population. However...the nature of humanity is such that as the population numbers grew, their consumption of these resources finally surpassed the supply.’ He paused, looked around the room and noted the hedonistic interplay between the Captain and Feen, who loved to tease.

‘Greed and total disregard for the environment had caused monumental so called “natural disasters” that left our planet’s atmosphere clogged with all sorts of gasses and carbon particles. To make matters worse, the solar wind activity of our sun increased massively; higher than ever recorded in our history. Our weather patterns changed, generating killer winds that created these huge sand storms. They killed off all our crops and livestock and drove the surviving population underground. Then our magnetic field faltered and our atmosphere began to dissipate under the solar winds of our sun. With the decrease in atmospheric pressure our seas literally evaporated out into space. The only water we were left with was the underground aquifers. Now we inhabit the living rock of the mountains and have protective crystal glass canopies built over our cities in sheltered valleys that offer at least a semblance of normal life.’

‘Like bats in our little caves,’ the Captain interrupted and took another handful of nuts, ‘all jostling for a bit of space.’ He took a sip of his drink, put more nuts in his mouth and chewed, clicking his tongue as he savoured the oils and textures.

‘The Pathfinders, Mentor?’ Ehzhu prompted, breaking the awkward silence that followed.

‘Oh yes...The Pathfinders...they began as astronauts sent out into the Universe to find a new world for humanity to start over. At first we dispatched probes that returned data from all corners of the Universe. We found two planets that had potential. We sent manned missions to them, but they proved to be uninhabitable. We are still trying to seed these planets. The accidental discovery of the vortex opened up the Multiverse to us. We followed the same formula by first dispatching probes and then small manned missions. We lost many of these ships through various disasters. Then, when things got really bad here, private interests sent out large survival type ships with starter populations and all the necessities to start new worlds. No-one really knew where they were going; our navigational charts of the Multiverse were sketchy at best. At that point the Pathfinders were formed to explore and chart the Multiverse properly. So, it was decided to send out those brave men and women on what were essentially one-way missions.’

‘How do you find people, who would willingly go on a one-way mission like that,’ Ehzhu interrupted. ‘Surely it would be tantamount to a long and painful death sentence?’

‘Only unique individuals with strong psychic abilities could cope with the long years of solitary travel. Our very best technology was sent with them to prolong their lives and communicate their findings.’

Ehzhu looked at the Mentor with keen interest at the mention of this technology. He sat forward, his weight straining at the red and black designs of his silk shirt. ‘Are there any still alive?’

The Mentor noticed Ehzhu’s reaction. ‘Yes there are. The last one to be sent out was as recent as fifteen years ago. It’s an ongoing movement that still brings in new and interesting results.’

‘So, what of the search for this mythological planet, did they ever find it?’ Ehzhu asked.

‘No...not yet. Most of those early survival ships just disappeared. We have no idea what happened to them. We eventually found some of them that had been...compromised. When our planet seemed doomed, it was decided to build the generation ships and use the information sent to us by the Pathfinders to evacuate the planet in search of a more suitable world. These generation ships were monopolised by the elite and their avarice was such that only those who could afford the fare were able to leave the planet. The rest of us were left for dead. We have a partial navigational code, but as the Captain says, it makes no sense and has not yet been deciphered. In the mean time we continue to map out the Multiverse in the hope that we may find the answer.’

The steady hum of the air conditioners was interrupted by the sound of the Captain punching out a popper on the touch pad, breaking off the top and sniffing the intoxicating gas up his nose. As his heart contracted, it pistoned a hot gush of blood through his body that exploded in his brain and relaxed the nerve ends. In an almost euphoric tone he blurted, ‘Yes...well...that’s ancient history now isn’t it? We have since...evolved into much more civilised and rational beings now, haven’t we?’ His face was puffed up and flushed and the surface veins could be seen pulsating under the skin. He let out a strained grunt, took a deep breath and laughed with abandon, took another breath and with a satisfied look on his face ended with a long fading, ‘Aaaah...’

