

Enter Stelaris

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PROLOGUE

On Jason Hawk's 13th birthday he received a bright red Ripper bicycle, a Hornby boy's telescope, two pairs of navy and beige striped socks, and the latest Stooges 78 long playing record wrapped up in a flat orange and brown striped box. He was excited, not only for the new bike, but for what he'd just heard on the news. After throwing on his favorite striped shirt (and new socks) he rushed to the kitchen and took the plate of flapjacks from his mom's hands. "Thanks," he said while pouring too much maple syrup on the 'jacks and simultaneously twiddling knobs on the Duett radio with his other hand. He turned the tuning dial from President Kennedy's address to a patch of empty noise.

"Hey, I was listening to that," Jason's father berated from the couch, dumping his newspaper on the coffee table in front of the television. He walked up to the kitchen counter while Jason searched the radio. "What are you doing to my radio?"

Jason turned the fine tune dial until the needle lay a hair past 40 Megahertz. A soft but steady beep barely discernible through the static.

"Dad, listen!"

Several more beeps slipped through a wash of static.

"What the devil is that? Have you broken it?"

"No sir. That's Sputnik!"

"Sputnik?"

"Yes sir. The Russians put a satellite up in the space last week."

"Russians? I don't like the sound of that. What are they up to?"

"This, apparently."

"Turn it back, Jacky, I want to hear about the oil price."

"Alright." Jason turned the dial back to Radio Nevada. "Hey, dad, can Goddy come over for a barbecue tomorrow? We want to find Sputnik in the telescope."

"On the telescope, huh? Well, I suppose so, son, if it's okay with your mother."

"Why don't you ask Tory to join you?" Jason's mother asked from the kitchen.

"Mom, jeez. She's probably busy." Jason avoided directly looking at his parents.

"So? Just ask her," his mom winked at her husband.

Jason threw up his hands in surrender. "Fine. I'll ask her!"

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The next evening Jason and his friends gathered in the back yard and lit a barbecue. They tried for half an hour to find the satellite in the early night sky but saw nothing but the moon.

Goddard pressed his fingers into his wrist and counted out his pulse. "I'm too fast!" he shouted.

"Shh! I'm concentrating." Torianne Moss, Tory to her friends, scolded Goddy. She tweaked the telescope until she found Saturn, the rings blurry but visible.

"What's that? Is that it?" Goddard asked, pointing at a streak in the sky.

"No-uh, that's a shooting star," Jason replied with authority.

Tory searched the night for the bright object flying through the sky, convinced it was nothing more than an

airplane. She deftly aligned the telescope and peered through the viewfinder. "Oh my God, guys, come look at this."

20 Years Later

DAY 1

Captain Jason Hawk pulled in a painful breath from lungs long unused. The chemicals in his blood brought him slowly, inexorably from stasis. A man dressed in grey stood above him, still injecting the cold and painful liquid into Hawk's neck. Hawk raised his trembling hand towards the figure and whispered, "Who are you?" before passing out.

DAY 2

Hawk sat on the edge of his bed, holding his desperately aching head in his hands, his breathing dry and painful. Stasis was not the refreshing sleep of youth, but the empty, tired sleep of a parent on sleeping tablets. The automatic light flickered on in the cabin, just a five-by-five meter box, though larger and more comfortable than the crew cabins.

"Jason?" A voice in the haze, or at least the illusion of a voice, coming from somewhere. There was a sense of nearness as the light brightened.

"Slowly, Abela, don't shock his system." The voice was deep and calming.

Was he Jason? Yes, there was a memory of identity. I am Jason.

A shadow moved into view, vague and blurry but unmistakably alive. Liquid entered his eyes, painful at first but soothing soon afterwards. His eyes focused.

"Jason, I'm Rigel, I'm here to help you. Can you understand me?" The voice had a name, a thick and strange accent. Rigel? He did not remember the name.

Liquid memories flowed back into him. "I am Captain Jason Hawk," he croaked.

"That's right. Very good. You are the captain of the Valiant and you have been asleep for 140 years."

"Wha...t?" 140 Years gone by. How long was that? He remembered school and learning about numbers and concepts, things that seemed strange and new to him again. 140 Years... yes, he was old, forty five, or was it 185? He had a wife, Susan. She'd be dead now, remarried. God, I hope she remarried, he thought. The mission. Lying back in the stasis chamber he felt himself cry uncontrollably, emotions amplified. He tried to focus on the speaker instead.

"Rigel," he managed, and then "Doctor." He felt a smile overwhelm his face, meeting someone new for the first time. The emotions faded as his self became him again. He could see lights and the bed he was on and a nurse with her straight black hair looking down at him, curiosity written on her face. He'd get to nuances later; right now he had to check on his crew. He shifted his weight to slide off the bed.

"Be calm, do not overdo it. There will be time to move soon enough." The man, Doctor Rigel, put a hand on Hawk's chest, not threatening, but holding him back firmly. That was an order, the gesture said.

"My crew."

"Most are fine. A few have ceased due to broken static chambers. We cleaned them and sent them to the stars." The voice did not waver, as if death in stasis was something that happened daily. Hawk looked at Doctor Rigel and then the nurse. Abela. He could not tell them apart.

"Are you sure you're a doctor?" he said, eyeing the young doctor's long hair, his clothes.

"Of course, and I see you're curious about my lack of uniform. We were told about your generation's formalities."

"Wait. Who are you?" Hawk reached out to touch Rigel's arm but the doctor flinched and pulled away.

"We are from the ship Stelaris. We launched in 2047 and have caught up with you. Our ship is many times faster than yours, Jason." Rigel beamed.

Hawk looked at the other figure, the same hair, same clothes, but vaguely feminine. "Nurse Abela." He almost whispered the words but he saw another strange look come over the nurse's face, something he could not interpret. "Are you the doctor or him?"

"We avoid titles," she responded, removing a tube from his arm. "Our roles are interchangeable. First names are sufficient."

"What year is it?"

"2109. You have been static for 140 years. Take your time to awake, Jason. We will leave you now to get some rest. Do not be worried, our drugs are far superior to anything you have on board and will help you recover quickly."

There were so many questions rising but Hawk could not separate his tongue from the roof of his dry mouth. The two strangers left the room.

There were 30 rooms on the Valiant, each one contained a stasis chamber, a modest single bed, though the crew had sometimes turned them into doubles when the lights were out. The officers had desks, the captain a private shower. Bachelor quarters for space travel.

After The Valiant's top secret construction in space and a silent launch they had travelled for three months awake

to test the automated navigation systems and then one by one entered stasis. Back on earth investors in the ship also entered stasis, a highly expensive luxury not afforded to anyone but billionaires, and now the crew of The Valiant.

Rigel said some of his crew were dead? Broken stasis chambers. They died peacefully then, Hawk thought, lying back and drifting into the best sleep he'd had in a hundred years.

DAY 3

5 Dead, 1 comatose, 25 coming out of stasis in varying degrees. The promise of a perfect resurrection not so fulfilled, but nonetheless Hawk felt happy to be alive. He could barely remember the departed crew, as if they had dissolved into the groggy mush his brain had become. What did Rigel call it, ceased? Like a machine running out of batteries, he thought.

He dressed and first entered the technical officer's cabin, finding Officer Sam Burton sitting on the chair next to an unknown young man of oriental or Eastern descent, both hunched over a moving picture screen.

"Marvellous!" Burton shouted and clicked a switch. He noticed Hawk and gestured him over with a smile. "Have you seen this, captain? Simply marvellous!"

"What am I looking at, officer?" Hawk probed, eyeing the finely detailed screen with interest.

"The entire history of Earth, right here on one machine. A small machine at that! Fits right in my hand."

Hawk held out his hand to the young man, who stared at it blankly. Hawk withdrew his hand. "Yours? Remarkable." Hawk was seldom interested in machines that didn't fly, but if his TO thought this was something worth looking at he knew there was value in it.

"This is Aramel, he's their computer expert."

"Expert?" Hawk judged the man to be no older than twenty. The man nodded.

"One of the best on Earth," he said.

"Is that right? Well, pleased to meet you."

"Yes," he replied. Hawk gave up trying to communicate with what may as well have been an alien creature.

Burton tapped a button on the screen. "I've been skimming everything that's been happening since we left. War, peace, war again, inventions. Great inventions. Computing power beyond our dreams. Technology bordering on the miraculous really. Have a look at this." Hawk followed his gaze to another screen showing a moving picture of a spacecraft leaving its dock, sleek and beautiful, as if built from light itself.

"That's their ship. I haven't seen inside it yet; the portals are still closed until we're all awake and the quarantine is cleared." Burton was virtually beaming.

"Much more advanced than ours then?" said Hawk, a hint of jealousy in his voice.

"Good God, man, from what I've heard already the thing is unfathomable. I can't wait to see aboard, poke around their fab widgets, it must be like heaven! Well, at least for me."

Hawk smiled at his TO's enthusiasm. "I'll have to catch up later, Officer Burton, I need to find out how the rest of my crew are doing."

