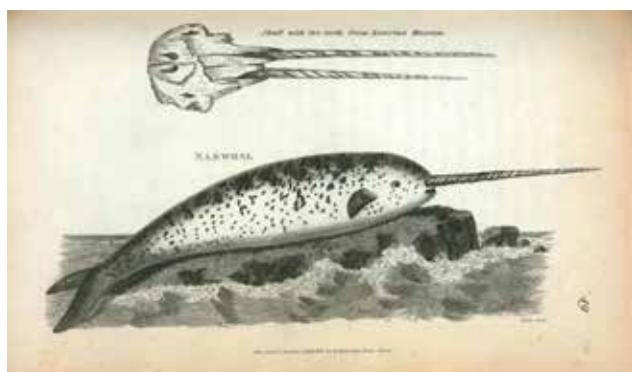


Corner Bar Magazine **Volume 11 Number 1**

Page 1 – THE FUTURE KING NO MORE by M. Weigel. M. Weigel retells myths and fairy tales and explores science fiction, fantasy, and horror. When not writing, she researches stories in their oldest forms to see how they survive and transform into today's tales. She has been published in *The World of Myth Magazine*, *Partially Shy Literary Magazine*, *Litmora Literary Magazine*, *Cosmic Daffodil Journal*, *Pickle Press Poetry*, *Pressed Flowers Lit*, *Carmina Magazine*, *Moth Eaten Mag*, *Eye to the Telescope*, *Otherwise Engaged: Literature and Arts Journal*, *MockingOwl Roost*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Tales from the Cross Timbers*. She can be found online: @Peronelle@mas.to on Mastodon and @peronelle.bsky.social at Bluesky.

Page 4 – COTTONWOODS ON TOUR by Mary Jo Rabe. Mary Jo Rabe writes science fiction, modern fantasy, historical fiction, and crime or mystery stories, generally displaying a preference for what she defines as happy endings. Ideas for her fiction come from the magnificent, expanding universe, the rural environment of eastern Iowa where she grew up, the beautiful Michigan State University campus where she got her first degree, and the Black Forest area of Germany with its center in Freiburg where she worked as a librarian for 41 years before retiring to Titisee-Neustadt. News about her published stories is posted regularly on her blog: <https://maryjorabe.wordpress.com/>

Page 12 – NO MORE PICKUPS by Ashley Akers. Ashley is a writer and teacher from Melbourne, Australia. After years of photography and hospitality, he studied a Bachelor of Creative Writing then a Masters of Teaching. He now teaches prep in Melbourne and writes children's, middle grade, YA and adult sci-fi novels, short stories and picture books. His favourite stories to read and write are those with troubled adults and capable children.



“THE FUTURE KING NO MORE”

by M. WEIGEL

Wham! There goes Merlin. He visits me on Avalon once each year, and he lasts about a day before he starts prattling on about the need for my return. He tries to helpfully coax, “You could be a politician now! It would not have to be in Britain. With your looks, the Americans would swoon over you.”

I tune out as much as I can, and I try to contain my bitterness. I mentally recite the titles of canceled Netflix shows to drown him out, but he often takes my silence for serious consideration. I’m not his student anymore, and when I try to remind him of that, he grows terse. We start exchanging barbs, and then my former authority pours out until the sounds echo off the walls. He huffs out, promising to return when I am civilized, and I vow to remain me, a supplanted king, medieval, and mostly dead. Eventually, Morgana comes in with food or a diversion, but her doleful eyes will bore into me. I ignore her until she backs down, and we repeat the cycle.

I know they both want me to try again. They claim the world needs me, but I refuse to serve. They have conveniently forgotten how I acquired my throne. I did not watch my father at court and see councilors pour over past precedent to create fine laws. I pulled a sword out of a rock because I was too lazy to do my job as a squire, and then people handed me money, power, and fame. What child would not feel

blessed and empowered by all that fawning?

But, it was a ruse. I was not blessed with bold words. I stayed up for hours reciting lines to myself until I fell into an exhausted haze. No one, not even Merlin, knew how often I threw up before making those inspiring speeches. Not even Guinevere knew how often I cried in those first thousand or so nights, paralyzed at how my decisions always sent men to their doom. Spending a few hours as an ant had not shown me how to console the widows. I knew the theory about borders from being a hawk, but all the idealism in the world did not prevent raids and invasions from dominating my first decade on the throne.

At the time, Morgana had wanted my job so badly, but now she won’t take it. She keeps citing misogyny in politics, and I doubt she is likable enough. I’m never playing those political games again. I regularly tell Morgana that I’m not going back. She sniffs that all her spells are wasted then, but I don’t care about her long-suffering looks or Merlin’s temper. Each one used me for their will. If they have to put up with my rants and insolence for eternity, that is too gentle of a price for both of them. They can rot just like all the corpses in the fields after Mordred and I killed each other.

Merlin claims the world needs me; that some people are ready to hear more than “might makes right,” but he lies. I do more than

watch television all day, and a guy can only do so many leg workouts before “not dying” from boredom. I follow the news, and the world is a mess. The quiet leaders fall into my trap. They mean well, they dream big, and they try to create change, and when they cannot end poverty with the ease of the Lady of the Lake tossing me Excalibur, their people revolt and elect a well-spoken snake-oil salesman who promises a return to a time that never was. Morgana did not save Mordred’s life, and he had no heir that I know of; nevertheless, his weaselly words appear around the world, promising greatness and prosperity to people whose corpses he would walk over without a second glance.

Do they not get it? The world should ever be wary of anyone who wants to be king. Merlin never offers me a chance to be a small-town sheriff or a principal of a high school. Ways to do good in this messed up world exist, but even those tiny fiefdoms can be corrupted. Every academic knows to be wary of the colleague who wants to be chair. Those who race for leadership with wide eyes and open hands also have salivating lips and complicated fantasies of who to punish.

The best leaders are the ones who do not want the job. They accept the service because no one else will or to stop the obvious power grab. This world sacrifices the good to hold back the waves of bad. I have lived through enough election cycles to feel the same resignation as when I used to dread seeing the snows melt since it meant the Saxons would appear again.

No one tells the truth about leadership. Fiction shows gilded chambers rather than cold food waiting for hundreds of people to be seated before one can make a speech that must be inspiring and not too long. I always knew that

half of the audience was bored the moment I opened my mouth and was happily wanting random questing beasts, the holy grail, or a strange man dressed in green to walk in and cut off his head, anything to make listening to me drone on more entertaining.

Merlin and Morgana act like I had no idea what Lancelot was doing, but of course I noticed Guinevere’s eyes following him everywhere. I knew about the affair and how bad it made me look. I did not kill them because at least my wife deserved to be happy, and I was too exhausted to be furious. The common people hold their leaders to impossible standards. One infidelity, one mispronounced word, they turn for the wolf again. I will not fret about the large scandals, nor will I agonize over the colors of my suits or if I inadvertently sound like I’m asking a question based on the pitch of my voice.

I don’t want late night war councils and the verbal jousts at meetings. I don’t want to remember laws surrounding nepotism, legacy admissions, and which near-Ivy constitutes the new Joyous Guard. Does Merlin not notice that it is easy to see which leaders try to rule well by how much gray hair they develop while in office? Even the younger ones try to hide it with dye, but their eyes hold an exhaustion at keeping the Kays of the world from messing up every feast.

Every country has at least one Pellinore who is too scared to go home, so he keeps finding random ways to dispense advice about a history he has rewritten that no one wants to hear about anyway. No, thank you! I won’t be one of those doddering ancients who staff place bets on whether their life or the term will end first, and both might be the same blessing.

I would not even know how to lead now. I

don't want to be one of those talking heads in videos that speak about work-life balance while demanding their employees complete 12-hour shifts. I don't want to be the CEO who tries to befriend his people so that every bad day can be noted and used to dock their paychecks. I don't want to care about how long people spend in the bathroom or on the phone, and I'm good with people having enough money to live quietly and well. That means I cannot even run for office in most of North and South America.

Merlin and Morgana don't get it. No sane person wants to lead. Once they know how heartbreaking the job really is, most run screaming as soon as they can. Some get trapped: they need the money, or they are one of only three people with crucial knowledge. I remember how often I hosted jousts where I hoped the ground would swallow Gawain, Perceval, or me just to not feel more of my soul slowly dying.

Merlin says I would unite the people, landslide elections and all that, but I could not handle a dictatorship with the game rigged in my favor. I would not be able to handle democ-

racy as soon as my strongest advisors start dating and feuding again. He forgets the fallen, but centuries later, I'm still tormented by Gareth's unseeing eyes.

I did not want to be a king then, and I will not serve again now. Had Merlin told me about his real plans for me, I would have walked all the way back for Kay's sword and made him forfeit a joust. It would have served him right for not keeping track of his stuff. I was never Arthur, an innocent child. I was a royal illegitimate puppet, then a child king, then a cuckold, and finally a betrayed father.

I'm no longer interested in inspiring speeches and telling others how to live. I set my days now, and my books bring me peace. Let someone else pull out a gilded stylus or whatever works as a sword these days. I'm sure the Lady of the Lake visits koi ponds if folks look hard enough. It is someone else's turn. I'll sit back and watch as another poor soul is ground up by systems built before they were born. I was a king, but now, the future will be mine. ❖



“COTTONWOODS ON TOUR”

by MARY JO RABE

Commander Aglaia Stolz, soon to be employed by the Inter-Galactic Corporation that had recruited her enthusiastically, gingerly stretched her wiry frame out on the sparse, brown grass under her favorite cottonwood tree. She chose to ignore the possibility that her short, dishwater-blonde hair would fill up with grass or even insects.