‘We have become more sophisticated yes, however, civilised is debatable.’ Etha despised the common use of recreational drugs, which was the accepted norm in Mt. Ross.

Ehzhu pushed Feen’s popper clutching hand away from his fat heavy jowled face with its full greedy lips and cascading double chin. He leaned forward with his hard eyes boring into the Mentor. ‘It is my understanding that you still possess this long life technology. Is this true?’

‘Yes we do.’ Etha Dax had a guarded expression on his face.

‘How then, does one acquire such technology?’

‘It can never be acquired, but its product may be part of a negotiation,’ he knew that Ehzhu was now in play.

‘This negotiation you speak of, what would that be?’ Ehzhu had a slight frown on his brow.

‘A fair trade treaty between our planets.’

‘Now, now Mentor,’ Ehzhu responded with dismay. ‘Surely you know that I am not empowered to negotiate such a treaty on behalf of the Sabalian realm.’

‘Yes we know that, but we also know that you have sufficient access to those who can. Your influence on the trading fraternity of your realm is legendary.’

Ehzhu was silent for a moment as he thought; this man is not the bumbling priest he is made out to be. To underestimate such a man was folly indeed. There was a price to pay when he used his influence; however, the reward of a longer life was very tempting. Besides, he had just been complimented, so rare these days.

‘Do you speak on behalf of the guild of Trade and Industry, Mentor?’ Ehzhu’s eyes gleamed at the prospect of newfound wealth.

‘I do.’ The Mentor answered simply. He already knew what the outcome would be, but had to play it out convincingly. Ehzhu put his fat fingertips together and brought them up to his lips. He thought for a moment and said matter of factly, ‘You realise of course that the cost in Interversal Gion would be exacting on both Moeba and myself. Vast sums of this currency would be needed for inducement and besides, what incentive would there be for me?’

‘Assuming you agree to facilitate such a venture, I’m sure we can negotiate a favourable incentive,’ he passed him a small vial of white powder, ‘A small token of our good faith.’

‘Mannas!’ Ehzhu exclaimed with an involuntary gasp and beamed, ‘Ah Mentor...you certainly have a way of sweetening the palate.’

‘Yes...well...perhaps you might meet with the trade minister and me for lunch tomorrow?’

‘Very well Mentor...tomorrow it is. You know where to find me,’ Ehzhu leaned back in his comfortable sofa and sniffed the popper Feen cracked open for him. He let out a satisfied sigh and took a drink from Uli. They knew what was in the offing for them at the success of such a venture.

As the Mentor was about to take his leave the holographic com-link came on. A miniature 3D image of the telephonist hovered above the table and asked for Captain John Masters. He was slouched in his chair with a slightly dazed expression on his face. At the mention of his name, he surfaced from his drug soaked fog and responded angrily. ‘I gave clear instructions that I was not to be disturbed tonight!’

‘I do apologise Captain, however this is a code red. Shall I patch you through?’ Her voice was calm and professional. The Captain stared at her for a moment, not quite comprehending; it had been so long since he’d had a code red, that he almost forgot how to respond. Slowly his eyes focused and he sat up straight. ‘Very well... patch me through then.’

Her image faded and changed to that of Admiral Walter Green. He was a distinguished tired old man biding his time until retirement. ‘Good evening Captain.’ Before the Captain could respond he said abruptly, ‘You and your crew have been chosen for a unique mission in the Onusa quadrant. You are ordered to proceed to our moon station on Var where you will be briefed and equipped for your deep space mission. Now...I understand that Dr. Monica Lynn is one of your guests tonight, so may I speak with her as well?’

‘Over here Admiral, how may I help you?’

The image of Admiral Green turned towards her. ‘Ah yes...Dr. Lynn. So sorry to meet you under these circumstances, but we were hoping you might consider going along on this mission, all expenses paid of course.’