"Yes, sir. Captain?"

"Yes, Officer?"

"Did Torrence make it?"

Hawk shook his head and walked out.

A tall woman dressed in dark grey approached Hawk as he made his way to the corridor connecting the ships. "You shouldn't be in here, Jason, go back to your ship."

"Captain Hawk," Hawk replied. No one used first names on a ship unless they were the admiral.

"I'm sorry?"

"Never mind, what can I do for you?"

"My name is Armine. I have a few questions." The woman's uniform covered much of her face, but when she turned her head Hawk could make out long, black hair, and a tattoo on her neck.

"I'm kinda busy at the moment, seeing to my crew."

"Step lightly with those heavy boots, the atmosphere in the tunnel is oxygen rich."

"Where are the rest of my crew?"

"Your crew are being well taken care of. Let us speak for a few minutes."

Hawk couldn't place her accent or features, somewhere between Russia, China, and the Middle East. They walked through the narrow corridor to the small social lounge, passing several crew of both ships examining a pipe behind an opened panel. Hawk made a mental note to check the pipes for bacteria now that Torrence was not there to see to it. "This water dispenser should still work. Plastic mechanism. American." He tapped off two containers of liquid, the liquid still clear despite over a century in space. Armine took the container delicately and they sat in chairs facing each other.

Armine sniffed at the water. "I would like to know more about your mission."

"And why is that?" Hawk took a deep chug of the cool liquid. The ship's reactors had not failed them, there may even be ice at the bar. And scotch.

"Because I suspect we have a common goal. Please, what was your mission, precisely?"

"Is. Our mission is classified."

"As is ours, but we are far from Earth now, I believe there should be no secrets in deep space and given our identical coordinates it is safe to assume our mission is related."

"Let us on your ship then." Hawk sat back and crossed him arms, scowling at Armine.

"In time. When we are assured of no contamination. We were not certain if any of you were alive at all, some even thought your ship a myth, a decadent fantasy of some disgruntled and deneurochemical NASA employee."

"Deneuro- what? If you were worried about contamination you would not be talking to me face to face. Tell me, where are you from, Armine?"

A device on Armine's side flickered for a second. "From Earth, but I suspect your question attempts to extract heritage and thus allegiance. There are few borders now. Territory is somewhat meaningless. I was born in the region historically called the East, though my parents have mixed origin." Armine gave Hawk a piercing, icy stare. Hawk couldn't help himself staring back into her eyes, trying to figure her out.

She gave him a hint of a smile. "NASA is no more. Dissolved. We now have private space exploration, funded by individuals."

"I guess costs have come down or money has gone up. Either way I would really like permission to board your ship,

Armine." The concept of addressing crewmen by their first name was not sitting comfortably with Hawk. A title gave one purpose, but more importantly it stopped people from interfering with each other's job, especially a senior officer. From what he had seen the crew of the Stelaris seemed to switch roles whenever it suited them. He could see the logic in it, the need to have everyone able to do every job, but it still made him feel uneasy, a Jack of all trades polymath was certainly not as experienced as a seasoned deckhand.

"As I have said, Jason, your ship is under quarantine. Until we give you clearance no one should leave the vessel. This is merely a recommendation, of course. We encourage freedom of movement, but of course we have a responsibility to our crew as well."

"Of course. Tell me what is your position aboard the ship again?" Hawk tried to make Armine squirm by announcing her title.

"I am trained as a strategist, primarily. I make psychological decisions that keep the mission on track and my fellows happy. If pressed you might call me an officer, but a title is meaningless in our polygarchy."

"Polygarchy, huh? Well that's a new one for the books. You're full of new words."

"Polygarchy is the new order of Earth."

"Is that right? A polygarchy funded by individuals. Interesting." Hawk finished his water and stood up. The woman reminded Hawk of a staunch communist, though he wondered if China still existed in the same way he remembered.

"Technical Officer Burton would be most grateful to study your ship's technology as soon as..."

Armine stood, leaving her water untouched next to her seat. "That will not be possible," she snapped, and gave an obviously fake smile. "At least not yet. Please give us time."

For someone who believed in freedom and equality she certainly gave firm orders.

Hawk felt that she was hiding something. He probed further. "Is your crew fully stocked, you have enough fuel?" Armine laughed - the first sign of genuine emotion he had seen from a crew member of the Stelaris.

"Of course, Jason. We have vastly superior propulsion and nutrition to your ship. That much I can tell you because it should be obvious."

Hawk tried to catch her off guard. "And your mission, precisely..."

They waited for a full minute, playing the silence game - whoever speaks first loses.

The device on Armine's side flashed again. "Our mission is to minimise risk to our investors by analysing threats. Scientific enquiry, of course. Political showmanship. The usual reasons, nothing too complicated for you to understand, I'm sure."

Hawk was not impressed by her condescending tone. "Please excuse me, Officer Armine, I must see to my crew, make sure they're all recovered." He took some enjoyment in seeing her break character and roll her eyes slightly.

"Yes, Jason. The survivors have recovered, except one who remains comatose. Sarah O'Neal, her tag says. We have no precedent so we can not decide what to do with her."

"Do with her? That's Lieutenant O'Neal!" Hawk's blood boiled but he kept his head. "My crew are all my decision, thank you, Officer Armine." He turned and left the cabin. He suspected the Stelaris crew felt entitled to command

his crew, as if they considered his crew an inferior species that could not take care of itself. Behind him Armine took out the device on her hip and tapped it several times.

Hawk walked on and entered each cabin after knocking, talking to the crew who were still in a state of confusion, patiently explaining the situation to those who asked. Crew members of the Stelaris were scattered around his ship, not one had asked permission to board, but he let it go for now. Some of them appeared to be performing minor repairs along with his own crew.

Entering Operations Officer O'Neal's cabin he was greeted by the sight of the two medical crew leaning over O'Neal's naked body, examining her lying in the stasis chamber.

"Rigel, Abela, what the hell are you two doing? Where are her clothes?" Hawk blushed seeing O'Neal's body lying on her bed so blatantly. His Operations Officer was not an unattractive woman.

One of the two turned to him, Hawk could not tell which, holding a syringe-like object but with no needle. "We are performing a medical check-up. We have tried to revive her but have been unsuccessful thus far. Her status is unusual."

"Put her clothes on for God's sake."

"As you wish, Jason."

Now without their headgear Hawk noticed the two were identical in every way.

"Twins, hey. Well while you are aboard my ship you will address me as Captain and nothing else, do you understand?" The twins glanced at each other, each with an eyebrow raised.

They claim to be doctors, Hawk thought, but since they wear no insignia they could as well be bloody janitors.

The twins covered O'Neal with her bed-sheet, leaving only her head exposed. A tube snaked from her mouth to a machine Hawk had never seen before.

"Alright, let me take a look."

The two bowed their heads slightly and stood aside. Hawk moved to O'Neal's bedside and felt her pulse, remembering the time they had got drunk Earthside after hearing they had been selected and ended up in the fountain of the Hotel Astoria. Hawk reached to the intercom above her head and punched in the number for the doctor's room.

"Doctor, are you there?" The intercom crackled for a few seconds and a familiar voice penetrated the room.

"Yes, Captain."

"I need you in O'Neal's quarters right away. Code 8."

"Yes, sir, code 8 here as well." They had used the phrase Code 8 on Earth when they wanted to speak privately but someone else was present.

A minute later the door opened and Doctor Terry Goddard walked in, clutching his medical bag. Behind him strode a member of the Stelaris that Hawk had not seen before.

"This is... Johnroy... claims to be medically trained."

Doctor Goddard gave Hawk a look of distaste as he pointed his thumb over to the young man. The young Johnroy looked more like a teenager than someone fit for ship work.

"I greet you." The boy gave a shallow bow.

Hawk ignored the boy and turned back to O'Neal.

"Can you bring her around, doctor? Vital signs are normal. I don't know what contraption they have her hooked up to." Hawk gestured at the shoebox-sized device next to Sarah's bed. A colour screen flickered and showed her heart rate and readings Hawk did not understand.

"MultiMonitor," said the young Johnroy, "It performs many monitoring and resuscitation functions. Ask me if you need assistance with it."

Hawk had known the young man only a few seconds and already wanted to punch him in the face. He turned to Goddard. "She's in a coma judging from her blood supply and oxygen levels."

"Indeed." Goddard began taking her pulse and checking under her eyelids. "I'll have to use our equipment and to be frank I don't know how reliable it is after almost a century. Anyway, their machine seems to be doing... something."

"The machine will apply the correct course of action to control the patient, do not be concerned."

"Never trusted an infernal machine, never will," Hawk spat his words. Johnroy blushed, the smile on his face fading. Hawk pointed at the machine, a screen now showing diagrams in a form he was not familiar with.. "Well, what's it doing?"

Johnroy leaned down and touched the screen, the diagrams changed to a live image of O'Neal's beating heart.

"The MultiMon is feeding her a slow anti-static and analysing her brain function, she is responding nominally. Don't worry, Jason, everything is under control." Hawk wanted to hit him, but restrained himself.