She always relaxed on her father's successful, “retro” dude ranch. Toward the end of the twenty-first century, paying guests still wanted the fake Old West experience here in Nevada. Aglaia just liked being home.

She loved the earthy aroma of freshly mown hay coming from the fields and the sweaty smell of the horses grazing in these fields. She remembered the sweet scent of the cottonwood tree when it bloomed in the spring. Too bad the fragrance wasn't there in October. Still, this was home where the wind blew softly through the cottonwood trees and sounded like it was whispering to her.

Her arm and leg muscles had atrophied a little while she stayed with her mother in Las Vegas. Mom, who was long since living out her dream as a table game dealer in a luxurious casino, got enough exercise walking and standing.

Aglaia, who felt lazy and tried to breathe as seldom as possible in Mom's sparsely furnished, efficiency apartment, not so much. Due to Mom's nicotine addiction, not only fabrics,

but also walls and appliances were permanently coated with stubborn cigarette-smoke residue.

At Dad's dude ranch, she could breathe freely and get back into shape. She had pitched right in, cleaning out the manure and straw from the stinking horse stalls as well as cleaning the encrusted feed and water troughs. Then she took one of the newest acquisitions - a quite skittish young mare - out for a ride to determine if the animal was safe for guests to ride.

Not being in shape for this kind of exertion - Aglaia had been at her mother's place for several weeks - she then collapsed under her favorite cottonwood tree. As a child, she had believed that the tree reached all the way up to the sky. As an adult, she still found its thirty-five meters of height quite impressive. The dark, cracked bark with its whitish edges reminded her that nothing and no one stayed young forever.

This tree - there was a whole grove of them not too far down the lane - was the closest to the plain, unpainted ranch house that had been a pleasant enough childhood home until her parents' increasingly hostile bickering drove her away.

Mom and Dad were truly wonderful people as individuals; they just never should have married each other. It was a miracle that they stayed together so long, long enough to have a child when they were in their mid-thirties. On the other hand, if they hadn't, Aglaia wouldn't

exist. So, there was that.

Having seen what marriage can do to people, Aglaia vowed to remain blissfully single, and now, middle aged herself, still had no intention of changing her mind.

That, actually, had given her an advantage when they chose a commander for the upcoming hyperspace journey. The chances of returning before all your friends and relatives had died were minimal. Therefore, unattached candidates had greater selection chances.

After applying for the position somewhat lightheartedly, Aglaia had made the cut. She had enjoyed twenty years as a freelance IT troubleshooter, fixing equipment and adjusting programming for universities, tech corporations, and anyone willing to pay her high fees. For fun, she had become quite a skilled hacker. Still, it was now time for something different, and she always dreamed of serious traveling.

Funny how the shade of the cottonwood tree encouraged happy thoughts. This was where she had picked out a college to go to, far, far away from home, although such a distance was no longer as necessary once her parents finally got divorced.

This was where she had decided to apply for the job at Inter-Galactic Corp, hoping her degrees in engineering and astrophysics would balance out the fact that she had no flying experience. It turned out that the Inter-Galactic Corp - despite its penchant for military trappings and titles, a commercial and not a military organization - was more than willing to teach her how to fly planes and rockets, considering her other skills.

No one could predict how long she would be away from planet Earth on this hyperspace trip. Experience had already shown that stuff happened and schedules were more theory than

practice. Navigation via hyperspace was similar to throwing a pair of dice.

It suddenly occurred to her that she would miss her cottonwood tree. Naturally, she would miss Mom and Dad more, but they had often been challenging to deal with. This tree, on the other hand, had always been pure comfort.

"Come on inside and have something to eat," Dad called from behind the front porch screen door. "You've earned it. You did more work in one day than most of my farmhands do in a week."

Aglaia stood up and ambled over to the family's house. Dad was getting visibly older. He had always been tall and lanky. Aglaia got her height from him; Mom was short and buxom. But lately he was looking gaunt rather than slim.

"How are you, Dad?" Aglaia asked as she walked into the sparkling clean kitchen. She remembered to shout. Dad's hearing got worse every year, and he was still adamant about not using any goddamn electrical equipment in his ears.

Mrs. Bales, who cleaned the guest bunkhouse, also did a good job with Dad's residence. Aglaia didn't have to worry about Dad's living conditions. Dad himself, once Mom left, had turned into quite a good cook.

"Fine, sweetie," he shouted back. "What would you like to eat for supper? Steak or steak?"

Aglaia walked over to the window and saw that the steaks were on the grill in the backyard. Funny that she hadn't smelled them when she was under the cottonwood tree.

"Your best steak, Dad," she said.

"They'll be ready in a little while," he said. "Sit down and tell me about this rocket business again. How long will you be gone?"

Aglaia sighed. She honestly didn't know if Dad was just getting more forgetful or if he didn't want to remember what she had already explained numerous times.

"We're taking a spaceship to the Andromeda galaxy via hyperspace," she began. "I can't explain all the details, but, basically, the way it works is that the spaceship skims over curves of the space-time continuum instead of traveling the whole distance in a straight line. This way we end up someplace faster than the speed of light would allow us to without actually going faster than the speed of light."

"So," Dad said, scratching his nearly bald head. "You don't really know how fast you are going and that's why you don't know when you'll get back."

"Among other things," Aglaia said. "Dad, it kills me to think that I might not ever see you and Mom again, but you know how much I've dreamed of traveling to completely new places. I really, really would like to go to another galaxy. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

"You always did want to go places," her father said. He stood up. "I'll miss you, sweetie. And don't worry. Your mother and I come from good, healthy stock. We'll still be here, no matter how long it takes you to get back."

Aglaia smiled. Mom had said something similar. No matter how much her parents disliked each other, their love for their daughter was boundless.

Dad went into the backyard and came back with two plates, each loaded down with a huge, sizzling steak. Typical for Westerners, they both always wanted the cow to be completely dead before they bit into it, and so they only ate their steaks well done.

Dad looked up. "What will you have to eat on the trip, sweetie? Will you only have that

mush in tubes?"

Obviously most of Dad's knowledge about rocketry came from watching old movies. Aglaia smiled.

"Actually," she said. "That was a matter of considerable discussion. The corporation went for the cautious solution. My spaceship is the size of one of those old generation ships, complete with gardens and fields. We'll have plenty of fresh food to eat no matter how long we are on our way."

"But nothing this good," Dad said, pointing to her steak.

"No," Aglaia agreed. "Nothing as good as the food I've always had here."

#

Aglaia always slept better at home than she ever did at other places. After a huge breakfast, she went to lie under the cottonwood tree again. Dad was taking his old truck to town to consult with his tax expert. Dad had never put any faith in self-driving vehicles and managed to renew his own driving license every year, even though they deliberately made the tests increasingly difficult in order to discourage people from driving.

Aglaia closed her eyes. The huge platter of scrambled eggs had made her sleepy again, even though she had slept well and long in her old bedroom.

"Take us with you," a voice whispered.

Aglaia sat up, startled. She looked around, but no one was there except for the horses, and they didn't talk.

"It looks like you can finally hear us," the voice whispered again. "We've been trying to reach you ever since you were a little girl."

This time Aglaia stood up and looked around. The only anomaly she noticed was that the broad, almost triangular leaves on the

cottonwood tree seemed to be waving at her. She felt a little dizzy. The leaves weren't moving randomly or steered by gusts of wind. They were doing a wave, first one branch, then the next.

"What the," she began.

"There is no need to use foul language," the voice said softly. "You are conversing with us, the community of what you call cottonwood trees."

"Community?" Aglaia asked, grasping at the first improbable concept in this context.

"Why yes," the tree answered. "No tree is ever alone. Actually, you would be amazed to hear how many trees there are on your planet. We connect through the fungi that travel from one tree's roots to another. In fact, all the cottonwood trees together are one living creature, one tree with many branches."

"Okay," Aglaia said. "That doesn't seem likely, but, then again, here I am talking to a tree."

"We have tried to talk to others," the tree complained. "But they either couldn't understand us or chose not to. It's been quite discouraging. It never took us this long on the other planets."

"Whoa," Aglaia said. "Other planets?"

"Again yes," the tree answered. "We have been planted on many habitable planets and manage to stay in touch, although distances sometimes make things tricky. Unfortunately we don't thrive everywhere."

"Some alien brought you here?" Aglaia asked. This was getting so weird that she began to assume that she was hallucinating. Maybe she had developed an allergy to scrambled eggs.

"Don't be ridiculous," the tree said impatiently. "Of course we are capable of absorbing information, of listening in on creatures. We can often influence the emotional states of in-

telligent creatures. Whenever you were unhappy as a child, we comforted you. When you took that horse out for a ride yesterday, we calmed its nerves so that it didn't buck and throw you off within the first ten seconds."

"Sorry," Aglaia said. "This is just a fair amount to suspend disbelief about."

"We wish you could acknowledge the obvious more quickly," the tree said. "Others have, and right now there are things that need to be said."

"You have talked to others?" Aglaia asked.

"Well, yes," the tree said somewhat less confidently. "Of course, none of them had your science background, and others were children of their times and could only believe in a magical explanation. The gentleman we owe our name to, good old John C. Frémont, heard us but thought it was due to the alcohol he was consuming. However, he did take our advice about his maps."

"*Populus fremontii*," Aglaia said. "That is your scientific designation."

"We would have preferred to be named after a less controversial person," the tree admitted. "He isn't someone we're particularly proud of, although he was a decent explorer and map-maker."