‘Could you tell me Admiral,’ Monica interrupted. ‘Where are we to be based and why am I being considered for this mission?’

‘You will initially be based at the research station on Upi, the moon of planet Onusa. We have detected a disabled Alien ship on the edge of the Othaxal cloud. Your research into alien physiology and culture has made you our natural choice as the leading scientist in this field. I realise that this creates more questions than answers, however, once on Var, you will be fully briefed at the research facility by Professor Erick Astor through com link, who I believe you are already acquainted with.’

‘Oh yes, I have worked with the Professor in the past and I’d be happy to work with him again.’ She was excited at the prospect of new challenges and working with the esteemed Professor once more. ‘When does the shuttle depart?’

‘At 22h00, Vidal flats shuttle station, terminal three. Please meet Captain Masters and his crew at 17h00 in the departure lounge for your pre-flight brief. Good evening and enjoy the rest of your party.’ And the Admiral’s image faded out...



Her lungs were on fire and her heart was racing painfully as she tried to swim up towards the light, desperate to escape the cold dark abyss beneath her. Blackness engulfed her mind, like suffocating ink it sucked at her soul and held her helpless, dangling like bait for what lurked in the deep. Monica woke up in a cold sweat, gasping for breath as she sat up. With a shaking hand she lifted the glass from her limestone bedside cabinet and gulped the water down. She looked around the bedroom. Still breathing hard, she tried to shake off the fear this recurring dream always left her with.

She had lived with the fear of water since she was a young child of six. She remembered the first time she saw a large body of water. Her father had taken her to see one of the many underground lakes. They walked onto a natural shelf of rock that protruded out twenty feet from the cliff over the water. It had a banister along its edge and was often used by visitors as an observation point over the lake. Her excitement was such that she took her father’s hand and pulled him with her; elbowing her way through the small crowd that had gathered at the furthest edge of the shelf. The massive expanse of water stretched out into the distance and disappeared into its mists. There were thousands of natural limestone pillars that seemed to grow out of the water to reach up hundreds of feet and support the heavy oppressive stone roof with its ancient stalactites that betrayed the planets earlier rainfall climate. From man-made holes cut into the roof, beautiful shafts of light cascaded onto the water. Hundreds of small electrical fishing craft were on the water with their nets out. At the small harbour, dock men were loading fish from the boats into refrigerated electric road trains that would take the fish to the markets.

She was excitedly gesticulating at the docks when, with a loud crack, the rock upon which they were standing broke off at the base and tumbled into the lake taking all the onlookers with it. As it started to tumble, her father had pushed her out and away from the rock, but could not dive out far enough to save himself from being crushed beneath the rock’s weight. Amid the sound of terrified screams she hit the cold water and sank like a stone. The black water beneath her reached up and tried to swallow her in its gaping mouth. It shocked her into panic. She looked up and clawed at the disappearing light, desperate for air. Slowly, she started to lose consciousness as her breath ran out.

As if in a dream, she felt the fishing net close around her. One of the fishermen had cast his net over the place where she had fallen. When he felt the tug on his net he knew he had her. He pulled the cord that closed the bottom of the net and hauled it out with the frantic help of his small crew. Once on board the fisherman breathed air into her lungs and pumped her chest until she coughed up water and took a deep breath of her own. The memory of that event and the death of her father had left her with an emotional trauma that had plagued her all her life.

She slipped her legs out from under the burgundy silk sheets and sat on the edge of the bed. She rested her feet on the warm limestone floor, streaked with veins of white and gold marble like tiny rivers of white-hot magma. Monica stood up and walked across the small round room. As she walked the recessed lights in the walls and ceiling slowly intensified, highlighting the fantastic patterns of the glowing marble. When she got close to the wall, with a soft hydraulic hiss, the stone bathroom door automatically pushed out towards her and slid to the right.

