

---

# ***Displaced***

~

**Nick Jenkins**

---

First published 2012 by  
Amazon/CreateSpace  
ISBN 978-1-478-18529-1

Copyright © 2009 Nick Jenkins

[www.nickjenkins.net](http://www.nickjenkins.net)

**Already published on Amazon/Kindle:**

*Gates of Hades*

**Upcoming books :**

*Insurrection (vol 2)*

*Point-of-View*

*For my Mum who loves life...  
...and a good argument!*



---

# 01

He stared moodily into the flames.

The fire, he thought, was an affectation. But, what wasn't? The wood on the walls, his thin greying hair, the walking cane, they were all deception, a sham.

He ran a hand through his hair. He could have had the physicians see to it but perversely he'd kept it. He like to think it gave him a certain dignity, an air of authority - even though times had changed.

He remembered a time when men of will ruled the affairs of humankind. Where decisions were made and action taken. A time of breathtaking movement and energy. But that was a distant past. Now it was bureaucracy and consensus, mediocrity and spin. Nothing changed and people supported the status quo because they were comfortable. Fear of the unknown made them complacent.

It rankled with him and itched like a sore.

Stability was weak however, unnatural and temporary. He knew this. Mankind was inherently destructive and he could already see the cracks in the seams of this monolithic culture. Drive a little wedge in here and another in there and the whole thing would split apart like an overripe fruit. But he needed to find the lever with which he could move the world.

He had the energy.

His will was strong, not as passionate as it once had been, but tempered to cold steel by decades of ennui. His will would be the hammer to drive the change, but he still needed a wedge, a spark to set the fire.

---

He looked at his own fire again. It was a fake, of course. A hologram and a radiant photon arc. Who would lift dead plant matter all that way just to burn it? He kept it because he liked it and because it made other people nervous. For those born to space and the oxygen-pure atmosphere of the habitat, fire was a deadly enemy; a naked flame unthinkable.

He kept it to remind them that he was a naked flame too.

For him the fire was a reminder of a distant home and a bitter exile. He threw his glass angrily at it. The elegant vitriglass beaker caromed off the wall and sprayed amber fluid across the room. The hologram clicked off, as if affronted, and he was left in silence.

Droplets hesitated and tumbled down in slow motion, splashing against the floor. A waste of good whisky but the anger felt better, it made him feel alive.

He realised he was breathing heavily, even in the light gravity, and he willed himself to peace. He tucked away his nugget of anger like a precious thing and sat down slowly. His body was old, but not so old that it wouldn't last to see this thing through.

He would set the fire but he might not be able to control it. He would set things in motion, prepare his people and wait for the right opportunity. When it presented itself they would strike and the world would change. Then they would ride out the storm. He might not live to see the change but his legacy would outlive him and his people would see it to the end.

He looked at the ceiling. "Could you come in here, please?" he said to the air.

There was a murmured response.

It was nearly time to set things in motion.

All he needed was the spark.

---

# 02

Beyond the Kuiper belt, where comets lurk, planetary systems are cold and dark. The primary's feeble rays rarely stir the temperature above sixty degrees Kelvin and the density of interstellar gas drops to a single atom of ionised hydrogen for every cubic metre of void. Out here, against the coal-black, a white-hot spark flares. It builds into a fiery star and dwindles to a steady flame, trailed by a plume of gas.

It looks a little like an inbound comet, trailing a feathery white tail some ten million kilometres long.

But the glowing ember is too hot, too bright and it pulses with a steady and regular rhythm. The tail points the wrong way too, inwards towards the heart of the solar system. A comet trails its plume behind it, from the pressure of the solar wind streaming out of the primary, ablating its surface as it plunges inwards on its orbit. A tail pointing the other way indicates the object is decelerating, slowing to a planetary orbit.

Ahead of it are two possible destinations, both huddled close to the feeble red sun.

The first is rocky and barren, its surface scarred by the too-close attention of the primary. Nothing stirs here and the surface temperature is enough to melt lead. The second is positioned better, with a regular orbit that keeps the temperature within manageable limits, but it is only slightly more hospitable than the first.