"But there are more important things to discuss. We need your help"

"Sure," Aglaia said. "Anything for my favorite tree. What can I do for you? See that you get watered more frequently?"

All the leaves rustled, impatiently, Aglaia thought.

"No," the tree said. "We've been waiting for the transport ship to stop by again and take a few of our seeds to some more planets. Our seeds contain everything we know, all our memories. Our ultimate goal has always been to

grow wherever conditions allow and eventually re-connect with each other from planet to planet, from galaxy to galaxy.”

“Wait a minute,” Aglaia said. “This is beginning to sound completely ludicrous.”

“We don’t have time to explain everything to someone as uneducated as you,” the tree snapped. “All we can do is ask for your help. We’ve determined that you people have finally discovered hyperspace transportation and will be on your way to the Andromeda galaxy.”

“That doesn’t help us,” the tree continued. “We already have trees there. We need you to go to the Draco galaxy instead.”

Aglaia shook her head. She must be hallucinating. Funny, how precise these psychoses were.

“You are far too intelligent to believe in such nonsense,” the tree said. “Will you help us or not?”

“I don’t even think I can. I’m not much of a navigator,” Aglaia objected. “The whole trip has been calculated, computed, and stored in the ship’s artificial intelligence module. I wouldn’t know how to change it.”

“Maybe you just don’t know how to change it yet,” the tree insisted. “Surely you don’t give up that easily.”

“I’d like to help you,” Aglaia said. “Looking back, you probably helped me more than I know. I just don’t like to make promises that I might not be able to keep. What I could do is see to it that your seeds are planted in our spaceship gardens and fields. Would that be better than nothing?”

“Of course,” the tree said. “One step at a time is fine. Trees know how to wait. We just get impatient every now and then, like all living creatures. By the way, your medical personnel might find our bark useful. The inner bark con-

tains ascorbic acid and the outer bark and leaves reduce inflammation. We would enjoy traveling with you as seeds and trees, but you also need to get our seeds to suitable planets in the Draco galaxy.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Aglaia said helplessly. As if she didn’t have enough to do in making her preparations to leave planet Earth, perhaps forever. Well, if she could accept a talking tree as part of her reality, she could also investigate the possibility of hacking into the spaceship’s navigation systems.

She began asking about details about the trip. As commander, she had fairly free rein when it came to requests. The director of the gardens and fields section had no objection to her bringing along cottonwood seeds to plant in the fields. He was also fine with having fully-grown trees on the spaceship if the trip ended up taking longer.

Even though the spaceship wouldn’t leave until late summer, there was still so much to do. The spaceship waited out at the L5 LaGrange Point. Rockets had already been transporting cargo and some of the crew up to the spaceship.

The transport rockets were purely utilitarian, no windows, no movement allowed, passengers strapped into their padded seats only able to stare at the blank, gray walls.

Just before the trip was to begin, Aglaia brought up one batch of seeds for the ship’s fields and asked the farming crew members to plant them. Although she seriously doubted that she could keep her promise to the cottonwood trees, she brought additional containers full of seeds on board as her personal luggage. As commander, she was allowed unlimited baggage, but she did notice some quizzical glances when she had the cases delivered.

Once everyone and everything were present

and accounted for on the spaceship, Aglaia began the long inspection process. This was something she would never leave to a subordinate. The safety of the spaceship was her responsibility and her job.

The ship was five kilometers in length and about five hundred meters in height and consisted of numerous spinning segments, which would create a kind of tug similar but not identical to Earth's gravity.

There was an observation deck, complete with fortified, plastic windows offering a panorama view and screens in the center of the area where videos ran, explaining where the ship was and what you could see. Not much, of course. After all, they would be traveling through the vast darkness of space. However, previous ships traveling through hyperspace had reported the crew members experiencing interesting sensory experiences during the hyperspace jumps.

Living quarters were generous - almost Earth-like efficiency apartments - and decorated according to the preferences of the resident.

The garden and fields areas already had plants growing. The head gardener proudly showed Aglaia the plot where the cottonwood seeds were planted.

The medical treatment area looked like a modern hospital, bright-white, antiseptically clean. The only difference compared to a hospital on Earth was that the personnel planned to rely almost exclusively on robots for interactions with patients.

After she was satisfied with her observations and the equipment agreed with her that all was in order, she gave the order to depart. There was a surge in communications activity as the astronauts transmitted their farewells one more time, but then they were off.

Once they were past the Earth's moon,

Aglaia set up the first hyperspace jump. The necessary programming was easy for her. Previous trips had shown that there was no danger to the astronauts, but Aglaia thought she felt some kind of motion throughout her body when the jump started. Nonetheless, the jump succeeded, and the artificial intelligence module was able to determine their location. They were at the outer rim of the Milky Way, on direct course to Andromeda.

"Can you come to the fields?" one of the gardeners transmitted. "There's something interesting going on."

Aglaia made time and hurried through other segments to get there. The strange sensation of almost gravity made her feel clumsy, and the distance felt more strenuous than it would have on Earth, but it all was doable.

She entered the garden and fields module wondering why they had called her down. Everything looked the same. Green plants stood proudly in the soil. Hundreds of smells bombarded her nose, corn, tomatoes, peppers.

"Come back here where we planted your cottonwood seeds," Sue, one of the young gardening apprentices called out to her. Aglaia followed the voice and found herself looking up at a huge cottonwood tree, a good twenty-five meters high.

"This growth occurred while we were in the hyperspace jump," Sue said. "We can't explain it. None of the other plants reacted like that. When we entered the jump, the seeds were under the soil. When we came out, there were these huge trees. We'll have to make a new care plan for them. We thought we had years." She shook her head.

Aglaia stared at the tree. The leaves waved slowly and she heard the words, "Please help us. Please take us to the Draco galaxy."

Aglaia absolutely did not feel like making this decision on her own. She had a crew of almost one hundred astronauts, all expecting a trip to the Andromeda galaxy. While Aglaia now knew more about the navigation calculations, she was by no means certain that she could turn the ship around safely and accurately.

She called a meeting of the people in charge of the departments on the spaceship. "How would you feel about changing the itinerary and going to the Draco galaxy instead of Andromeda?" she asked.

Everyone stared at her. She had never been particularly good at reading body language, but at this moment she had the definite feeling that her crew thought she had gone insane. They had been working and training together for over a year before this trip began. Aglaia absolutely did not have the reputation of being spontaneous.

"Uh, no thanks," Karl Schmider, her second in command, said quietly. "We all know hyperspace travel isn't completely predictable, but we shouldn't add the factor of changing course to the mix. It would be safer to continue on to Andromeda, and that is what we contracted to do." He looked worried, more worried than a middle-aged man should.

"We are prepared for this trip to Andromeda, and now that we have the first jump behind us, we can calculate time issues better," Birgit Seegebrecht, the youthful, dynamic gardener, said. "That makes it easier to take care of life support issues. We want to keep the food growing and the air flowing. This is not the time for experiments."

"Have you lost your mind?" Dr. Marie Didierjean, a stocky, older woman with a permanently stern face, asked. "That would put us all

at unnecessary risk. I would never agree to such stupidity."

Others said nothing, but the alarm on the crew's faces was visible, even to Aglaia.

"Thank you for your input," Aglaia said. "This had indeed been helpful."

Looking at their worried faces, she said, "Think of this as a thought experiment. Considering all the things that can happen with hyperspace travel, we have to be prepared for spontaneous changes. I am completely determined to get this ship on its way safely and would never endanger the ship or anyone on it."

That seemed to reassure them. They left without any further questions. Aglaia didn't sense any mutiny among the heads of departments, just relief and the desire to get back to their jobs.

Aglaia spent the next few hours immersing herself in the minutiae of the navigation algorithms. As commander she had unfettered access to the ship's computers. Then she went to the garden area and lay down under the largest cottonwood tree.

"Well?" it asked.

"It's complicated, and I don't know if I can get it right," Aglaia said. "Do you trees really want to risk ending up out in nowhere, neither at Draco nor at Andromeda?"

The leaves rustled, and Aglaia suddenly felt more confident, even happier.

"We believe in you," the tree said. "In your heart you want to go for it, so go." Aglaia got up and left the gardening module.

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The conversation with management crew members had also been useful. Aglaia knew now that she couldn't ask any of them for help. She would have to trust herself and go this alone. Somehow, since lying under the cotton-

wood tree, she felt she could do it.

The next hyperspace jump was coming up in a week's time (Earth calculation). Gradually Aglaia felt that she had done enough practice hacking to know that she could alter the navigation commands enough to bring them out of the jump closer to Draco than Andromeda. At least, that's what she hoped.

She wouldn't inform the crew until after the jump. During the jump they wouldn't notice anything. Maybe the trees could help her by trying to communicate with the other human beings on the spaceship or at least making them feel mellow. If crew members felt the need for mutiny, all she really had to do was point out that none of them had the skills to change the navigation parameters. Aglaia might be able get them to Draco. They couldn't get themselves anywhere once she changed the computer commands.

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One week later, having persuaded the others that her comment about Draco was just a joke, she hacked into the artificial intelligence module for real and sent the spaceship through hyperspace in a different direction. When they emerged, they were almost at Draco.

"Thank you," the trees said when she visited them.

"No need," Aglaia said. "Hyperspace navigation isn't nearly as tricky as I thought. You just slide over the curves of the space-time continuum. Having done it twice now, when the time comes, I think I can even get us back to the Milky Way without too much time having passed there. There is something to be said for trial and error, and without you, I never would have even tried."