As she walked into the circular bathroom the lights dimmed up. In the centre of the room was the round floor to ceiling, glass enclosed steam shower. On the right was a glass basin sunk into its limestone cabinet with a large elliptical mirror on the wall above it. On the left was the toilet framed by two narrow cabinets. A curved bench along the far wall connected the two sides of the room.

She took off her navy blue nightdress and put it on the bench. As she walked into the shower, fine jets of warm water sprayed out from channels within the glass shower wall. She thought of her mother. She had suddenly become rich through compensation paid out by the Agricultural Guild for the accidental death of her husband. With her mother’s newfound wealth came high morals and standards, critically imposed on Monica with fanatical intensity. Eventually Monica had become a tense, self-conscious introvert. At fifteen she had won a scholarship at the Institute of Anthropology and Alien

studies and left home for good. She did not hate her mother; only, she could not live with her. Every time she visited her, she always had some criticism to throw at Monica that ended the visit with dramatic argument. Monica had called her yesterday evening to let her know that she was off on this mission which of course ended the same way as usual.

‘Who knows what is to become of you Monica!’ she had ranted. ‘You’re always off on a mission to who-knows-where, to some remote corner of the universe to study who-knows-what, when you should be at home with a good husband raising a family! It’s such a waste after all the hard work I’ve put into you!’

Monica knew that there was nothing she could do to help her mother understand her thirst for knowledge, her need for freedom and the joy she felt when exploring new worlds and studying new species. When all her faculties were focused on alien physiology, the last thing on her mind was a man and raising a family. Shay Duncan suited her needs well enough for now. They were both travelling people and accepted the noncommittal nature of their relationship. She knew Shay wanted more, but it was not a viable option under the circumstances and besides, she was not sure she loved him enough anyway.

As she walked out of the shower the water stopped flowing. She took a towel out of the cabinet and dried herself off, took another towel and dried her long straight black hair. She pulled back a glass sliding door under the bench and put the wet towels and her nightdress into the steam washer. She walked over to the basin and pressed a button on the touch pad beneath the mirror. The backlights behind the mirror slowly dimmed up and a low recessed cabinet containing her toiletries rose up from the stone counter top.

While brushing her teeth, she thought about the mission she was about to embark on. She looked forward to spending several weeks if not months with Shay. The unpleasant part would be sharing the time with Captain John Masters. He normally captained freighters that were sometimes used to ferry passengers on special assignments. He was militarily trained, but with Moeba’s neutral status there had been very little call for such activity. Some officers had gone off to far-flung universes to work as mercenaries or to join other militaries, but only a few had returned. Captain Masters was not one of these. His rank was achieved through the merchant fleet, helped along by the fact that he lined the pockets of key people who could promote his interests.

When she finished she rinsed her mouth and toothbrush and put it back in its place. She put on some deodorant and left the bathroom. On entering the bedroom, the bathroom lights dimmed out and the toiletries cabinet sunk back into the counter top. Still naked, Monica padded unabashed across the room towards the opposite wall. She was comfortable with her body and in her own space she enjoyed the unrestricted freedom of no clothing. Her five foot eight body was long limbed and lithe with the finely toned muscle structure of an athlete and the grace and posture of a dancer.

As she neared the wall, another stone door swung out, giving access to her dressing room. The left and right walls were lined with the usual assortment of hanging spaces. However, what gave the room its character was the alien origin of its furniture. Standing on the floor on the far side of the room, was a very narrow full-length oval mirror. It had a narrow silver frame that rested on an ivory base that was beautifully carved and finished. It resembled fine wisps of smoke emanating from the floor, so finely carved; it was almost transparent and completely surrounded the mirror. The backlight picked out these transparent areas and emphasised the illusion.