"Stay with her as long as you can, doctor, I must see to the crew." Hawk moved to the door. "Thank you Johnroy, we can take it from here."

"But I have instructions to..."

"Thank you Johnroy." He turned to the twins. "Gentlemen." Abela's face flickered for a moment at his words, her hand briefly stroking her hair, but Hawk's voice carried the weight of years of authority.

Rigel stepped in Hawk's way. "One more thing, Jason. We are tethering your ship to the Stelaris and will start a slow acceleration to a higher velocity. I trust this agrees with your crew. We will need assistance from inside your ship to attach the tether. I've requested that our crew member Aramel oversee the union."

"Giving us a tow, hey? That is fine. I'll get our bosun to assist your Aramel. Dismissed."

The two eyed each other, but said finally in unison, "Yes, Jason."

"For the last Goddam time, while you are aboard my ship you will address me as captain, understood?"

"As you wish... captain." The twins glanced at each other once more in silent sibling communication and left the room, Johnroy followed them to the door.

"Johnroy, where is your captain? I wish to speak with him immediately."

Johnroy looked between Hawk and Goddard for a few seconds. "We have no captain, captain. We have no need of a single leader, we all understand our mission." His voice betrayed a hint of sadness. Johnroy turned and disappeared down the narrow corridor after the others.

Hawk sighed and went back to O'Neal's bedside. "I don't like them, twinkle toes or the twins. They're too young to be anything useful," He leaned over and held on to the edge of O'Neal's bed.

"Quite," Goddard said as he pulled out his stethoscope and checked O'Neal's heart-rate, despite the live image showing her heart on the screen. "No protocol. No hierarchy. Like dealing with schoolchildren. Their machine is remarkable though, seems more accurate than anything we have at one tenth the size. We must get on board their vessel ASAP, see

what other medical equipment we can borrow, but I want to talk to their chief medical officer, not some snot-nosed punk."

"Likewise with their captain, some face to face yakking would be welcome, not this juvenile stand-off. We're a circus wagon compared to them and I need to get us ship shape before we continue our mission. Try figure out where the hell we are."

"I thought they said they don't have a captain."

"They're lying. A ship doesn't fly half way across the galaxy without a captain and survive, certainly not with these punks at the helm. Something's up and I intend to get to the bottom of it. Can you summon the crew to the rec room as soon as they've all got their deck legs, with no Stelaris invited?"

"Yes, sir." Goddard tapped his nose a few times in concord and left the room.

Outside O'Neal's cabin Hawk noticed the ship's bosun, Sonia Loibenbock, leaning against the wall twirling her hair while a young Stelarian, no doubt the one they had called Aramel, explained something to her with excited hand gestures and wide eyes. The poor boy probably hadn't seen a short skirt in a hundred years.

"Bosun," Hawk interrupted as he walked past, "make sure there's no hull breach when tethering."

Behind him the bosun stood up straight and put her hands on her hips, shaking her head in amusement. "Aye aye."

DAY 4

"Here's the situation," Hawk addressed his crew, huddled together in the tight space of the rec room, the table

tennis table folded up and pushed back against the wall to make space. "We're mostly okay. Though we lost five good crew, may they rest in peace, our mission is still under way. We've docked with the spaceship Stelaris, as you know, and are awaiting permission to board their vessel. We're also tethered to their hull to increase our velocity as you have probably seen. Keep your ears and eyes peeled, their crew seem friendly enough but we don't know enough about them yet. Report anything unusual to me, any time. I mean it. Don't keep anything back. We've been asleep over a hundred years and by God I know how strange that feels. The world as we know it is gone, no doubt our loved ones too, but I am confident we can fulfil our mission and return to Earth one day, even have a life again. So let's press on."

15 Men and 5 women stared back at him. The best in their field and not one of them earning a cent from this mission. 300 Years back pay with compound interest would bankrupt a small country. His crew had been carefully chosen by a panel of psychologists to be the most suitable for long space travel in cramped conditions, though some were dealing with the experience better than others.

Hawk pulled down a chart detailing their mission. "We're still en-route to Proxima Centauri, the coded signal emanating from this region is still strong. The Message is unchanged since we left. Are there any questions?"

"Sir," ship-swain Henderson stood up and saluted the captain, "how many aboard the Stelaris, sir."

"That is unknown at this time, ship-swain, as are many things about their craft and crew. I can tell you they appear to have highly advanced machinery and medical equipment, and we know of at least twenty who have been on board the

Valiant. By the way, Henderson, you are promoted to third mate in Allen's place."

"Yes sir," Henderson saluted once more and sat back down, frowning at the floor. Allen and Henderson had been good friends.

"McTavish?" Hawk addressed the red-haired woman sitting next to the suddenly Third Mate Allen.

"Sir," she replied, pulling her gaze away from the young man next to her.

"You are promoted to engineer to replace Briggs. Along with O'Hanlon I need you to perform a full evaluation of the ship so that we can travel at full velocity again."

"With respect, sir," O'Hanlon interrupted, "McTavish is hardly qualified to be engineer on this class of ship."

"I am quite qualified, you limp witted leprechaun."

"Eat your haggis."

"Enough!" Hawk's voice bellowed in the small room. "One more outburst and I'll have you both in the brig. O'Hanlon, you will instruct McTavish on her duties. We need everyone focused on the mission, not each other." Hawk eyed bosun Loibenbock who was lost in thought, gazing out the portal to the Stelaris. O'Hanlon looked like he was about to burst out again and Hawk held up his hand to silence him.

"As I said, our mission is unchanged, we're approximately two light years from Earth. The signal from Proxima Centauri is still loud and clear after all this time, the message is still the same as it was when we left. I don't know if that is a good or bad sign, but we will intercept the source of the signal in approximately one year, sooner depending how fast the Stelaris can accelerate us. Our telescope is currently not functioning so see what you can do to get it working as a priority. I will speak with the crew of the Stelaris and find out

if we will get there any faster, or if we must go back into stasis for the final year to save resources. Our recycling plant is working well, but I don't want to leave anything to chance." The crew did not look happy about the prospect of entering stasis once more.

McTavish raised her hand. "How damaged is our exterior, sir?"

"Unknown. We will need two people to perform an extravehicular manoeuvre to investigate."

O'Hanlon responded, trying to raise the stakes on McTavish's comment, "We could ask the Stelaris to do some recon for us. Use their TV gizmos to send us pictures."

"A good idea, but I'm hesitant to betray too much of our weakness at this point. The fact that the Stelaris caught up with us despite launching a hundred years after us tells us that they have at least five times the power we have. We were by far the fastest ship on Earth when we left. We do not know at this time if they are capable of being hostile."

Loibenbock stood up. "Captain, should we befriend them? To find out more information."

Hawk hesitated. "Yes," he conceded. Hawk paced back and forward in front of his crew, "find out anything you can but give away nothing until we know more about them. Understood?"

Loibenbock and the crew voiced their agreement.

"Good. Engineers, continue with the evaluation, everyone assist them where needed. Once the ship is nominal the rest of you take two days rec time to recover, we'll meet here again same time on Earth Friday. Dismissed."

DAY 5

"Captain?" Technical officer Burton's voice crackled through the intercom and the coded light flashed next to his name on the intercom system next to Hawk's desk. Hawk pulled himself out of his bunk and tapped the button. "Go ahead, Officer."

"I need to see you in comms at your earliest. It's to do with the message."

Hawk glanced at the earth-time clock. 2am. He dressed and made his way through the maze of corridors to the comms room.

"What's the news?" He sat down next to Burton at the computer, a Globos 1000 measuring over 6 feet square.

"You mentioned to us that the message had not changed since we launched. Well that's not quite true. I've picked up a harmonic in the signal, perhaps new, or perhaps it was simply not strong enough for us to detect Earthside."

"Tell me you've managed to decode it."

"To a degree. It is a variant of the system from Proxima Centauri, but seems to be from a different source."

"Interesting."

"Disturbing, which is why I woke you. Look." Burton clicked a button on his console and the black and white screen changed to show an arrangement of blocks, each grouped into a 9 x 9 matrix. Under each matrix was a word. ATTACK HELP WARN.

"And you're sure this is the message?" Hawk said uneasily.

"The original dictionary of twenty thousand words is still being broadcast on the primary harmonic, each has a

picture element so I'm fairly certain it is correct. There are some new codes in the message that are not in the dictionary, so I suspect whoever or whatever sent this is not aware of the dictionary or is unable to modify it."

"And the secondary harmonic is still showing the same message?"

"Yes." Burton flipped a switch to show the original message received by Earth in 1955. WELCOME TO SPACE WE RECEIVE FRIEND DISTANT. ENJOY YOUR SIGNAL OF THEATRE AND MUSIC. BUILD SHIP. COME. WE ARE PEACE.

And the plans for the engine and obstacle avoidance calculator that now propelled them through space near one tenth the speed of light.

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Hawk, Goddard, O'Hanlon, and McTavish sat in the officer's lounge, a small room just a few meters square but a private space to discuss mission-critical details.