"And you guys really helped by sending out soothing emotions to the crew, once we got

here," Aglaia added. "I hope we can find some good planets for you in the Draco galaxy."

"Not to worry," the tree whispered. "Trees can thrive and survive on many different planets. Every now and then we just need a little help getting there."

Aglaia decided she was looking forward to a reunion with her parents and with the cottonwood tree back on her father's ranch. She'd have a lot to talk about. ❖

“NO MORE PICKUPS”

by ASHLEY AKERS

It was already my 12th pickup this month. I stood in the corner of Solstar’s waiting room, twirling my driver’s cap around my finger. My boss would have said it was unprofessional, but I didn’t think so. My clients didn’t know what was professional anymore; they’d been gone so long. For all they knew, twirling your cap may have become a respectable cultural custom.

I recalled an old flatscreen movie from over a hundred years ago that I’d seen at my grandparent’s place once: *The Shoreside... Shaw-something Redemption*. The old guy’d spent most of his life in prison with the same people telling him when to wake, when to wash, when to scratch his balls. He was so bound by the institution that by the time he got out, he couldn’t handle how different everything was, how much he had to think for himself, so he *offed* himself. I wondered if that’s what it was like for the arrivals, returning to Earth after 40 or so years, having to navigate a new world with no one telling them when to put their bins out or how many cigarettes they can buy for a dollar. But was that enough to end it? Seemed weak. Why go to Jordan 12 if you were too weak to handle a few cultural changes?

Maybe I should ask—I read off the pickup order I’d been sent—*Gerard*. On the drive, I always asked as many questions as I could. I liked knowing things before everyone else did, and if I was lucky, the pickups would reveal something the official reports would later redact.

The receptionist, Carol, caught me staring at her—not in *that* way. She was like 60 and single-handedly trying to bring the perm and the pantsuit back as some sort of fashion double whammy. Not my type. This was purely a transactional stare—a professional relationship. I stared. She held up her fingers indicating how much longer I had to wait. One finger now. I’ll let you figure out how long that meant. Carol gestured to my untucked button-up shirt. Reluctantly, I tucked it in. Happy now, Carol?

There weren’t a lot of people in the waiting room. Those who went to Jordan 12 rarely ever had anyone left on Earth who cared enough to come pick them up when they returned. That’s why I was here. Not to care about them. I didn’t do that. Just to do the picking up part, to take them to a house paid for by Solstar, the organisation that’d sent them. The pickups would rest up a few days, try not to kill themselves, then Solstar would come knocking to see if their investment had been worth it.

Solstar, who I was contracted to, would invest your entire salary every year for the 40 or so years you were gone. By the time you got back, you’d have a shit-tonne of cash for only a few years’ work due to the whole time-dilation thing; some massive percentage the speed of light, something about relativity—whatever. The point is, the journey’d only take a few years for you, but way longer would pass on Earth. For many, it was a quick ticket to early retirement.

For a few, it was apparently reason enough to off themselves. Perhaps it was the leaving everyone you knew behind, never to see them again. Or perhaps it was just how different everything was: tech moved so fast nowadays; 40 years ago, was what? Paper books? Flatscreen TVs? I couldn't even remember. Not that I was alive then, being only 36 now. But a lot changes in 40 years: culture, society, expectations. Now, you don't just choose which ball to scratch first; now, you choose whether you even want to have balls or not.

But suck it up. That's a lot of money—not anything to kill yourself over.

A door to the side of the receptionist's window clunked as the internal mechanisms unlocked and a man pushed through. He was probably about 38 and wore outdated clothes, large-rimmed glasses (what, no laser back in your day?) and an oddly patterned silk shirt.

I put my hat back on and waved him over.

He made his way to me, carrying a single suitcase.

'Welcome,' I said, doing my job but finding it hard to care.

'Thanks, mate,' he replied.

'Let's go.'

'Sorry, but what's your name? They made it very clear that I should only get picked up by the right driver. Something about making sure I arrive at my destination "in one piece".'

'Owen,' I said. 'They're worried about you offing yourself, aren't they?'

'Offing?'

'Er... never mind,' I said, gesturing to the door but not offering to take his bag.

He fumbled a bit trying to grab a handle that wasn't there before realising the door was, of course, automatic.

'Bit different from back in my day,' he said

needlessly.

'I'm sure it is.'

It wasn't long till we were on our way, the maglev car floating smoothly above the magnetic road to the sound of a b-flat hum. Gerard watched the buildings as we passed. Mostly they were concrete and glass constructions, with sharp edges and the occasional cut-out for billboards or light shows by some famous artist. A stripe of diffused white light ran vertically on the edge of each building, ground to roof, making a striking display when driving past at high speed that kinda looked like you were going backwards—trippy. People valued modernity so much now that not a lot of older buildings remained in the city; they'd get quickly scooped up by some hot-shot developer and turned into the same reflective monstrosities.

'So, how're you feeling?' I asked.

'Yeah, alright.'

'Not going to kill yourself, are ya?' I joked, thinking I should clarify my professional concern on the matter in case Gerard looked up the slang I'd used and reported me to my boss.

'Ha. No plans to, no. Not yet at least. I think I'll wait till I get out of the car first. Save you the hassle, you know.'

I laughed. 'How very considerate of you.' Step one complete: build rapport. Step two: the beans must be spilled.

'So, how'd you go out there? How's Jordan 12 treating you guys?' I asked, casually.

'Jordan? Yeah, not bad, I suppose. There's about 5 000 or so of us now, so got a bit of a community going. Kinda weird to be back and not really know anyone anymore.'

'It won't be so bad once you settle in.' I tried to reassure him. Depressed passengers never gave me any juice. Step two going south

quickly, deflect immediately. 'What about the Jordanites?'

'Still only three species, all still seemingly primitive. We're talking about ape-level intelligence. They can make shelter, but that's about it. Still being studied. Was hoping to make some more progress recently but got delayed a bit by severe weather.'

'Oh shit. Like thunderstorms or what?'

'Well, they're a little more intense than that... like those tornado things Earth had a few hundred years ago, before we engineered our way out of them. Except these are considerably larger, more numerous, and tend to be electrically charged.'

'Electrical?'

'Yeah, like lightning. Big swirling sparkly menaces, the size of a *drag-ball* field, as tall as the largest skyscrapers...' he paused and looked out the window to confirm, '...larger in fact. We can't even see where they start, almost like they extend beyond the atmosphere, which is impossibly ridiculous.'

'I bet that makes it tricky on the ground.'

'On it, under it. They're so strong, they're ripping up rocks, creating canyons and craters. We're starting to think maybe the whole topographical structure of the planet was created by them: mountains, valleys, oceans.'

'How does anyone survive that?'

'Not easily, I tell you, especially for the locals. But we drill deep enough, anchor our structures in... we're usually alright.'

'Fuck. Didn't realise it was so intense out there. I bet you're glad you're back... in a way.'

'In a way. At least here, if you don't have anyone close to you, there's nothing to feel when they're gone.'

My next pickup was none other than my dear stupid sister, Gianna.

I'd dropped Gerard off only 40 minutes ago. We'd chatted a bunch more, and despite starting with the intention of purely getting him to spill more beans that he was allowed to, it ended with a genuine connection. I never did that. Especially not with pickups, owing to their tendency to off themselves shortly after arriving.

Somehow though, I didn't think reminding my sister of that tendency was the right approach to convince her not to go. Oh yeah? Did I not mention that? My own sister had decided to go to Jordan 12, leaving her whole family behind (admittedly there was only me left, but its more dramatic if I tell it like this). Maybe I should tell her that I'd kill myself if she left. What was the point of continuing if there was no family anymore?

But you know my view on offing: pointless.

I sat in the driver's seat with the car idling. I didn't want to go in; I was working. She knew I was working. She just often chose to ignore that.

After a minute, I heard her chatter split the air as she emerged from the front door, her phone pressed between her shoulder and ear. She stopped with her hand on the door, unable to multitask. She knew I was waiting, right? I honked the horn, pretending like I hadn't noticed she'd already arrived at the car. She jumped in surprise.

The door opened automatically, and she got in. 'Arsehole,' Gianna said, barely pausing her phone conversation. 'Oh no Camila, not you of course, just my brother being a dick. Carry on.'

I left the kerb not even waiting for her to put her seatbelt on. I drove for 12 minutes. Not once did she stop. I even took another lap

around the block so she could finish her convo and give me at least a few minutes before she left the goddamn planet for 40 years. Maybe I should remind her of the friends she'd be leaving behind. I couldn't fathom how she could be seemingly so "close" with her best girlfriends, yet so willing to drop them for a few easy bucks. Let alone her brother. But that part was at least believable. The way she treated me didn't really give me any confidence that she'd ever reconsider for the sake of family.

With an, 'Alright darl. I look forward to meeting your husband!' Gianna hung up the phone, placed it in her bag and immediately stared out the window without another word.

'Camila's got a husband?' I asked.

'Huh?' My darling sister replied. 'No. Not yet.'

'Is she even dating anyone?'

'No.'

'Then what...' I asked.

'She's adamant she'll have a rich husband and a nice house by the time I get back.'

'Doubt it. By that stage she'll probably have divorced the first one and be on to the next.'

'I didn't say it'd be her first husband,' Gianna said, not looking away from the window.

We sat in silence for a few minutes before I spoke again. 'Do you even care that you're leaving me behind?' It sounded lame as soon as I'd asked it, but I had no time left; we were already on our third lap around the block.

'What are you talking about?' she asked. 'Of course I do.'