Dominating the room was the central dressing table. It was carved from the two tusks of the Giant Oselha, a gigantic arctic beast that once lived on the now extinct planet Eko. A unique and fantastic piece with silver trim and small silver handles. All the edges and surfaces were softened with the smoke motif flowing and boiling in subtle relief. It had the curved shape of a horseshoe open at one end. An elegantly formed silver stool stood in the centre, its padded seat upholstered with the exquisitely soft white fur of the Giant Oselha’s underbelly.

Monica stepped up to the hanging closet to her left, took out a royal blue silk robe and put it on. She strode over to the stool and sat down. She looked at her reflection in the dressing table mirror with its silver frame. It was suspended in its fine carving that held hundreds of tiny day glow bulbs scattered like glitter on a carpet of snow. She sighed and while brushing her hair, thought of that mysterious tribe of inter planetary hunters she had lived with for three years. She had been studying their culture and

gene pool when their leader had fallen ill. Her knowledge and equipment had helped to save his life. They had given her this dressing table as a gift of gratitude.

She thought about the flight she was about to go on and how much she hated the take off and re-entry. Although she had done light years of travel, it was always these two aspects that she feared the most. It always seemed a small miracle that the craft survived and everyone arrived safely. Even more dangerous was passage through a natural vortex. It was highly unstable and could tear a ship to pieces. Fortunately they would use the teleports. They were stable man-made portals that could transport space ships, crew and cargo to predictable destinations light years away almost instantly. Every realm had their teleports and charged exorbitant fees for their use.

Monica finished brushing her hair and tied it back. She stood up, walked over to the right-hand hanging closet and took down her flight suit. From the drawers she dug out her underclothes and got dressed. Her flight suit was an all black coverall type outfit with multiple pockets that hugged the body and was normally worn under the space suit. It had a pressure membrane on the inside that equalised under heavy G forces. She put on her flight boots and took another look at herself in the mirror.

She always felt transformed when she was dressed for flight. She felt empowered, ready to take on the universe, with conflicting emotions of dread and excitement; she felt flushed and energised. Oh yes, she was ready all right. It had been almost two years since last she was on a mission. The idea of getting off this dust bowl again was almost euphoric. Her bags had been collected last night, so all she took with her was her small carry on holdall with a few personal effects. She took a last look around her, walked out of the dressing room and through the double stone doorway that led into the main open plan living space. She stepped out the front door and pressed the button on the remote key that locked the apartment. As the lights went out, the only sound was the hum of the air conditioner as it slowly wound down to its silent hiatus until her return.



At the back of Shay Duncan's mind there was a place where all his painful memories were supposed to remain...secure behind sturdy locker doors in neat rows in that dim, dank and airless space. From one of these lockers burst a gale of agony so intense, it pinned him to the sidewalk. He felt powerless as it tore through the barriers he had taken so long to build. The raw intensity of emotion was such that it felt as if his spirit had left his body and was standing next to him; watching himself fall to pieces. With an exhaustive effort he finally shut out the emotional storm and cauterised its effect.

His numbed body slowly tingled back to life. The sight of the young girl speeding by in the auto-tram had unlocked the emotional assault. He had noticed her as he looked up from the tram call console and there she was, seated on the near side window seat. She was the spitting image of his daughter when she was five. She had the same smile with those expressive eyes and the dark hair. It was not her of course, it couldn't be; she and her mother had passed away in the tragic quake of Mt. Toyin. He had been away on a merchant ship that carried harvested ice from the ice caps of Taras when he had heard the news.

With a sigh, Shay calmed himself and looked up at the crystal glass dome that covered the city. Its embedded Polaroid layers filtered out the intense ultra violet rays of Moeba's sun and made it possible to still inhabit this planet. Shay could see a weak dust cloud driven by the wind. He was still in awe at the power of that wind and the destruction of the dust storms it generated. It was almost the end of the nine-month dust storm season...almost, but not yet. He had seen a spaceship caught in one of those unpredictable storms. It had ripped off one of its fuel cells and had blown it so far off course it eventually crashed in the arctic region where the entire crew perished in the minus seventy two degree Celsius climate. It was still however a good day to fly.