Hawk waited a few seconds before addressing the others, trying to feel out their mood. "I intend to get on board the Stelaris. The asymmetry of them being all over Valiant but us not authorised to board Stelaris rubs me the wrong way."

"How do you plan to do that?" McTavish asked. "They don't seem too negotiable."

"That's why we're here. I need intel, specs, ideas on how to gain access without being noticed."

"Is that wise? It pains me to say it but right now we need the Stelaris." O'Hanlon sipped his scotch, longing desperately for Irish whiskey.

"I think the risk is relatively minimal, they're not exactly going to court martial us out here. There are just too many questions they are not answering."

McTavish said, "We're docked with the Stelaris at our main hatch only, the secondary and escape hatches are free."

"Possibly, but still too visible, no doubt the Stelaris have many of those television devices on board, who knows what type of sensors."

"We could go in the front door," O'Hanlon said, "their uniforms hide enough of their faces, just dress in grey and stroll over. Remember when we used to do that at the bars in Liverpool?"

"Rubbish," McTavish said.

"I beg your pardon, you flaming backwoods..." O'Hanlon caught the captain's gaze and bit his tongue. "My plan is perfectly reasonable, Officer McTavish."

"I mean the waste system. We eject the waste every week that we can't reuse, why not go along for the ride?" McTavish beamed through her freckles. Hawk had not seen any of the women wear make-up since coming out of stasis, a detail that spoke of the seriousness of their situation.

"You're a daft bugger, McTavish," O'Hanlon raised his glass, "but that is not a bad idea, if it wasn't terminally dangerous and completely impossible." O'Hanlon put down his scotch and shook his head at it, adding under his breath, "Sad."

"Can we fit a waste pod with steering rockets?" Captain Hawk asked.

"You're not serious, captain?" O'Hanlon burst out.

"It's an excellent idea," Hawk replied.

"With respect, captain, are you blooming mad? Even if you got over there without being detected how will you get

inside? The Stelaris is an unknown, they could have all sorts of jiggery pokery on their doors. Guards at every turn."

Hawk crossed his legs and put his fingertips together under his chin. "I am assuming their maintenance entryways are not locked and that they would have a simple system for emergencies. If we can locate an emergency hatch we could gain entry there. I am certain they would not have guards. Even in this age ships will be minimally staffed."

"You've all gone mad. Absolutely bonkers." O'Hanlon shrugged. "Just don't ask me to climb in a loo bucket and jettison into arse-end of a foreign vessel."

McTavish retorted, "We would not expect you to do anything dangerous, O'Hanlon, stay here where it's nice and cosy."

O'Hanlon gave McTavish a fake smile.

McTavish continued, "I did look over the images their Johnny-boy gave us and I think I remember a spot we could enter." McTavish sipped the scotch. "Delicious. Ageing a hundred years in space does wonders for it."

"Let's pretend your idea isn't complete insanity," O'Hanlon conceded, "it might be wise to also make some of their uniforms in case you get spotted. "

Hawk stood, "Good idea. I'll get Sonia on it, she knows her way around the repair kits, there's spare material."

McTavish added, "The tunnel between the ships is wired up with every sensor known to man, one of them almost bit my head off when I scraped a screwdriver in there, said the sparks would activate the airlocks. They are a careful bunch of loonies, I'll give them that."

Goddard spoke for the first time. "Can I ask why this is so important? It makes more sense to wait for them to allow us on board. They can't resist our request forever."

"They might. Because of this." Hawk walked over to his private desk and pulled out a photo taken during the EVM.

Goddard took it and looked up blankly. "What am I looking at?"

"Weapons, forty eight of them. While these two love-birds were strolling outside in the moonlight patching holes in the Valiant they did a scan of the Stelaris."

McTavish added, "We picked up high levels of radiation and electrical activity, which we thought were from our own reactor at first. Those weapons are primed and ready to fire."

"And you're sure they are weapons and not part of their propulsion system?" Goddard asked.

O'Hanlon replied, "Aye. Their propulsion engine is some other system I've never seen before, possibly electromagnetic given how haywire our systems went when we accelerated. We've seen normal steering jets scattered around the craft perform corrections, so yes, these are most definitely weapons."

"I have a bad feeling about them," Hawk said, "but I need to know the truth."

Goddard brooded over the information while the rest left the room to prepare the waste vessel.

DAY 6

"Any radio activity from their side?" Hawk stood over Burton's shoulder while Burton flicked and dialled through every frequency their antenna could detect.

"Nothing I can pick up. There is a lot of radio noise from the engines, could be wrapped up in that. I took a stab at decoding it, if it is a signal it may be modulated, beyond my capabilities I'm afraid. If we got our hands on one of their transmitters we could figure out the schema."

"Or perhaps their hull blocks all electromagnetic radiation to shield them from their own engines, though who knows what it is made from."

Burton flipped a switch and the radar screen glowed for a moment. "Our radar signal reflection is diffused, sir, you may be right."

Hawk and O'Hanlon floated up and pulled themselves into the waste container, the spin of the gravity generator having little effect this far aft.

"Their waste chute is about to open. Ready?"

McTavish asked through the radio.

"Ready," Hawk spoke into the suit microphone.

"Ready," O'Hanlon acknowledged. "Don't kill us, you Scottish bastard."

"Oh aye. I'd rather throttle you myself when you get back. Happy travels."

Hawk felt the waste container float forward. McTavish watched from the tiny portal, the controls for the rockets jury rigged just below it to give her a clear view. She remotely adjusted the flow of compressed gas to aim the vessel at the Stelaris.

The Valiant's waste container, itself made from compressed waste, landed gently against the Stelaris just as the Stelaris waste chute opened. Hawk and O'Hanlon pulled

themselves out of the waste container and up into the hatch as it irised shut, nearly amputating O'Hanlon's leg.

The chute enveloped them in complete darkness, Hawk tapped his helmet to activate the light and O'Hanlon followed suit. Surprisingly the chute was filled with condensation.

"It's a good sign," O'Hanlon said into the radio, waving his hand through the fog, "shows there's direct access to the interior."

They made their way up the narrow chute only slightly wider than their shoulders, until they reached the far wall. Hawk reached out and probed the recesses, looking for any emergency release or hatch.

"See anything?" Hawk felt around for any lever or wheel.

"Nothing yet. McTavish, you hearing us?"

"Roger," McTavish's voice crackled heavily, barely audible through the noise. "Should be something around the door, a hole to put a ratchet in."

"We don't know if they do things that way. A lot has changed, could be strictly mechanical."

"I doubt it, " McTavish spoke loudly to break through the hum of the metal tube. "There are two constants in this universe - getting rid of shit, and basic engineering."

"How much oxygen do we have?" Hawk asked.

McTavish was silent for a few seconds. "About twenty minutes."

O'Hanlon and Hawk pushed and probed around the door. "Featureless," Hawk said, calming his breathing to conserve oxygen, "and now we're trapped."

"Should I get one of the Stelaris crew to come and fish you out, captain?" McTavish asked.

"It pains me to say it, but yes. We'll deal with the apologies later."

O'Hanlon sighed into his suit, causing a small amount of condensation to appear on his visor.

"Wait," Hawk said, "cancel that. McTavish, get Burton on the blower, stat."

"Roger, patching him in now."

"Captain?" Burton's voice crackled. "Where the devil are you?"

"In the waste chute of the Stelaris. Listen, that knowledge machine of yours, do you still have it?"

"You're where? Never mind. I still have it. What do you need?"

"Look up how to access the maintenance port on the Stelaris if you can."

"I'll do my best, but the language is strange."

"You have fifteen minutes before we're dead."

"God almighty, man, hold on."

"O'Hanlon, come back a bit, point your light at the door."

"What is it, captain?"

"The fog. See if you can find a source."

The two men moved their lights around slowly, trying to find a stream of air without disturbing the atmosphere in the chute.

"There, way up in the corner," O'Hanlon pointed off to one side. A whisper of condensation curled into the chamber from a small recess. Hawk and O'Hanlon propelled themselves up and shone their lights on the triangular shaped hole.

"Any diagrams on that world knowledge machine of yours, Burton?"

"Lots of images, sir. Some plans, nothing too detailed. Oh wait, here's a news article about taking care of, well, your business, in space. Hold tight, let me figure this language out."

O'Hanlon pulled out some tools from his EVM toolbelt. "This screwdriver almost fits, if we applied the gripping pliers to the handle we could create a ratchet, should be able to turn the nut inside." O'Hanlon clamped the pliers to the screwdriver and inserted the tip into the hole. He tried to turn the makeshift ratchet in the low gravity while Hawk propped himself at an angle to push O'Hanlon back in the other direction.

"I have a diagram of a waste chute. Looks like there's about ten feet of airlock on the other side of that door."

"Good work. Keep looking, see how we get to the bridge or engineering."

As O'Hanlon turned the ratchet the hatch inched open.

"You'll need to close the outer door again to open the other airlock door," McTavish said.

"Any interior maintenance points, Burton?"