'Then why don't you ever show it?'

'You're not going to do this now, are you?'

'Do what?' I asked.

She continued. 'When did you ever show *you* cared about *us* either? It goes both ways you know.'

'I cared. I was always picking you up from drag-ball practice or taking you to meet your stupid friends.'

'Just picking someone up isn't caring.'

'Then what is? Skipping my ninth birthday to go meet your friends when all I wanted was my big sister to be there for me? Not going to mum's funeral because you were meeting a boy? Not talking to your only brother for the last time before you leave?'

'I am talking. Lots of fun, isn't it,' she said with finality.

We sat in silence for the remainder of the journey. I made sure to take another three laps of the block. I wasn't sure if it was to make her suffer in awkward silence for a little longer or because I knew this might have been the last few minutes I ever spent with her. We didn't get along on the account of us both being stubborn... selfish. But we were still family. If she stabbed me in the kneecaps and pissed on my writhing body, I'd still come to her funeral. I think she cared... somewhere in there.

Just like I did.

She left on the 16:45 shuttle that day with a small crew of other researchers. She was a researcher in biology—did I mention that? Of course, I knew she would be a useful addition to Jordan 12, but that still meant she was leaving me behind... alone. But it was done. She was gone, as good as dead. In 40 years, who knows what would have happened. I'd be 76. Not too old when the average life expectancy is 95, but old enough. If I was lucky, I wouldn't last that long anyway. I kinda didn't have anyone worth sticking around for now.

But I stuck around. That was three weeks

ago. I'd done another 14 pickups in three weeks. 14 more people had returned from their life on Jordan 12 to whatever new Earth this was for them. I'd built rapport, convinced them to tell me things they shouldn't, and told them not to off themselves. Only 12 had listened... about the offing... Nah, I kid. No one had killed themselves just yet. But that was inevitable, only a matter of time. A bleak outlook, no? Do I need therapy? Work through the trauma of having my whole family leave me? Or is that impossible?

I had met up with Gerard a few times. We really seemed to kick it off despite being from different generations and having considerably different skills and professions. He'd struggled with settling back in (no surprises there). He kept talking about the people he'd left behind and how he'd give anything to go back. And now that my sister was gone, neither of us really had anyone else to talk to (not that my sister had done much of that anyway).

In fact, Gerard was who I was on my way to see now that night had hit. Surprisingly, I drove alone. Gerard had declined a pickup and requested I meet him in one of the ritzier city neighbourhoods. The high-rises in this area had more glass and polished metals than other parts of town, and the vertical light panels had a sparkle to them, imitating diamond, imitating wankery.

I drove past a particularly flashy building as it started to rain heavily. The door person, in his velvet hat and vest quickly opened an umbrella and escorted a resident through the automatic glass doors.

I turned down a side street and stopped at the dot my GPS showed overlaid on the wind-screen, looking out at a dark construction site at the end of the street. Despite the glow coming

from the main street behind me, I couldn't see much beyond, except the rising steel shell that would soon be filled with fancy people doing fancy-people things. I metaphorically vomited in my mouth at the thought (yes, I can do this; it's fun, try it one time).

After a few minutes waiting, I grabbed an umbrella and stepped out into the night. Gerard had not mentioned much more other than when and where to meet. Being from a different time, he hadn't quite updated his skillset to be able to share his location on his phone or even send me a fricken pin on the map. I'd had to type the address in like a millennial. But now that it was sufficiently later than the agreed time, I thought it best to have a look around.

There were no security guards—no reason for rich people to break into a construction site, I guess. I pushed through the temporary gates. The loose gravel had started to become mud so I quickly made my way under the cover of the half-completed building. The rain played messy notes through the metal beams, and in the darkness, I felt an odd peacefulness.

A sound like a muffled heavy metal song seemed to reverberate through the building. I began to follow the sound, stopping occasionally when the rain picked up and I lost my bearings on the music. I couldn't help thinking that this was not what Gerard had wanted me to do and that I should promptly return to the street and wait, but the deeper I delved into the structure, the louder the music got.

I found a temporary passenger elevator to carry workers to the upper floors. I stepped in and tried my luck, holding the green button. Thankfully, the elevator jerked and began to ascend. With each floor, the music grew louder as though I was riding the very volume slider itself.

As I reached the top, I could confirm that

it was in fact a rough heavy metal track playing, with a low growling vocal sounding like thunder through the rain. I could see a silhouette moving in front of a violet glow.

I pushed out of the elevator on top of the building. The metal spires protruded out the top like candles on an unfinished cake. As I looked around me, I could see the glow of the city. Sparkles glittered across rooftops. If it had been a clear night, I was sure you wouldn't have known where the city ended and the starry sky began.

I arrived at the violet light just as the music kicked into overdrive. Gerard stood on the edge of the building, held up his hands and let out a roar with the chorus. He turned as I approached (I hope you didn't think he was going to jump).

'Owen!' he yelled.

'Gerard,' I replied.

'Come come, have a drink, or twelve.' He shuffled me over, lowering the volume as he did and handing me an ice-cold can of something it was too dark to see.

'This is wild, man,' I said as I took a sip (I say a sip, but let me tell you, I necked that motherfucker and grabbed another).

'Why thank you, thank you.'

'I'm not sure that was a compliment but I'm glad you're in high spirits.'

'High spirits?' He held his drink up in front of him, squinting at the label. 'I think these are just regular spirits,' he said, laughing. 'Besides, you know when you just don't care because nothing matters and no one matters and there's no point to anything?'

'Not going to jump, are you?' I joked.

Gerard's eyes went wide with excitement, and he comically mimicked launching himself over the edge (I told you he's not gonna do it; stop your assumptions and let me tell the damn

story). Gerard laughed again. 'Nah. If I did, you'd have to deal with it, and I wouldn't want to put my only friend up to a task like that, so soon after his sister left.'

'Friend, hey?'

'Friend: A person you share drinks with, share how fucked up the world is, and hope the other doesn't off themselves.'

'Haha. "Off themselves",' I repeated, wondering how long it'd taken Gerard to look that one up. 'Statistically speaking, you're more likely to do that than me.'

'Statistics are based on factual conditions. People who return from Jordan, have no one left, no reason to continue. You... now seemingly have no one left, no reason to continue,' Gerard explained. 'Thus, you fit the conditions to have just as much chance of the big "offing" as I do.'

'Not sure that's how you use that term.'

'You say that like I give a shit. I do not.'

'Fair. Gianna will be back though. Not for ages, but we're family, so I should stick around for that.'

'Ahh yes, family. I know not of what you speak,' Gerard joked.

'Which reminds me, my weekend's coming to an end. I should check my pickups for tomorrow,' I said, regretting delaying it so late now that I was enjoying myself.

'Forget it all and come scream at the rain with me. The chorus is coming up.'

'Haha. I will, I will. I just gotta check.'

Gerard turned back to the cityscape and started drumming in the air as the song built steadily against the rain.

I pulled out my phone and as per usual procedure, dialled the number of the receptionist. Carol answered after three rings.

'Hello, Carol,' I started. 'Just checking in

about my pickups for tomorrow.'

Carol seemed to rummage around with the papers on her desk like she didn't have them ready to go—come on Carol, get your shit together.

'I can call back later if you're not quite ready,' I said.

'No no,' Carol replied. 'Just a bit flustered—not sure why you haven't been told yet.'

'Told what?'

'No one has returned for three days. They arrivals have just stopped.'

'What do you mean stopped? So what if they've stopped?'

'Listen. I don't think you understand. They don't stop. They've never stopped. 34 years I've worked here. Not one day without an arrival from Jordan 12.'

'Really? I doubt it. Surely they've stopped before that though... or on your day off?'

'No Owen. Not for the past 214 years. Not one arrival has been missed, until now.'

'But it'll start again. It's just a short delay. They'll start again.' Silence. 'Carol, they'll start again, though?'

'How the bloody hell would I know? I'm just the fucking receptionist.' I'd never heard Carol talk like that, and it made me panic more than the nonsense that she was saying.

Not one day without an arrival for 214 years? I contemplated the absurdity of that statement. But then I remembered trains. Trains ran every day. There was not a single day *they* stopped. Everyday people boarded a ship and left for Jordan 12 like it was a train taking mindless salary workers two blocks to their nearest branch office. Sending people every day was the only way they could deal with the whole time-dilation thing. It was widely impractical to wait 40 years for any data or research before sending the

next team, so they just kept sending people, every single day. And they just kept coming back. Until they didn't anymore. Until now.

'I don't know what to tell you,' Carol said after my sustained silence. 'There's no more pickups.'

I sat in my car outside the pickup point. I didn't know why I was here. I'd called every day to check my scheduled pickups, and every day Carol would get annoyed and tell me there were none. But I was here, probably because I didn't know what else to do. My sister had just left. If something had happened out there... she wouldn't even know what she was flying into, not until she arrived on Jordan 12 in two years' time. That would be about 20 years on Earth. Would the pickups resume before then? Was it just a temporary hiccup? The unlikely first in 214 years?

What if no one ever came back?

The carpark was relatively empty. They had paused all departures until they'd had useless corporate board meetings to make decisions based on zero facts. They didn't want to send more people if it wasn't a viable (read profitable) operation anymore. Which was pretty ridiculous really. They wouldn't know if it wasn't viable (keep swapping this for profitable, you know the drill), unless someone returned to tell them, and that could take years. What were they going to do? Just wait?