The flame is now only forty-four million kilometres away. Deep within its heart there is a nugget of metal, three hundred metres across and a kilometre long. It has an unusual heart, an incredibly thin shell around a hollow core. Inside the temperatures are more

---

hospitable, around one hundred degrees Kelvin, and there is a complicated web of metal pathways and the faint spark of biological life, almost imperceptible.

The 'comet' burns its fiery tail for the better part of a year, homing in on the not-very-habitable planet. A trickle of electrons courses through channels etched in silicon and jump an N-P gap, kicking off an exponential cascade. The temperature rises fractionally and a thin mix of nitrogen, oxygen and argon begins to seep into the core. Electrons feed other parts of the ship, rousing dormant systems to life. Fans stir the atmosphere and coils warm the air. Lights flicker and corroded circuits spark and flare.

The fire flickers off the frosted surface of ten glass coffins which guard the periphery of the room like soldiers on parade. Pressure and temperature build slowly, fractionally, until they reach a stable 295 Kelvin at ninety newtons per square metre. The caskets mist over and within each of them a flicker of life stirs. Deep inside the machine a logic gate ticks over and the doors of all the caskets swing open silently.

A jolt of electricity ignites nine dormant human minds.

~

Hari Simran Singh was slick. His ancestry gave him brown eyes and dusky skin and a look that a romance novel would describe as "tall, dark and handsome". Hari knew it. He worked to keep his figure trim, his style in fashion. His romances were short, frequent and carefully managed. He never bruised egos, never grew too attached and they always parted as friends. Nearly always.

A first string graduate of the infamous Naval Air School at Fallon in Nevada, he had flown the deadliest war machines on the planet. But barely six months after his first posting, he resigned his commission, abandoned his career in the NorAm NavFor. His squadron mates thought him mad, walking away from his shining career at the age of twenty-nine, throwing away everything he had worked for.

---

Hari had other ideas.

On the other side of the world, in Chennai, he weaselled his way onto the Centre Alliance space program and fast-tracked his way to the flight roster. He ruthlessly pursued the left hand chair on an orbital shuttle and within a couple of years he climbed through ground-to-orbit work to interplanetary missions. He left bruised egos along the way but his flawless flight record protected him.

He was now a much bigger fish in a much smaller pond.

But Hari wasn't finished. After a couple of years hard and patient graft he managed to score the prize that had been his goal all along, chief pilot on a Daedalus Probe. At the tender age of thirty two, Hari became what he had always dreamed of - famous.

Daedalus was a worldwide phenomenon. It roused the slumbering imagination of a bored and complacent population. The first unmanned probes to distant stars had sent back pictures and data so unequivocal that it stoked popular opinion to push for manned flights to the distant systems. The Daedalus programme was the result. The cost was astronomical.

The program kicked off by the Centre Alliance had the cooperation of every major economy and the endorsement of the Council of Nations. Even the old, first-world, space powers backed the program, throwing in tech and expertise to curry favour. The public lapped it up, hungry for novelty. The Daedalus crews were the poster children of the program, especially the pilots. Hari basked in the attention and collected pretty girls by the dozen, leaving a string of broken hearts right up until launch day.

But all of that was a long, long time ago.

Now, Hari was dreaming.

This was one of Hari's favourite dreams. It featured a young, blonde co-pilot that he'd met in the training program in Chennai. She'd flown the right-hand seat on Hari's first full shuttle mission. She shared his bed as well. The romance had been fiery, explosive and a lot of fun. Free-fall sex was as gruelling as it was acrobatic and she knew a few things that even Hari didn't.

---

Hari and Anna were sweatily grappling in the cockpit of a cargo freighter as the blue-green vista of the South Pacific slid past the window. Hari had his arms tight around her waist. Anna's legs were locked around his buttocks and she called the rhythm, squeezing with her heels. The cockpit lights were off and their faces were lit by bright patches of cloud drifting by below them. Hari could see her face in sharp profile, teeth bared like a wolf, panting.

It had nearly cost him his flight status and it had cost Anna her career.

She was nominally in command when an unmanned cargo drone had passed, unnoticed, within one thousand metres of their shuttle. Nothing had happened, but rules were rules and someone had to take the fall. Hari, as command pilot, should have copped the flack, but he ducked the charge with an ease born out of long practice and a complete lack of scruples. Needless to say, it had ended their relationship in spectacular fashion.