"None that I can see, sir."

"Five minutes of oxygen," McTavish announced.

"Pull, damn you," Hawk gasped at O'Hanlon. The hatch swung open just enough for the two men to enter the airlock.

"Same place, up there," O'Hanlon said and floated up to the small recess. He inserted the ratchet and started turning, this time propping his feet between the narrow walls of the airlock chamber. The outer door inched closed.

O'Hanlon pulled himself to the interior door and started turning the ratchet. His boots slipped against the polished surface of the tunnel. "This one is hard, need your help, captain."

Hawk moved closer, oriented himself at 180 degrees to O'Hanlon and pushed against the ratchet, hoping the American steel wouldn't buckle. The ratchet moved only fraction after their combined effort.

"Three minutes of oxygen."

"Come on, you piece of Stelarian rubbish, open," Hawk commanded the door and put all his strength into turning the makeshift device. The inner door hissed open by a narrow crack as the pressure equalised in the chamber.

"We're inside," Hawk said into his radio.

"Shut off your oxygen," McTavish's voice crackled through the static, "you still need to get back."

They opened their visors and felt the cool, fresh air from inside the Stelaris hit their lungs. The door opened easier now with the pressure equalised. They moved into the dark room beyond the tunnel, the only light coming from the consoles of various machines. The machines hummed and whirred, a pump gurgled liquid into a silver tank. As they exited the door and entered the waste control room they felt the gradual pull of a gravity generator anchor them to the floor. Suddenly the other way up the two took a minute to reorient themselves.

"McTavish, Burton, can you hear us?" Hawk whispered. The silence of the radio confirmed his suspicion that the hull of the Stelaris would block out radio waves. They passed a window and saw the Valiant alongside, the pockmarked hull looking worn and dull after a century in space. Hawk flashed his light on and off several times and was relieved to see a responding flash in Morse code - OK. He flashed his response - Stand by.

They helped each other out of their now heavy EVM suits and stashed them in a compartment next to the gurgling

machine, The exited the room and glanced around the corridor of main ship. Silent. Hawk used his hand to brush down the wrinkles of the grey suit Loibenbock had made and put on the fabric headpiece.

The spacious interior of the Stelaris gleamed in comparison to the tight submarine-like construction of the Valiant, the corridors were wide enough to allow two people to pass without touching. The crew were evidently asleep, no one interrupted their passage, with the exception of a small robot car carrying a tray of food with a transparent lid. The robot waited patiently for them to stand aside before continuing on its way, O'Hanlon plucked a piece of the food from the tray as it glided by and tasted it.

"Tastes like rotten cabbage. Vastly superior nutrition my arse. Want to try?"

"No. Keep your mind on the task at hand."

"Right." O'Hanlon squashed the remaining piece of food behind a service light before rejoining the captain.

"There's a portal, let's ask for directions." Hawk flashed a message to the Valiant with his light, receiving a reply almost instantly. BRIDGE 1 FLR UP. Hawk replied OK and started looking for a stairwell.

"Over here, captain," O'Hanlon whispered. Hawk joined him in the small room just as a crew member turned down the corridor towards them. O'Hanlon touched a button and the lift floated them upwards, opening into a similar corridor.

This time they heard a scream. Hawk and O'Hanlon glanced at each other. Hawk sidled along the wall and peeked around the corner, quickly drawing his head back, then returned his head confident no one was looking in their direction.

In the darkened room Hawk estimated a hundred people were dancing around a central column of gold where a naked figure stood. Hawk recognised the young man, what was his name? Johnroy? The people swarmed around the central column, each dancing figure dressed in black robes from head to toe, they swirled around each other forming a perfect pattern as they danced and chanted in an unfamiliar language. Johnroy stood immobile against the golden pillar, his face contorted in agony while electricity shuddered through him from the golden column.

Hawk pulled his head away from the doorway as one of the figures turned in his direction. Hawk and O'Hanlon edged away from the door and turned in the other direction, looking for the bridge.

A crew member no older than eighteen turned into the corridor and walked towards them without making eye contact, Hawk was relieved to see. They walked past each other without greeting or salute, just two figures dressed in grey on the way to somewhere else.

The wide corridor narrowed, a flickering terminal embedded in the wall showed images and text in a language neither Hawk or O'Hanlon recognised. O'Hanlon stopped in front of it and whispered, "Think we should have a look and see what it can tell us?"

"Tempting, but who knows how these machines are rigged. Let's try to find the bridge, even if we can't gain access there will be other rooms nearby with information for us."

They continued down the narrow corridor past doors with name-tags. A cabin door slid open and a woman exited backwards, a grey sheet wrapped around her body. As the door slid shut she turned around.

"Loibenbock!" Captain Hawk couldn't contain his surprise.

The Valiant's bosun stifled a yell, almost dropping her sheet.

"Captain Hawk, what are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing, bosun. Getting to know the crew?"

"Shhh!" Loibenbock pulled Hawk into the cabin opposite which turned out to be a shower. O'Hanlon looked both ways down the corridor before squeezing in with them. Loibenbock tapped the button next to the door and it slid silently shut.

"Care to explain?" Hawk said, his face close to Loibenbock's, their noses almost touching in the confined shower compartment.

"Aramel asked me to come to his cabin, sir. I thought it a good opportunity to find out more about the Stelaris, sir."

"I bet."

"He works with the ship's computers, he's a valuable asset, tells me everything. Sir, there's something going on here. Their captain, I think he's still on board."

"Captain Hawk," O'Hanlon interrupted, "next time let's just skip the dramatic entrance and get Loibenbock to do recon for us."

Hawk ignored his jibe. "Where is their captain, can you take us to him? Or get your boyfriend to take us?"

"You're crazy, sir."

Hawk waited.

"Fine. I'll ask him. But you have no idea how difficult it was to sneak me on board. If the rest of the crew find out there could be trouble, they don't like him, you see, because

he's against what they're doing. I'm worried for him, though, I don't think they're as passive as they make out to be."

"That much we've figured out. Go ask him. Don't tell him where we are until he says yes."

Sonia sighed and left the room.

The four figures walked quickly through the ship, Sonia wearing a grey and white suit with a headpiece that covered her blonde hair, Hawk in one of Aramel's spare uniforms, O'Hanlon feeling conspicuous in his hand made outfit that had several differences to the Stelarian uniform.

Aramel led them in a twisted route through progressively narrower corridors then down a lift to the lowest floor. He stopped and looked around, touched a control button to open a door. "He's in here."

The large storage room was icy cold, the walls covered in polished metal. Hundreds of large metal crates were stacked on palettes up to the roof. At the back of the room Aramel pulled open a large metal door revealing five translucent chambers containing translucent blue liquid. Two containers were empty, three contained figures floating like seaweed in the liquid.

Aramel pointed to the central figure. "This is our captain. Tanaka."

"Is he alive?" Bran asked, trying to see inside the cloudy container.

"Usually this is where we keep prisoners, but instead of a cell the prisoner is made static until he can be dealt with. These static chambers are used for storing food, humans, so over a few years a person's brain slowly dissolves. To answer your question, I don't know. He has been here for many years."

O'Hanlon tapped against the stasis pod, trying to figure out what it was made of. "Who are the other two?"

"The captain's aides, Shima and Shibu. They tried to defend him from the crew. Both were forcibly ceased."

Hawk wiped condensation from the front of Tanaka's clear container, finally catching a glimpse of the man's frozen grimace. "Get him out of here, God dammit."

"It is not so simple, I have some medical knowledge but only our medical experts can fully restore their function."

"Rigel and Abela."

"Yes."

O'Hanlon examined the container, crouching down to look for any sign of electronics or pumps. The engineers must have cunningly integrated the system in the shell. "Tell me, what's their deal?"

Aramel looked perplexed. "I don't understand."

"I mean are they brother and sister, or what?"

"Clones, sir. Made from the same genetic material."

"I see. A medical experiment."

"You could say that. They do not have parents in the traditional sense, they were grown to term in a laboratory static chamber on Earth."

Hawk shook his head. "Good God, what has the human race become? Look, can we stop the chit chat, we need to get this man out of here. Can this contraption of yours be transported?"

"Captain," O'Hanlon stood up, "you don't mean to... kidnap him?"

"That's exactly what I intend to do."

Aramel said nervously, "I will help you, but I want to leave the ship, sir. I will join you."

"You mean defect? Are you aware what a political can of worms you'll be opening up? Assuming there is still any form of politics when we get back."

"Please sir," Loibenbock spoke up, looking Hawk in the eye, "the situation here is bad. I was actually going to smuggle Aramel into my cabin. And tell you later, of course."

Aramel grasped Hawk by the arms, breaking the Stelarian policy of no contact. "You must help me, these people... there is something wrong with them. They're convinced they are being led by a higher power and use that to justify anything they do. Some of my friends who stood up to them have been made an example of. I don't want to tell you what the crew did to them, it is too gruesome."

"We saw dancing earlier, there was a person tied to some goddam electric generator. Is that what's happening?"