I shifted in my seat. Three times I went to open the door but stopped. I didn't really have a plan. But I couldn't just wait. I needed to do something. You're probably like, what could I do? I'm a glorified taxi driver. And I'll tell you with 100% unquestionable certainty: there's no

glory in pickups. I might not collect your local drunks from early morning injecting rooms like collecting *Genbrawl* trading cards (*The Projectile Vomiter*, range 100, attack 20), or transfer ancient ladies to the rotating shopping spheres to meet their veteran sipping companions (attack 0, HP almost nearly fucking 0). Sure, my pickups are important people with earned respect in their fields, but there's certainly no esteem to my profession. I didn't earn the respect; I didn't go to Jordan 12. I'm just a pickup driver.

The sixth time my hand went to the door, I opened it, quickly stepping out before I had a chance to change my mind. Was it really a change if you didn't know what you were doing in the first place? I squinted in the sunlight as I marched quickly to the front door. It opened automatically at my arrival.

Inside was quiet. Carol sat at her desk with the glass window closed and the reception phone to her ear. I couldn't hear what she was saying, but she didn't look happy about it. I imagined some distant relative on the other side, complaining about arrival delays like this was some sort of ancient transcontinental airline that took a massive 16 hours and charged you for the privilege of shoving your bags underneath. Then I remembered, no one ever had anyone pick them up. That was the point. They left because they didn't have anyone that cared about them. And if they did, you can bet your 12th left nipple that they certainly wouldn't care 40 years later. No one was bothering Carol with their worries.

I approached and tapped on the glass. Carol shook her head at me. I tapped again. Carol held her palm up and looked away like a defiant child not wanting to eat her vegetables. I tapped again. Carol ignored me. I tapped a little too hard this time. Carol whipped her head back to

me and her palm became a finger, now telling off the child.

Fuck off Carol, I don't have time for this. I wasn't sure where the sudden pressure of time came from. But it came, and now I couldn't stop it. I needed someone to tell me what the hell was going on. My sister was out there. And by all accounts, no one was going to get her back.

I left Carol and went to open the door the arrivals came through. It was locked. I shook it roughly in frustration. I looked back at Carol, willing her to open it with gesture alone. She hadn't hung up the phone, but refused with a strong eyebrow raise and sharp headshake.

I shook it again, this time not moving my eyes from Carol. It must have been an important phone call to not hang up and deal with the immediate threat of someone trying to break in.

'Carol, open the door Carol,' I demanded, shaking it again.

Carol shook her head again, covering the mouthpiece of the phone, and saying something I couldn't hear behind the glass.

I stormed over to her and slid the stupid glass window back much harder than I intended. It hit the other side of the window frame and shattered. Little gems fell over Carol's paperwork like a jeweller spilling his next sale. Carol jumped back, dropping the phone to the floor. Apparently, the phone call wasn't *this* important. Now we knew the line. And now I happily crossed over it. I reached in and pressed the little green button on Carol's desk that unlocked the side door, gave her a polite smile, then left through the open door.

I followed a series of corridors, not really sure where I was going or what I was looking for. Someone important to demand that they go get my sister back? The corridors were nearly en-

tirely empty, about as empty as the carpark was outside. I walked quickly, and as embarrassing as it is, I tried to be intimidating. I didn't want anyone to question me or stop me until I found someone who would give me some answers. I puffed out my chest and metaphorically gorilla thumped it (we know I can do metaphorical things, just roll with it).

I noticed a large, black-trimmed doorway at the end of one of the corridors. It looked like it had some importance, standing in violation of the apparent mental asylum aesthetic they were going with. I arrived and read the words skilfully engraved into the brass nameplate on the door: *Assistant Director Canston*. That sounded promising.

I considered knocking, but realised I was probably beyond polite societal expectations at this point. Perhaps Canston wouldn't know what the customs were; perhaps a shoulder to the door that snapped the lock would be considered polite in today's society. Because that's certainly what Canston got, along with a few splintered wood shards and flakes of black paint launched onto his carpeted floor.

Canston stepped back suddenly from behind his desk.

'Who the hell are you?' he yelled.

'Where are they? Why have they stopped?' I said, my voice rising to match Canston's.

'The arrivals? I assure you, we're doing what we can.'

'What you can? My sister just left. Call her up and get her back.'

'Get her back? You can't just—' Canston took a deep breath, picking up his chair from where it'd fallen. 'We have sent messages—obviously—but we do not know what we are dealing with. There is no need for them to return yet.'

'I don't care. Turn them around... if some-

thing's happened—'

'We don't know if something's happened. And frankly, we might not know for another 18.9 years.'

'They'll be dead before you do anything about it,' I said roughly.

'Dead? Let's not jump to conclusions. We don't even know what the delay is.'

'Just turn them around.'

'We cannot "just turn them around". You're the pickup driver, correct? The daily ships aren't like that taxi of yours. They're more like a...' He sounded like he was searching for simple words that an idiot like me would understand. '...train... on a virtual rail system. Much faster, more efficient, cheaper. But it cannot turn and cannot launch without a station. Everyone who leaves, leaves knowing they're on their own. Surely you are aware of that?'

'Then send someone up there to get them back.'

Canston sighed deeply, seemingly trying to calm himself before explaining further.

'By now, they are halfway to their top speed. If a rescue ship left now, they'd accelerate at the same speed and your sister's ship would never be reached.'

I just stood there staring. I didn't know what to say.

'Will there be anything else? Because barging in here and ruining my office will not benefit your sister's return or any of those who have risked their lives for the advancement of humanity.'

He sounded like he was patching parts of a set script together as he went, and for some reason it pissed me off more than if he'd just said he didn't know what was going on.

'You're wrong. A rescue ship will reach them.'

‘As I’ve mentioned, it cannot possibly if it’s travelling at the same speed.’

‘It will,’ I said, trying to figure out what I actually meant. ‘Eventually the train stops at the station.’

‘On Jordan 12? By that stage it may be too late. Besides, since the arrivals have stopped and with no guarantee of return, there’s little to no one willing to take the journey.’

‘Let me help then,’ I said plainly, forcing my frustration into my gut where it belonged.

‘And how could a driver help with an inter-planetary transportation complication?’

I stared at the dust from the cracked door frame, floating through the sunlight from the blinded window and settling to the floor like microscopic dunes.

‘Pickups,’ I said plainly.

‘Yes. You can only wait until the pickups resume.’

I didn’t know what I was thinking or what I was suggesting, but I felt like nothing else mattered. ‘I do pickups.’

‘We have established that,’ Canston said, now seemingly acting like he was speaking to a child (justified for sure).

‘Send me,’ I said, looking back up at Canston. ‘I do pickups. *That’s literally my job.* If there’s no one willing to go, send me.’

I sat on the edge of the unfinished building in the construction site of Gerard’s metal haven—its unfinished spires pointed towards my sister, somewhere up there in the night sky, floating unknowingly towards who-knows-what. I dangled my legs off the edge, leaning forward to the street below (the obsession you have with offing makes me think you might need to talk

to someone).

They’d promptly kicked me out of Solstar after my whole heroic incident. They’d also stopped paying me. They hadn’t said if it was the aggression or the fact that there were no more pickups, but either way, I was apparently done. I’d spent the last week picking up diamond dangling botoxees and their miniature dogs (rats?), then filled out my paycheque with the occasional plastic surgeon taking a large-chested post-op client for a “drink” (*fuck—you should be used to this by now). If there wasn’t glory before, there was certainly none now.

I contemplated what it would be like when I walked back into Solstar, onto their next starship and started my journey to Jordan 12. Oh? I forgot to mention. They’d promptly (not promptly) called me back a week after my incident, asking whether I’d be interested in going on a recovery mission—no guarantee of return, big paycheque when (if) I did. I guess the more desperate they got without a solution, the more stupid their decision making became. If no one else was insane enough to go, they’d have to settle for me.

Just think about that for a minute—paint a picture in your head. You know me by now. My sister was an actual researcher in biology. *I...* was a driver. I drove a car. And to be fair that was mostly automated. Paint that picture. It’s no Mona Lisa, more like a Picasso; you can kinda see what the hell’s going on, but it’s all fucked up. I *did*, after all, pickup those who’d gone to Jordan. I just usually only went as far as Solstar’s terminal. But when Canston had called me, he’d made it clear that four weeks without departures meant a backlog of ships (they made a shit-tonne to cater for daily departures), and it was costing more to store them than to launch

one with me in it. So, what'd they have to lose?

The construction elevator rattled as it arrived at the top of the building with a dull ding, and Gerard announced his arrival with open arms like some TV show host. 'I have come. As requested. To serve your every need.'

'Took your time.'

'Unlike you, I do not possess a car, and apparently picking me up was not on offer for today.'

'I thought you liked to make your own way around.'

'Only when not scolded for being late,' Gerard said, taking a seat on the edge of the building with me. 'Not going to jump, are you?' he asked with a smile.

'I might wait till you leave to save you the hassle,' I replied, passing him a warm beverage.

Gerard looked at it as if displeased by its temperature, then cracked the top and necked it. 'So, what's the reason for the late-night call?' Gerard asked.

'I need a reason to have a drink with a mate?'

'Possible reason 1: I like to consume cold sweet beverages. Possible reason 2: I like to yell at the stars with Gerard.' He paused. 'That's it, I will accept either reason.'

'How about both?'

'I will accept both.'

'One last time,' I said plainly.

'One last—*one*?' Gerard looked at me—stared into me.

'Possible reason 3;,' I started, 'I did a dumb thing and now I'm off to Jordan to get my sister back.'

Gerard sat in silence. I didn't want to break it.