He looked at the traffic loop on Chestnut Avenue, but found no available auto-trams. You'd think that on a road that is five miles long they'd have more auto-trams, he thought. Fortunately he had ample time for his rendezvous with Monica at Millie's breakfast club, so he decided to take a walk. With the roadway on his right and the apartments on his left, he took the wide footpath, which was bordered

by tall chestnut trees. They created a leafy canopy that always struck Shay with a sense of tranquillity. Its cool shaded protection helped assuage his nerves and recover his fractured emotions.

He passed the workmen taking a break from harvesting the fruit of these versatile trees. Shay didn't know them, but greeted them anyway. He remembered his teenage years, working beside peasants like these in the olive groves to make enough money to pay his way into the right schools to qualify for space academy. The pathway was crowded and he felt he was floating down a pedestrian river that would end up in a sea of humanity somewhere.

The population of Moeba had changed somewhat since the Multiverse had opened up. Shay noticed several Sabalian traders with their deep blue skins and expensive clothes. A small group of Adovacian fighters, sinister and secretive, were standing in the shadows watching the passers-by and a mentor in deep discussion with a very tall Nekobian priest. Nekob was one of the strangest places Shay had ever visited. All its population were very tall and thin; humans stretched up like an elastic band. It had to do with the atmospheric pressure there. Visitors to their planet had to remain in de-pressurised buildings or eventually suffer pressure sickness. His crew could not stay long and even then it was only in their de-pressurised terminal building.

Shay took one of the pedestrian footbridges that crossed the street every two hundred and fifty yards. When he had crossed the bridge, he turned left onto an identical footpath with its double row of chestnut trees and continued walking in the same direction as before. With the road now on his left, more pedestrians crushed in on him, augmenting his already heightened sense of claustrophobia. On his right was a wheat field; one hundred yards deep and the entire five-mile length of the road. As he approached the next footbridge he noticed the walkway was partially blocked by another harvesting team, so he turned right on the path that crossed the field. The contrast was almost liberating in its emptiness. The path had very few pedestrians and no trees with wheat-fields stretching out for miles on either side. The wheat was still green and waved slightly in the gentle breeze generated by the fans of multiple giant air-conditioners that regulated the air quality of this man-made habitat.

Shay turned left again onto the terrace promenade that ran parallel to the road and bordered the field. There was a row of chestnut trees on his right with recreational benches in their shade. They faced out over the open expanse of the valley beyond. The view seemed particularly clear this morning so he decided to stop for a few minutes and take it in. He dodged some runners and angled across the path towards one of the benches that had an unoccupied space next to an old man. He was feeding the doves that often came begging for a snack. Shay greeted him and sat down. Putting his light bag of personals at his feet, he crossed his legs, sat back and marvelled at the cityscape in front of him.

Across the valley the same terraces were cut into the mountainside and followed its meandering contours. The three bottom levels were reserved for underground industry; hydroponics agriculture, silk farming, clothing, textiles, medicine, and recreational drugs. All other manufacture like electronics, vehicles, heavy machinery, and warehousing was also on this lower level. The upper layers were reserved for housing. The higher up the more it cost. Many of the upper terraced apartments had private walled gardens and crystal glass windows that looked out over the wasteland. Each plateau was similar in that they all had a road that ran along its length bordered by different fruit or nut trees with an irrigated wheat, maize, bean, potato or hemp field along the edge.

The valley floor was carpeted with more hemp and wheat fields. Groves of mulberry trees flanked a narrow winding river that ran through the centre. It was crossed by footbridges and roads that formed a maze through the fields and mulberry groves. The leaves were harvested for silkworms and the hemp was harvested for the textile industry. There were many insects crawling and flying that had found refuge with the human population. Several different species of bird added variety to the wildlife; chief among them was the falcon. Field mice and rats were plentiful and were preyed on by hawks, falcons, owls and snakes.