"Johnroy. He questioned the wisdom of having no leader. They are putting him under trial today, if he survives their torture then they will consider him innocent, but no one has yet survived what they do. We have no law here, can't you see? If I stay here longer they will kill me as well, or worse." Aramel glances at the figures floating in blue liquid.

Hawk read the angst in his voice and his eyes, knowing they must act quickly.

"We must get Tanaka to the waste room where we entered. Aramel, help us disconnect him from the wall."

Aramel showed O'Hanlon where to pull levers next to the captain's stasis pod, it clicked and came loose from the wall. They lowered the pod carefully to a horizontal position.

"This thing's heavy. Aramel, you said you were a computer operator. Can you get that food car robot to help us carry?"

"Yes. It is actually my program that runs it."

Aramel tapped on a console on the wall and within a minute the robot appeared outside the door. The four lifted the pod on to the food robot which took the weight with ease, and with the food car leading the way they worked their way to the waste room.

Hawk retrieved their EVM suits from the compartment. "We'll need more thrust to propel the extra mass. O'Hanlon, attach my suit's rockets to Tanaka's stasis pod. McTavish can steer it back to the Valiant."

"I can do that sir, but what will you use? You don't intend to travel inside the pod with him, do you?"

"No. We'll use your original idea – walk through the front door. But I need you to escort Tanaka back in secret until we're safely back, got it?"

"I understand, sir."

They loaded Tanaka into the airlock, easier now because of the limited effect the gravity generator had at this extreme end of the ship. O'Hanlon plugged in the suit's emergency tube and transferred the remaining oxygen in Hawk's suit to his. "I should have ten minutes to cross back to the Valiant with our friend here. Plenty of time."

"Aramel, can you operate the airlock without alerting the crew?"

"Yes, of course." Aramel tapped at the console next to the airlock and the doors began their cycle.

Hawk helped O'Hanlon manoeuvre the stasis chamber into the airlock. "See you on the other side, officer."

O'Hanlon gave Hawk a quick salute before disappearing behind the closing door. Aramel tapped the console again and they heard a hiss as the airlock depressurized. A video image of the outer door appeared on the console.

"They are clear of the outer door. I'm closing the door."

"Good. Okay, let's get the hell out of here."

They took the lift up to the top floor; Aramel led them back along the corridors to the front of the ship. As they passed the room near the bridge they could still hear Johnroy's trial of torture. It pained Hawk to leave the man here unaided but one hundred to three was not odds he would risk.

As they approached the airlock where the transfer tunnel connected with the Valiant they heard running footsteps behind them.

"Who is that?" A familiar voice called out.

Aramel turned around. "We are on our way to examine the Valiant's computer system." Aramel's voice faltered as he spoke.

"We have no plans to inspect that old machine. Who is that with you? Turn around."

Hawk and Loibenbock turned. Hawk smiled, "Armine. Lovely to see you again. Your geek here is helping us wire up a radio, that way we can talk directly, since our signals seem to be so incompatible."

"That is not necessary. How did you get on board?"

"We asked the man at the door. He said it wouldn't be a problem. Since you have no need of a leader we assumed he spoke for the ship."

Hawk relished the sight of Armine squirming under his gaze, the concept of white lies unfamiliar to her psyche. Their path to freedom lay just a few feet behind them.

Hawk continued, "We'll speak again soon. I'd love to stay and chat but you know us, work work work." He turned and motioned the others to continue.

"Jason," Armine raised her voice but Hawk ignored her. "Hawk. Captain Hawk. Stop."

"Sorry, have some important work to do."

"I order you to stop."

"I don't take orders from unranked civilians, Armine." Hawk turned and smiled at her.

Armine screamed at them as they reached the airlock and Aramel punched the cycle button on the console. Hawk made a mental note of the position of the button, trying to stay calm while several more crew of the Stelaris came running.

"Jason. Stop please." One of them shouted.

"Stop now." This time Hawk recognised Rigel. Or Abela.

"I have an important meeting. Can't stay to yak."

"You will stop."

Hawk waved at them through the window as the airlock closed. Aramel typed furiously on the keypad. "They've locked the outer door."

"Can you open it?"

"I am trying. I've locked the inner door for maintenance."

"Good man. Try the same on the outer door."

"Already doing that, captain."

Hawk patted him on the shoulder. They heard fists pounding against the airlock door. The Stelaris crew were getting angry.

"Got it. Hurry. They're shutting down the system, it will close the doors."

The outer door irised open, the four ran down the corrugated tunnel between the ships, losing grip and drifting forward as the gravity effect faded out. They pulled themselves towards the Valiant along the rungs mounted inside the

connecting tunnel. The door of the Valiant hinged open with a creak and Hawk sighed with relief when he saw O'Hanlon grinning at him from within.

"Lock it. Now." Hawk ordered as Loibenbock and Aramel pulled their way into the Valiant's airlock. Hawk followed them inside.

"Can we de-pressurize the tunnel from our side?"

"Not sure," O'Hanlon admitted.

"Wait," McTavish walked up behind them, "I have an idea." The engineer pulled out a small cigar box from her jacket pocket and from it drew her gold lighter. "Sorry, old friend," she said, flipping the lighter open with a spark and throwing it into the tunnel just before the airlock door closed. An alarm sounded in the tunnel.

Behind them they heard the hiss of the inner airlock opening and several crew pulled them into the ship.

Hawk watched through the portal window as the tunnel retracted to the Stelaris. "Did our guest survive the jump?"

"Still alive inside his stasis chamber as far as I can tell," Goddard said. "Now do you mind telling me what the devil is going on?"

DAY 7

Hawk instructed the officers and bosun to assemble in the private meeting room. Loibenbock sat next to Aramel, unashamedly resting her hand on his leg.

Hawk said, "Goddard, any luck in reviving Captain Tanaka?"

"I'm working on it."

Hawk paced the room. "They will discover their captain is missing soon enough, if they haven't already."

"Not necessarily, captain," Aramel replied. "The food service is automated. It could be weeks before someone enters that room and discovers Tanaka is missing. The crew do not like to come into contact with basic utilities, anything that could infect stasis."

"And your television devices?"

"Surveillance? We have not monitored security cameras since the mutiny. The crew believe in unmonitored freedom. They hold honesty as their primary ideal."

"Then that could be our greatest advantage at the moment, but if they decide to attack they could destroy us in seconds."

"Again, not necessarily," Aramel responded. "They have weapons, but only the captain and his aides can unlock them. As far as I know there are no personal weapons on board."

Hawk relaxed and sat down. "The captain knew his crew then. How many others will be able to bypass the locks on the ship's weapons?"

"Besides myself and the captain's aides, the two who ceased in the static pods, perhaps one or two others, but it will take them time. The procedure is complex." Aramel looked around the room, all eyes were on him.

"Can you help Goddard revive Captain Tanaka?"

"Possibly, sir. Is the multimoon still on board?"

"Yes," Goddard replied. "Still hooked up to O'Neal, though. No change in her condition, despite what their so-called experts said."

"Dammit." Hawk steepled his fingers. Revive the captain and gain great leverage against the Stelaris and possibly save his crew, sacrificing O'Neal, or wait for his second in command to possibly come out of her coma and risk annihilation from the Stelaris?

"How fast are we travelling now?" Hawk asked.

"Almost back at full speed thanks to the tow from the Stelaris," McTavish replied.

"We're still tethered, though," O'Hanlon said. "We could detach at any time, the connection is fragile. A sudden thrust in any direction will snap it."

The intercom buzzed. "Doctor Goddard, Burton here."

"What is it, Burton?"

"It's O'Neal. She's woken up. Better get up here fast."

Hawk and Goddard left the meeting room, half-running to the first officer's cabin with the others in tow.

O'Neal sat upright in her bunk, no expression on her pale face, her eyes unblinking in the low light. Burton sat on the chair next to her bed.

"What's the matter with her?" Hawk asked.

"O'Neal, can you hear me?" Goddard snapped his fingers in front of her face. "O'Neal!"

The first officer remained silent and continued to stare desolately from her empty grey eyes.

Hawk's blood boiled. "If they've done something to her, I swear, I'll..."

Goddard pulled the tube from her throat, the end, a bulbous, fly-eyed device, twisted like a Medusa in his grasp.

"Good God, put that thing down," O'Hanlon said while Goddard continued to try and get a response from O'Neal. She blinked, but otherwise remained motionless.

"Is she still comatose?"

"I don't know. She's breathing normally, her pupils are dilating. Give her a few minutes."

Goddard picked up the multimom. "Aramel, take this to Tanaka so long, I've set him up in the medical bay, Loibenbock will show you the way."

The two left while the doctor checked O'Neal's vitals. "She's stable. Seems to be out of the coma." He gently pushed her back down onto the bed.

"Let's leave her to get some rest. She may be in shock from whatever chemicals the Stelarians pumped into her bloodstream."

"Can we get him out of the liquid?" Goddard asked Aramel.

"Yes, it is just a preservative. The static tube takes care of his requirements."