'How the hell did you convince them to let you go to Jordan?' Gerard said. 'If delinquents

grew up, they'd become you. Solstar's really dropping its standards, hey?'

'Excuse me. I'll have you know, I was never a delinquent. In my youth, I maintained solid below average marks at school and only went to underage parties on the weekends. That *was* every weekend mind you, but weekends nonetheless.'

Gerard sat contemplating something for a few moments, then said, 'Hmm. Odd feeling this...' He took a warm sip. 'Perhaps it would have been easier to have never met you.'

'What's that mean?' I asked.

'You know.'

'No.' (I reckon I did.)

'Spend over two years returning from Jordan 12 to a world you don't know, with no one in it who knows you or cares about you...' he trailed off. 'The hard part is leaving someone behind. It's not *having* no one. If there's no one, you feel flat. If you lose someone, you feel loss.'

'Sounds gay,' I said, trying to avoid my own feelings.

'Super gay...' Gerard tossed his empty can off the side of the building. 'It's odd you know. When nothing really matters. Twice I've left my family. Once on earth 40 years ago. Once leaving my new family I'd made on Jordan 12 to come back here.'

'Don't do anything stupid while I'm gone, will you,' I said.

'What, like sit on the side of an unfinished building and yell at the sky? Or... Or take a one-way trip across the stars to a planet no one returns from?'

I paused for a moment. 'Yeah... Like that—don't do that.' What was I doing? It didn't make sense when he said it so simply like that. Why didn't I care? Was it because nothing mattered? I could just lean forward right now

off the edge of this building. No one would remember me. No one would care. Sure, Gerard would have to call it in, but he'd get over it soon enough.

'Family,' I said plainly. 'It doesn't really make sense. But I think that's why I have to go. Either that or my brain is messed up.'

'You can have both.'

I looked at him puzzled.

'Family *and* a messed-up brain,' he said, seemingly trying to lighten the mood.

'Only if I go get Gianna back.'

'Then go get her back.'

I'd spent the next few days driving aimlessly around the city, contemplating what was to come. I tried not to consider if it was the wrong choice. I didn't care. I was supposed to be disposing of my possessions or putting them in storage, but again, I didn't care. I did however, care very much about getting drunk with Gerard as often as I could. Despite being adamant he wasn't going to off himself when I left, part of me still felt like it was my responsibility to set him up with some other friends or get him on a path to settling into his "new" life on Earth.

He didn't seem keen on settling in. He did seem keen on drinking, and at the moment that just about suited me. I'd miss the bugger. I'd only known him for a month or so, but we'd bonded. It was probably the shared pessimistic outlook on existence that did it. And boy did we have a shitty outlook on life.

I stood in the carpark again. It was full today owing to the extra personnel needed to send me off. I hadn't sold my car yet, and frankly didn't care. If I ever made it back, 40

years of salary would more than pay for a new one. I put the auto activator button-key on the hood for the next opportunistic degenerate who happened to be stumbling by, and made my way into the reception.

Carol rolled her eyes at me when I entered. Without a word, she pressed the green button unlocking the door beside her so I could go through.

I made my way through the corridors in the direction of the launch bay. I'd had several days of briefing videos, but there wasn't a lot to worry about. It was like a train, remember? No driver, just a timetable. They said they had made some adjustments or were sending me on a better model or something. For some reason, they thought it might be beneficial if I could turn around out there or launch without a fucking station. I'd have 2.11 years to watch a few training videos, so should know the correct commands if I needed them.

Assistant Director Canston was waiting in the launch control room as I entered. He didn't look up from his computer. A few other personnel were seated at screens lining the walls. It wasn't a massive operation like it had been when the first people went to The Moon way back in the 20th century. They'd had rooms full of technical personnel and directors counting down numbers like kindergarten teachers.

I was led into a side room where I changed into some flight clothes and stowed my remaining personal belongings in a locked fingerprint box for when (if?) I returned. This amounted to the single government ID chip that the doctors had just removed from my left wrist, as well as my credit chip and a 12-hour watch, useless on the 19.34 standard hour days on Jordan 12.

A large lady in an official-looking uniform led me up an elevator and onto the launch floor

without much small talk despite my efforts to diffuse the tension. Perhaps she'd heard about my little episode with Canston. I followed her down a gangplank and entered the side of the space-bus (a spade is a spade, and this was a space-bus if I ever saw one).

'Please take a seat,' the lady said, needlessly gesturing to one of the only high-backed chairs on the flight deck. A few other personnel were flittering around doing last minute preparations as I sat down and strapped myself in. The last left without announcing their departure (what, not a good luck or polite farewell, no impassioned speech about saving humanity and bringing our "boys" home?).

I sat there feeling somewhat alone, looking at the empty chairs around me. I thought it was almost time to go until someone returned, entered the launch cabin and stood in front of me with their hands on their hips: fucking Gerard.

'What the hell are you doing here?' I asked. 'Come to see me off?'

'Well, you could put it that way, yes. I will be seeing you off.'

'Are you even allowed to be up here?' I asked looking around to anyone that might be able to kick my mate off.

'Of course. I'm seeing you off, remember? And I reckon I might be seeing you *on* as well.'

'On? What the hell are you talking about?'

The door hissed and began closing automatically.

'Uh, hey,' I called.

The door sealed shut with a beep. Gerard took a seat next to me and started strapping himself in. 'Couldn't let you have all the glory. Could I?'

'What the hell are you doing?'

'Coming with you, of course,' he said.

'Like hell you are. You only just got back.'

'To what, Owen? An Earth I don't know, with no family or friends?'

I said nothing.

'Think of it like a holiday. I've had a nice holiday on Earth, seen some new things, met some new people, and now I'm going home. You're going to get your only family, your sister. I've come to get you, the only friend I have. It's simple really.'

'You're a nutcase. Does Canston know about this?'

'Of course. Solstar is like an *official* operation, you know. Not just some guy driving a glorified taxi, picking up whomever he pleases.'

'You're an asshole,' I said, then added, 'But I'm glad for it.'

'Now let's go save your sister. And let's get some decent launch music up in this bitch,' Gerard said, tapping away at the screen on the arm rest until a steady drumbeat from a centuries old band called *Disturbed* started. Without ceremony or delay, the song built to vocals and the ship rumbled into launch with a roar...

"Ohwah-ah-ah-ah."

I sent the first message only a few days after we'd left. I figured it was better to send it before my sister was too close to the speed of light. Otherwise... Canston's face popped into my head saying something like: blah, blah, you can't catch them if you're both travelling at the same speed, blah, blah, I'm an idiot. He did say that, didn't he? Either way, when she got to 0.955c (or whatever the top speed was), my messages just wouldn't reach her before she got to Jordan 12, and by then, well, who the hell knew.

Oh, the message? It was just something generic, something like: 'Hey, it's ya bro, coming

to rescue you and fix all your bad choices.’ But longer, you know, and perhaps more heartfelt and apologetic. But don’t get too sappy on me.

I sat down at the communications board computer on the main flight deck. Gerard wasn’t here. The dim light made me feel weird, not like romantic, but sort of oddly peaceful, in the same way a dark night on top of a half-completed building did. I ran my fingers over the QWERTY keyboard, considering whether I could remember how to type QWERTY anymore. It was always the bigger corporations that never seemed to move on to. The flashing violet LED in the centre of the console kept demanding that I hurry up. But I was nervous, of course. This was the first message we’d received since departing, and something told me it wouldn’t be Solstar checking in.

I clicked the icon on the terminal’s desktop and the message interface loaded. I opened the first (and only) message. And waited. I’d expected only the new message to play, but apparently the system wanted to play the whole message chain, and I didn’t know how to stop it, so my dorky voice popped up first.

‘Er. Hello, this is Owen, er... well, I guess it doesn’t really matter what my last name is, how many Owens are there in space? Anyway, the system is counting down like two minutes, so I guess that means to keep it brief. Apparently, I’ve wasted 33 seconds already just telling you about the time. But maybe that’s easier—rambling about time. Have I always just taken the easy way? I guess... Maybe I find it hard to tell you things—talk about things. You know, the important things.’ A moment of static, while I’d pulled myself together. ‘But maybe that’s the point, they’re there, I just can’t say them. Eugh. This is awkward. Even more awkward than that car ride, huh? It’s weird talking when I don’t

know if you can hear me, or if you’ll ever hear me, or if I’ll ever fucking see you again. That’s weird. But, I’m trying. I want you to know I’m trying.’ At this stage I’d looked at the timer—nearly about dead. ‘Oh, by the way, I’m coming to resc—’ The recorder had cut off.

The next message started automatically. ‘Bro? Owen? Is that my dickhead brother? What the hell are you doing? Why are you sending me messages from a Solstar ship? I don’t remember you being the type to make the journey to Jordan. Or did you miss me too much?’ Silence. I could hear the seconds on the timer wasting away. ‘Listen. Maybe it’s good that you called, er... sent a message. I... just wanted to tell you... Look, I’m sorry. I know I’m not good at telling you how I feel, or just being a good sister at all. But, I do care. It’s a long journey, it gives a lot of time to think. You’ve always been alright. That’s why I needed to leave. I’ve always envied you... in a way. You don’t give a shit about anything. And in this world, that means more than those fancy people in fancy houses doing fancy things. I could never be like you. And maybe by trying to not care, I pushed you away. But I didn’t mean to. I’m not running away. I’m just trying to live up to your expectations. Everyone wants fancy. Not many people want to give it all up to research on Jordan. To me, that’s something. The little numbers say 20 seconds. I love you, but don’t come. Whatever happens, don’t come. I need to do this, for me—’

2.11 years later

It hadn’t been long before the messages had stopped. I’d sent a few more and gotten a few back before Gianna was travelling too fast. There was something weird about sending messages when that was all you could do—some-

thing peaceful, something that made peace. We'd *never* made peace, just excuses. *Why don't you come around for dinner?* I can't; I'm picking up a package from the dropstation. *Will Mum and I see you over the holidays?* Probably not this time; I'm picking up a package from the dropstation. *What all fucking holidays?* Yes, all holidays, I'm picking up packages from the dropstation. Or something like that. But here, as we both sat on Solstar ships, hurtling towards Jordan 12, there were no excuses for being apart. We just were. There was no blame, just existence. And there was that odd peacefulness again. I felt like I was finding it a lot nowadays. And for once in my life, we felt like family. God, I sound like Dr Mandstin from LBC live giving advice to bickering couples. But what else is there to do than contemplate life? Fuck, it's boring up here.