There were two huge stadiums on the valley floor used for sport, music, theatre, and political rallies. About three miles to the north the valley forked, split by an enormous outcrop of rock. Tapered on both ends; it was eight miles long and three miles high. Like a subterranean axe blade it cleft Mt Ross in two and dominated the city. Its steep sides were smoothly encased with glass walls that covered the entire length of the outcrop. It enhanced its sharp powerful presence, which housed the planetary administration in its honeycombed centre. Air traffic was heavy as usual with light cargo and passenger

craft that created a constant hum from their magnetic pulse engines, the smell of which left a sharp metallic taste at the back of his mouth.

The old man looked at Shay. 'We don't often see you flyboys taking in the scenery here, you're always too busy going somewhere aren't you?' Without waiting for a reply he tossed some more seed at the doves.

'I suppose that's true enough,' Shay responded. 'How about you, do you come out here much?'

'Most mornings...I'll come and sit here with the birds. Sometimes they are better company than people, you know. Look at that one there; with the dark ring on its neck...it's almost as if he's trying to tell me something, as if he understands what I'm saying.' The old man cast him some seed which was instantly pecked away. 'I was a flyboy like you, you know,' he continued. 'Merchant fleet like yourself. Traded eight universes and cost me forty-five years until I was "replaced" by a younger engineer. Back on Moeba, the whole family were gone, I had no friends, no wife, no kids, so now I sit with the doves every morning, take naps in the afternoon and read or use the entertainment centre at night until I finally fall asleep.'

Shay felt a deep sympathy for this man and not a little fear for himself. Here was the living manifestation of what might be his future. 'Why not write your memoirs perhaps or even a novel based on your experiences?'

'My memory has faded and my imagination is not that good,' he said and sowed more seed for the doves.

'Oh... I'm sure an interesting man like yourself will find a good woman to keep you company through those long nights hey?'

Shay said with a wink.

With an incredulous look on his face, the old man hacked a cackle of mirth, 'Yes...perhaps... maybe hey!'

'Good luck!' Shay took his bag and stood up.

He took a drink from the water fountain next to the bench and continued his walk down the boulevard. This day had not started well he thought. The sooner he got out of this place the better. Millie's Breakfast Club was only a mile further down the road, so he stretched his pace and hurried along.



Millie's was packed as usual. It was popular not only for its great food, but also for its location. It was on the outer edge of the all-glass shopping centre that spanned between two terraces. With entrances at the upper and lower terrace it had five levels of shops, eating houses and markets. Millie's was on the top level and enjoyed the best view.

To Shay's surprise, Monica had arrived early and had found a good table at the window. He caught her eye and she waved at him as he elbowed his way past the hot drinks bar. He always felt a light-headed thrill whenever he saw her and loved her deep blue eyes that were like warm oceans in which he could lose himself.

When he got to the table he wanted to kiss her hello, but was never sure if it was okay to do so, however Monica offered, so he kissed her and sat down opposite her. 'How are you this morning?' he asked.

'Fine thanks Shay,' she said, admiring his fresh good looks augmented by his dashing navy blue flight suit. 'I had that dream again,' a fleeting moment of despair flashed behind her eyes.

He reached across the table and touched her hand in sympathy, knowing that nothing he could say would make it any better.

'Every time I have that dream, it feels like it happened yesterday...intense.' She looked out of the window at the auto-tram traffic on the lower terrace road, ferrying passengers to the great elevators that would take them up or down the mountain. 'I have never been able to get over my fear of water you know,' she looked at Shay. 'Since that day I have avoided anything to do with going on water. It frightens me...I hope this mission has nothing to do with water.'

‘Oh, I don’t think so,’ Shay said reassuringly. ‘The captain seems elated, so there’s money to be made...for him at least. It’s most likely some sort of alien discovery. Besides, you don’t have to do anything you are not comfortable with.’