They pulled the captain from the static pod, the blue liquid splashing on to the floor of the medical bay and down the drains in the floor. Aramel pulled the tubes from the captain's throat and they lowered him onto the bed. Goddard inserted the multimom's compound tube down Captain Tanaka's throat and immediately the device started flashing messages.

"What does it say?"

"Some intrachranial pressure, fractured wrist, otherwise he will be okay. I'll set the machine to bring him up from static, it will take about ten minutes."

"Incredible," Goddard said, "ours takes over a day to revive someone in stasis, or static as you call it."

"Our static system completely shuts down a person's metabolism and neural activity, unlike the old stasis system that merely slowed it down."

"I see now," Goddard said, checking the captain's vitals. The captain woke slowly, groaning and clutch his head while the machine worked internally to repair damage.

"It is telling his body to repair itself, we have nano helpers already within us that we use for repair, unlike the old humans. This is how we can be shut down completely."

"Unlike us old humans who bleed to death pretty easily," Goddard said.

"And died so young," Aramel added.

"Are you telling me people have longer lifespans now?"

Aramel tapped the multimon and adjusted the flow of chemicals entering Tanaka, causing the captain to breathe more deeply. "When we left Earth the average lifespan was one hundred and eighty years. Longevity was the biggest technological breakthrough since the computer revolution. It could be longer now, for those who can afford it."

"I always wondered why extending life was never a priority. Instead we focused on waging wars."

"You lived in a barbaric age. Is it true primitive humans believed they lived after dying, so no importance was placed on death? Robots ended most wars, opened borders, decentralized industry.

"I guess so. Robots, hey, fascinating. Wish I could go back and see all the changes." Goddard began cleaning Tanaka's eyes and nose, noticing a strange texture to the skin, as if the entire surface had become scar tissue.

Aramel stood back. "You would be a fascinating creature for them too, a living dinosaur. You can look forward to a hero's return."

"A dinosaur, hey?"

"Of course it is not too late to extend your life."

Captain Tanaka sat on the edge of the unfamiliar bunk, surrounded by strange figures.

"You're fine now, captain. Take deep breaths,"

Goddard said, taking the man's pulse directly from his skin. He would never get used to these machines, they removed physical contact and compassion he considered the cornerstone of medicine.

Hawk explained the situation to Tanaka, though if he understood he gave few clues. "As far as we know your crew don't know you're here and we'd like to keep it that way."

Tanaka nodded, his voice croaked, "My head. It broke." The Stelaris captain tried to stand but stumbled back onto the bed.

"Captain," the intercom crackled, "The Stelaris is contacting us on the radio, should I patch them through?"

"Go ahead." Hawk looked at Tanaka and held a finger to his lips, signalling Tanaka to stay quiet. Tanaka nodded solemnly.

"This is Captain Hawk, go ahead Stelaris."

"Captain, we have been trying to contact you. It seems our digital harmonic systems are incompatible with your antique radio." Armine cut her words into clipped pieces.

"I'm so glad you have fixed the incompatibility, officer Armine. We seem to be talking just fine now, with our antiques." Any sarcasm was lost on the Stelarian.

"You will return our crew-member immediately or face serious consequences."

"Negative, Stelaris. Aramel has emigrated and under section, uh, 91 of the interstellar code he is entitled to asylum." Goddard shrugged his shoulders at Hawk's lie. Armine paused for a few seconds.

"Perhaps that was the law when you were on Earth, James, but that is no longer the case. We will give you thirty minutes to return the crew member."

"Negative, Stelaris."

"This is my final warning."

"And then what, you'll open fire on an unarmed military vessel with all 48 nuclear warheads? I don't think so."

"We will require only one."

"Even if you were that stupid you wouldn't be able to launch it because we have booby trapped all your weapons. In case you are unfamiliar with that colloquialism it means that if you fire a weapon it will detonate before it leaves the ship. We've been secretly boarding your ship since you woke us, or did you think we would leave you with an advantage?" Hawk noticed McTavish and O'Hanlon's raising their eyebrows at his bluff, heard the officers lean forward in their chairs, but he continued. "The real revelation here is I figured out what it is you really need from us."

It seemed like the entire ship had gone silent.

"We need nothing from you."

"I wondered why you bothered to wake us from stasis, or even dock with us at all with our primitive capabilities, potentially a drain on your resources. The truth is you are heading to an alien system for the first time in human history and don't know what to do. There's no book that teaches you courage. You need a captain."

"We are a polygarchy, we..."

"Bullshit, and you know it. You all have technical skill but no knowledge. You're all leaders in your field but have no leadership. That's why you can't attack us. Your own system is eating you alive from the inside, you've got too many people making decisions and it's pulling you apart."

More silence from the Stelaris.

"So tell me, Armine, why exactly do you have 48 nuclear warheads?"

"A safety measure, you should know that."

"And what exactly are you hoping to destroy, an entire planet? Because 48 warheads, even old antique ones, could wipe out the entire Earth."

"That is classified." Armine's voice was clipped

"This is not the time for secrets. I'm guessing that your orders come from your investors, not from any ethics committee. Earth buys weapons for two reasons, to protect its people or to protect its business interests. I suspect a little of both in this case, or at least using the fear of one to justify the other. Am I correct?"

"I do not think that you understand Earth as it is now, James... Captain Hawk... our sole purpose is our economy, not any of the romantic notions of scientific endeavour you grew up with."

"You mean the Earth as it was. It may have changed again since you left, officer Armine. Become a dictatorship."

"That is not possible."

"Anything is possible in politics, empires rise and fall, but one thing remains constant, the fear of losing money. You were sent as sacrificial lambs to destroy any chance of alien contact. Not to protect Earth, to protect your investors."

"We received a hostile message from Proxima Centauri and will deal with the situation."

Hawk leaned back and put his hands behind his head, trying to figure out the mystery of the second message. "You received a cry for help. Possibly a decoy, we don't know. Neither of us does."

"You are incorrect in your assumptions. Our radio telescopes see a great deal of the Centauri system. After Earth received the new signal we created a powerful radio telescope and pointed it at the system. The results were of great interest. Perhaps if you return our crew member we can share the images of what we saw."

"Return him to what, some barbaric ritual of blood?"

"I assure you he will be given a just trial, he is a mutineer, after all. You should not interfere in our ways. They are as different to you as no doubt the Centauris are to both of us."

"Look, it doesn't matter. I will not allow you to torture an innocent man, no matter what your ways are."

"And you are willing to sacrifice your ship for one man."

"One ship? I would risk an entire fleet to save one good man." Hawk pushed the intercom button on his chair hard, wishing he could talk face to face.

"A heroic image, a classical image even, relevant in front of the news cameras of your time, but I do not think you will be so naive when pressed. An old captain serves his investors to protect the ship just as much as any modern investor protects his investment."

"Armine," Hawk sat back in his chair, "we are getting nowhere. Put me in command of both ships and I will deal with the Centauris in a way that protects all of us, and our investors."

After our mission is complete you return as Captain, or whatever it is you are now, and we go back to Earth."

"I don't see the point of going back to a planet so different that it is no longer home, captain Hawk." Goddard and O'Hanlon caught the subtext in her words, but also the title. Hawk had won her over, she just had to realise it before she blew them all to kingdom come.

"You can build whatever home you like when you get back. Start again. If we have something in common then it is that our home is now a very different place."

The Valiant crew heard Armine have a discussion with her crew in a language they were not familiar with.

Armine asked, "I have told you our real mission, now tell me your real mission."

"To investigate Proxima Centauri and if possible initiate trade relations to benefit the heirs of our investors, or our investors if they are still alive. As simple as that. We have no weapons."

"Then why send real people when radio is so much more convenient, so much safer?"

"Given the time constraints it would take centuries to negotiate any kind of treaty. We were invited, we responded. And we were curious." Hawk said.

"You were curious, so you risked the lives of your crew. Why then did the Centauris not come to Earth?"

"I suspect they are afraid of leaving. The plans they sent us show they are an advanced species. We don't know what they look like, if we will even recognise them as living creatures. But perhaps they suffer from the same intellectual affliction we do – the inability to take risk, because to know things means to know what can go wrong. They do not want to risk the journey."

"You may be correct, but they did send a warning signal." Armine's voice had changed, softened with a hint of despair. The approaching rendezvous meant things would have to change.

"They did, and we should take it seriously. Which is why we need to stick together. Do you agree?"

"For now."

"No more torturing crew. No more demands. And I will tell your engineers how to safely deploy your weapons when we near Centauri, should the need arise."

Armine spoke with her crew before returning to the intercom. "We agree to that, though we will maintain our structure, you will not be captain of Stelaris. We will, however, consider your recommendations as an experienced leader."

"It's a start. Let us focus on the mission."

"I agree. We would like to send you a video device so that we can communicate better."

Hawk was about to agree when Aramel touched his arm, shook his head, and whispered in Hawk's ear, "Even a small device can spy on the entire ship, or worse."

Hawk nodded. "That will not be necessary, we will continue to use radio for now, Armine."