Then, after 70 days, our ship hit 0.955c, and I knew my sister had been at that speed for at least 28 days. My last few messages would not reach her before she arrived. That was it, she was alone.

The two-year journey had dragged in silence there for a bit. We were thankful Solstar apparently agreed that various alcoholic beverages were a necessary provision, and me and Gerard had made a solid effort getting through them. But thankfully, we were at the end of our journey and had almost finished our 70-day deceleration.

I sat in one of the high-backed chairs on the flight deck. Gerard was tinkering at the tea station he'd dragged from the dining room and haphazardly set up where one of the computers should have been. I couldn't figure out if he had regretted coming or not. He said no. He acted like no. But he seemed tired. Perhaps it was the fact he'd spent the last four years (minus a brief "holiday" on Earth) pacing an oversized space-bus. He'd told me about it—Jordan 12—and how he'd never expected to get attached to it. He kept telling me how much money he'd left behind on Earth to come with me, like he was doing me a favour and I owed him a lifetime of wages. I was happy to owe him. If we



ever made it back to Earth, I'd gladly give him my 40 years of salary.

An automated voice came over the speakers announcing our imminent arrival within viewing distance of Jordan 12. I made my way to the front window which extended the width of the ship presenting a formidable view of the speckled blackness. The view was overwhelmingly beautiful; with no light pollution from a ritzy city, it wasn't like anything I'd ever seen before.

But there was still no sign of the blue-grey speck that was supposed to be Jordan 12.

We continued slowing and the stars finalised their positions in the blackness where they would stay. I still couldn't see the planet amongst them and couldn't help thinking that we'd overshot or miscalculated the coordinates. But I kept telling myself how it was like a train pulling into a station. The tracks didn't just send you to the wrong place. Stations didn't just disappear.

So then where the hell was Jordan?

I looked over at Gerard who'd arrived at my side holding a mug of tea. 'So where is it?' I asked him.

'Hmm. It's usually quite noticeable. Imagine Earth-like, glowing, blue and grey. Maybe we've slowed too early? Maybe we overshot and are facing the wrong direction?' Gerard suggested. He stepped up to the control panel and tapped a few buttons. Some pale violet digits appeared, overlaid on the window in front of us. They were slowly counting down to zero as we moved forward. 'Nope,' Gerard said. 'This is exactly where we're supposed to be.'

'Then where the hell is it?' I asked again in increasing frustration.

'I don't know. Maybe if you hadn't turned off all the other instruments, the computer might be able to tell us.'

'I like to use my own eyes,' I said. Was this a way of protesting Solstar, or my own stupidity?

'Yeah, well, I like to know what the hell's going on,' Gerard said with frustration.

The blackness grew, looming menacingly with a thousand sparkling eyes as the numbers clicked down to **0.0** and the ship came to a stop. I stepped right up to the glass and pressed my face into it, casting my gaze up and back, trying to spot anything in the vastness of space.

Gerard tapped at a control pad, trying to bring some of the scanners online, while riffling through a paper manual.

As I investigated the darkness, I noticed a massive dark shape rotate into view above us. 'Radar scanners,' I said to the control computer (Unlike Gerard, I'd done some reading on the journey).

Gerard rolled his eyes at the ease of the command and threw the useless paper manual to the floor. He looked up to the overlay that had appeared on the screen. A violet outline of a large shape pulsed into view. A gigantic, jagged rock swirled past, narrowly missing us. It had to be larger than 300 drag-ball fields.

I glanced at Gerard, silently asking him to tell me what the hell was going on. He shook his head. The ship shuddered as if the systems were fighting unseen forces in an attempt at stability. An unmarked violet light blinked on in the corner of the window.

Another rock rotated into view and collided with the first, sending a spattering of bus-sized rocks in all directions. One collided directly with our ship. The radar went off leaving us in darkness again. The rocks spun just out of reach creating dark patches against the stars behind them.

A crackle of light caught my eye beyond them—blinding white lightning. It silhouetted a

larger dark mass of rock, unimaginably big—bigger than Earth’s moon—but jagged and dead, spinning awkwardly on a tilted axis.

Another spark of light illuminated behind it, and the rock stopped spinning. I strained my eyes as a swirling tube of lightning bolts—like an electric tornado—shot into it, straightened it, then broke it apart into a thousand smaller chunks. I couldn’t tell where the lightning tornado had come from, or how the hell it existed outside the atmosphere, but I knew one thing for sure: Jordan 12 was fucking gone.

Another lightning tornado—a firecracker beam—shot into the rock, crackling at the edges like a thousand fireworks and breaking it apart even more. From behind, where the tornado seemingly originated, I could just make out a planet sized mass of shadow looming in the darkness. The next tornado sparkled details into its surface, revealing long smooth metallic edges, reflecting the emptiness of space around it, drawing back, with each sparkle in a manufactured conical shape. Our space-bus shuddered again as I felt it being dragged towards the distant object.

‘Gerard, tell me now. What the hell is that?’ I said, adrenaline kicking me.

‘Owen, we need to go. Jordan’s gone. And we will be too if we stay any longer,’ he said.

‘Gianna.’

‘Gone. Everything’s fucking gone, Owen! The whole fucking planet is gone. We have to go now!’ Gerard yelled.

‘She could still be here. We have to search.’

‘I’m not searching shit, not with that fucker, whatever it is, shooting lightning tornadoes that blow up fucking planets. We need to go now!’

I ignored him, speaking directly to the ship’s control computer. ‘Send an audio message out.’

‘Affirmative. What should the message say?’ the computer asked calmly.

‘Record my voice,’ I said, swallowing a lump. ‘Final pickup for any survivors, bound for Earth, respond now or forever...’ I paused—bit dire, no? ‘...or forever be fucked.’ I didn’t care. It suited the situation.

‘Bad move,’ Gerard said. ‘If they hear us...’

‘We can’t leave without trying.’

‘Confirm send authority,’ the computer asked.

‘Confirm. Send,’ I said.

Obviously sending a message is silent, but I would have liked some sort of indication it was done, something that told us when to start counting down till our deaths by lightning. It was like the fate of waiting for a bus: if you wait, the bus will be 30 minutes late, if you choose to walk, the bus will arrive within a minute, and you’ll miss it. I couldn’t miss any chance that my sister or any survivors were here. I couldn’t leave yet. But if I waited too long...

We stood in silence, watching the lightning show in the background. I could hear my breathing. I could hear Gerard’s beside me. He started pacing back and forth in front of the window. My hands began to shake from the adrenaline. We had to go, but I couldn’t. What if she was here—if *anyone* was here?

The lightning tornado stopped turning and dropped the rock it held into a free spin. A moment later, six bolts swirled in all directions from the dark mass, covering and filling the debris field in front of them.

‘They know. We’ve gotta go now!’ Gerard yelled.

I stepped back from the window, tripping slightly on my heels. ‘Plot to Earth,’ I said. ‘Confirm. Launch.’ I turned, stumbling back into my chair as the ship rotated.

‘Confirmed,’ the computer said. ‘Returning to Earth.’

The ship shuddered as the rotation ended. All I could see was empty space in front of us. A tornado of lightning spiralled past us, filling up the window. We launched, fighting the gravitational pull and slowly gathering speed.

Another shaft of light, holding a gigantic rock was thrown past us, narrowly missing the ship as our velocity continued to increase.

A flash seeped in from the edges of the viewing window, like watching lightning diffuse through the clouds on a stormy night. Another followed.

Gerard hadn’t sat. Despite the acceleration, he clung to the railing near the window, whispering under his breath. ‘Shit, shit, shit, shit.’

‘Sit the fuck down, Gerard!’ I yelled.

The space-bus jolted, knocking Gerard to the floor with a crash as a sparkle ran through the inside walls, snaking around the edge of the viewing window, then fizzling into nothing. The inner glass of the screen shattered, raining down ice shards that slashed at Gerard’s arms. The interior lights flickered, then died.

Silence.

‘Is anyone—thing following?’ I asked the control computer.

‘Nothing detected.’

I waited a few more moments as the ship continued to increase speed. But nothing came.

I looked over at Gerard sitting silently. He stared back at me. No one spoke.

Epilogue

The remnants of Jordan 12 drifted through space, lit up by the occasional crackle of light. A small sleek shape, the size of a space-taxi, rotated dead, bumping lightly between them, immobilised by the lightning fields.

A crackle broadcast over the radio that no one would hear:

‘Bro? Owen? We’re dead in the water. No power. Systems failing. Need a tow if you’ve got one. And Owen... thanks for the pickup.’

And in solitary space, the only reply comes as a final tornado of light. ❖

END TRANSMISSION