‘I know, I know, it’s just...I have this feeling that it has something to do with water. Every time I feel this way, something happens.’

‘Are you sure its not just pre-flight nerves playing tricks on you, I know how you feel about take-off and re-entry?’

‘Now Shay, I know the difference between nerves and intuition,’ she responded with mild annoyance.

‘Very well then,’ he picked up the menu. ‘Let’s eat.’



After breakfast they made their way down to the valley floor and took the mainline train out to Vidal flats. The train had no wheels and ran silently on magnetic tracks. Its carriages had polaroid glass domes and offered unobstructed views. Mt. Ross was one of several cities created in a long mountain range; all connected by underground tunnels and overland glass domed railroads. These railroads were lined with fruit trees of apple, cherry, apricot, peach or plum.

Other more long distance railroads were lined with olive, orange or lemon trees. Every five miles there was a worker’s compound for agriculture, road and rail workers. Along some sections of the line the air was replete with blossom petals, picked up by the slipstream as the train sped by.

As they reached the edge of the flats, the train took the tracks that branched off from the main line and headed straight across three hundred miles of stony plain. There was no agriculture along this line, only the four rail tracks that carried people and freight to and from the space station in its glass tunnel. From horizon to horizon the stony countryside was flat and scorched black by the intense heat of Moeba’s giant sun. It was a desolate inhospitable place that promised only a slow agonising death to anyone who was trapped out there in its vast hunger. Like a javelin the straight line impaled the extinct volcano that housed Vidal flats space station in its hollow centre.

An ensign met Monica and Shay on the station platform and fast tracked them through security and immigration. On exiting the station they boarded an open EV (electric vehicle) that drove them the three miles to the western elevator which took them up to the seventeenth level. They stepped out of the elevator and walked down the corridor. It had a glass wall that looked out over the crater.

Monica was always in awe at the scale of this complex. It was not only a launch pad with five terminals, but also a maintenance and spacecraft production facility. It had sixty-four levels, twenty-five of which were under the launch pad. It was built on an elevator system that could lower craft to the bottom levels and bring other craft up to the surface for launch. The lunar shuttle was on the surface being made ready for take-off. It was an undistinguished craft; big, bulky with its hull burnt black from repeated entries into Moeba’s atmosphere.

The ensign showed them into the conference centre at the end of the corridor where the crew were already assembled. Captain Masters was in animated discussion with Admiral Green who looked distressed and seemed to be trying to move away from the Captain. Shay and Monica’s entrance offered him the excuse he needed so he turned his back on the Captain and walked up to the podium.

‘Can I have your attention please,’ the Admiral said.

The Captain, who was left in mid sentence, strode purposefully to his seat and sat down. The crew had not heard the Admiral and continued with their conversation. The Admiral tapped on the microphone and said in a more commanding voice. ‘Attention crew!’ The crew settled down and the Admiral continued, ‘As you all know by now this is a code red mission.’ He gave that a few seconds to sink in and noted the expressions on their faces.

‘What we know so far is that five days ago an Alien ship or part of it was discovered on the edge of the Othaxal cloud. Our radio telescope on Upi cannot give us any information other than a rude outer image of the ship. It would seem that it has travelled through the cloud and presents us with a possible time capsule. However, this might be a war ship and we don’t know what we are dealing with.’

There was a murmur among the crew who had not often if ever been in a military or first contact situation before.

‘You have been assigned to make contact with it and find out if there are any survivors. If so what are their intentions and if not to tow the ship back to the research station on Upi for further analyses. Your weapons will be issued to you on Var where your ship is now being prepped and supplied. You are scheduled for teleportation three days from now, so that should give you ample time to rest and make final preparations.’

The Admiral wished them well and left the room. The ensign took over with their flight log details and assignment sheets. There was a heightened sense of excitement and expectation among the crew that rubbed off on Monica. She felt elated and slightly light headed at the prospect of the new...