Burton walked in the door and motioned the captain to step outside.

"What is it, Burton? I'm in the middle of an important negotiation."

"We've received a message sir, from the Centauri's. A direct message."

"And?"

"You'd better come, captain."

Hawk signalled O'Hanlon to end the communication with the Stelaris and followed Burton not to the

communication room but to O'Neal's cabin. "What is going on, man?"

"Listen."

O'Neal sat upright in her bunk. Her voice whispered words in an accent so thick it was almost unrecognisable.

"...welcome you to my system," O'Neal whispered. "my analysis reveals dangerous artefacts on your craft and I wish you to stop."

"Can you hear me?" Hawk asked O'Neal, or whatever was in control of her. He turned to Burton and whispered.

"How are they doing this?"

"We're about 1 light month away, Captain. And I have no idea."

"But they know about the nukes on the Stelaris. I assume they have contacted the Stelaris as well."

"Our radio communication, unlike the Stelaris digital system, is not encrypted. We are not shielded as they are. No doubt the Centauris picked up our conversations, or have some other way of scanning us, perhaps a remote base with a relay, who knows."

"If you can hear me, please respond," Hawk said. A full minute passed.

"I can hear you."

"My name is Captain Jason Hawk. We come in peace."

Another minute passed.

"I have learned much from your transmissions and from information gathered from the one called O'Neal."

Hawk whispered to Burton, "Get Armine on the blower and tell them to wait on any decision until we negotiate with the Stelarians."

"Aye aye, captain," Burton replied and left to speak to the Stelarian crew.

"Centauri, you have my word, the devices you detect are not harmful."

O'Neal's eyes never blinked, her breaths perfectly regular, though timed strangely in between the words. "You will deliver them to me."

The two ships slowed their approach, their journey through space towards Proxima Centauri brought individual planets into focus, some rock, some gas, though none appeared to have an Earth-like atmosphere. Communication between the ships remained limited to mission information and status updates, no more mention was made of the defected Aramel.

Aramel gave the crew of the Valiant information about the Stelaris, enough to prove his worth to Hawk, who enlisted him to assist Burton as communication officer.

Captain Tanaka moved in secret through the Valiant, his mental faculties slow to recover from months in the food pod. He avoided portals that faced the Stelaris, helped with simple tasks like food production and recycling, a refugee from his own ship.

Every day Hawk waited for Armine to burst on the radio and ask about the missing captain, but either they had not investigated the static chamber or chose not to confront Hawk about it. The strange communication through O'Neal became less delayed, more immediate with every light hour that passed.

The engineers and bosun restored their telescope and radio imaging equipment. In a few weeks Aramel upgraded

their low energy radio telescope to analyse a broader range of signals using spare parts salvaged from broken equipment. Though Hawk thought the device a work of genius, Aramel assured him it was standard faire for even a junior space engineer. The upgraded radio telescope revealed more detail about the Proxima system.

“Can this thing find out which planet has an atmosphere?” O’Hanlon asked Aramel.

“None detected so far. If there is a habitable planet it is different from ours, or hidden in some way.”

Proxima Centauri was similar to Earth’s solar system in many ways. Several planets orbited a sun, including scattered fields of debris that distorted their attempts at continuous observation.

“What about the signal, have you located the source?”

"It appears to be originating from a base near the seventh planet. Perhaps we could ask them about it directly."

Hawk sat next to O'Neal's bed, both appalled and amazed at her transformation. His once friend reduced to little more than an intergalactic radio.

"Centauri, we have your signal location. Estimated arrival in two of your days. Is this the location?" Hawk held up a diagram showing the location of the base. O’Neal’s eyes blinked and focused on the diagram.

"This is my location."

"How many are you?" Hawk was hesitant to use the word 'people'.

"I am Centauri. We were separate once, but I am a single entity now. The base you see is not a construction, it is my body."

Hawk watched the incoming video feed as they approached. The giant creature glinted in the light of Proxima's sun, its surface vast and uneven. Any casual observer would mistake it for a large asteroid.

"The one you are speaking through, O'Neal, will she return to normal?"

"It was quicker to speak through your O'Neal, though our proximity now allows your primitive radio. Follow the seventh harmonic."

Hawk signalled Burton, "Get on it."

"Your individual O'Neal will not recover from her neural damage easily, though I can still access many of her thoughts."

Hawk did not know to what extent the Centauri had control over O'Neal's mind. "Is there anything you can do to help her?"

"It is more efficient to allow the O'Neal to decay and retain the information contained within it."

"She is more than information to us, Centauri. Please do not allow her to decay if you have that power."

"I have copied her information. It will not be lost. The genetic material is easily replaced."

"We don't think that way, Centauri."

Behind them O'Neal slumped back down in her bunk, groaning and thrashing in the bed. The life support machine beeped rapidly. Goddard rushed to medicate her and attach the MultiMon that he had now mastered.

"I have the Centauri on the radio, captain," Burton announced on the intercom.

"Thank you, Burton."

"Centauri, your third harmonic warned us of a threat. Is the threat still imminent?"

"I have not sent this harmonic." The Centauri paused for a few seconds. "The message originates from your vector."

"Could you elaborate on that?"

"I detect your third harmonic emanates from your ship, the message travels in the opposite direction to Centauri's message."

Hawk sat back in the chair. "What the devil?" He said to Burton. "Find out what you can about that rogue signal."

"Which ship, Centauri, can you tell? We are two ships."

"The concept is unfamiliar. Why two ships when one will perform efficiently?"

"We individuals have complex motives. Let me say that our ship comes in peace, but I am not sure about our companion." Hawk realised immediately that he had made a mistake.

The Centauri responded, "It is more efficient to copy your information and remove any threat."

"We are peaceful, Centauri. I imagine you have the power to destroy us, and if you did indeed consider us a threat would have done so already."

The Centauri clicked a few times on the radio. "You are peaceful yet also not peaceful. Two ideas. An unnecessary complexity."

"I will not allow our companion ship, the Stelaris, to pose any threat. I only wish to explain that their initial motive may not have been as peaceful, but under my consultation they have changed their mind."

"Centauri has one mind. One desire."

"I understand, but try to see the situation from our point of view. I can only imagine how vast your intelligence is, this should be easy for you."

"Centauri encompasses all intelligence. I will consider your words out of curiosity."

Hawk had found a seed, the Centauri creature had retained something like pride and vanity since becoming one creature and it thirsted to expand its knowledge. A valuable negotiation tool.

"Centauri, even though we have small minds, together they create vast knowledge. We could share our ideas. Trade our resources."

"The objects I detected are nuclear material in significant quantities. I require such material."

"We could trade the material for information. For diplomatic relations."

"I have no need to share information as exchange. I wish the nuclear material."

"I assume you have the power to take it."

"Centauri has great power."

"Or do you? I think I understand why you had to bring us here. You can't move. You're trapped in the body you have become. You spent so much time consuming yourself that you forgot to consider what would happen if you succeeded. Do you want the material so that you can travel? The opportunities to expand your knowledge are no doubt limited."

"My Sun will die soon, expanding and consuming me. It is inefficient to allow information to die with it."

"We can trade. A new and interesting concept perhaps. An exchange of unlike commodities."

"An exchange, yes. But I know of the idea your species calls dishonesty. Perhaps you wish to destroy me like

your kind have destroyed much of yourselves. Inefficient. I do not know if you are honest."

Hawk thought about the lie he told Armine to prevent them from deploying the nukes. There would be no use in hiding it from a creature that saw everything, remembered everything.

"I am an honest and trustworthy person, Centauri, or I would not be appointed captain of such an important mission created just to see you. Sometimes I am compromised when my crew's lives are endangered, but I am willing to prove my honesty in important matters by donating a small sample of the material you require without trade. We can build our trade and trust for one another one piece at a time. You will have your mobility and we will have some of your scientific knowledge. We will grow together and explore space. Your ability to control O'Neal and your immortality will be of particular interest to our people."

"That is inefficient. Send all the material. If you are an honest being."

What did the creature want? Hawk decided to up the stakes, to treat the Centauri as if it were a king on Earth. "Centauri. You are great and powerful. You are immortal. We live only a hundred years, but we have a great supply of nuclear material ready to use. An almost unlimited supply. Time is to your advantage, not ours. Sometimes we must make compromises to achieve our goals. To be free."

The planet-sized creature was silent for a full minute and the officers of The Valiant waited with baited breath. Hawk imagined a fantastic inner dialogue taking place within the continents of the creature's mind. How many compartments of thought did it possess, or was it really a singular mind? The

strange lilting voice filled the room once more. "A sample then. Send it."

"Give us a few days to prepare it. A small unit of time."

"Very well."

McTavish spoke quietly, despite switching the intercom to silence. "Captain, you don't intend to offer the Centauri some of our reactor core? We're in short supply as it is."

"No. I intend to send it one of the Stelarian nukes to prove we are an honest and trustworthy species."

"And just how in bloody bleeding hell do you intend to get your hands on one of their nukes?"

Hawk smiled. "I intend to steal it."

THE END