But Hari shouldn't have been dreaming.

His skin glowed with frost and his core temperature hovered around 143 Kelvin. His brain activity had slowed to a tiny trickle and his organs had completely shut down. There should be no way his mind could generate conscious thought. But deep within his frigid sleep, Hari dreamed of a supple body pressed up against his in a grinding embrace.

As they approached climax, Hari's attention started to wander.

Over Anna's smooth white shoulder he could see a warning light, flashing red on the console. Distantly he could hear an alarm. Her thrusting body synchronised slowly with the strobing rhythm of the light. He cocked his head. The noise rose in a crescendo and hammered at Hari's ears and merged into the timbre of a human voice. Out on the darkened edges of his consciousness the voice flared, like a bell, calling him to wake.

Slowly, very slowly, Hari opened his eyes.

A shock of white hair bobbed above the square jawed, hook nosed face.

---

Pyotr's lips moved energetically.

The thought penetrated Hari's sleep numbed brain - he was yelling at him.

Hari concentrated and focused on his lips, trying to read the words.

Pyotr's words broke through and hammered into his brain : "FIRE - WE - ARE - ON - FIRE!"

Hari fought the fog in his brain with a pilot's reflexes. Disorientation was a frequent threat and his life could depend on how fast he could make sense of his situation. The dormant centres in Hari's brain fired up, like the cylinders in a combustion engine catching sparks. Now he could smell smoke and his heart began to pound. The rest of Pyotr's words trickled into his ears, "Get up to the bridge! Get the ship stabilised and find out where we are!" and then his face was gone.

Hari struggled blindly with the straps that bound him to his couch and fought his way out and into the recovery room. The ship was in free-fall and he tumbled out of the casket in a slow motion cartwheel. He reflexively braced himself to absorb the impact of the opposite bulkhead and twisted his body to orient himself. Hanging himself 'upright' against the wall he looked around for Anna.

Further up the room there was a flash of brown hair and Hari caught a woman's eye. She flashed him a smile and went back to work. Hari shook his head. Stupid. Anna wasn't on this mission. She was gone long ago.

He looked again.

Tatiana was the ship's psychologist and backup medic. She was floating in front of one of the sleep pods, tending to someone. Pyotr, the captain, was further along the row of cabinets slapping another lucky member of the crew into wakefulness and at the far end of the row Hari's bridge mate, Hans Adler, the navigator, was awake and hauling a fire extinguisher off the wall.

Hari looked around, stretching his neck, arching his back.

The recovery room was a shambles.

---

Wires hung from the walls, the air was filled with smoke from a fire in one of the light panels and the door was half ajar. Hans could handle the fire so Hari pushed off and glided over to the door and tried to open it. There was something wrong with the power. The door surged but would not open properly. Hari tried again and got nothing. He braced himself in the doorway and put his shoulder to it and heaved it open.

The situation in the core was not much prettier; smoke and scorch marks everywhere. Hari couldn't work out what had gone wrong. A meteor strike? That was the constant fear on these ships. Travelling at a large fraction of the speed of light, a strike from something in the 1-2cm size range could vaporise the ship. The Argonaut's vapour shield and ablative armour reduced the odds to an even bet but even a glancing strike could throw the ship off course.

Hari kicked himself out into the central core, ignored the padded hand holds and expertly deflected himself 'up' the shaft towards the bridge.

A large green arrow indicated the route to the bridge while an opposing red one indicated the engineering spaces 'below'. Passing by the living deck, Hari reached the hatch to the bridge and dialled it open. The bridge hatch, at least, worked properly and it swung silently open to reveal a vista of stars against a black velvet background.

Hari slid through the open door.

~

Tatiana kneeled in front of the silent form of one of her shipmates.

Cold sleep was risky and starting and stopping someone's organs could be like playing Russian roulette. Julie's heart was arrhythmic and her breathing irregular. Routine enough for someone coming out of fifty years of cold sleep but still life threatening. Tatiana prepped fifty mls of digoxin in an injector and administered it intravenously. She checked Julie's pulse again and consulted the

---

heart monitor. Julie's heart rate was back down to something resembling normal and her breathing had steadied.

She had a moment to think.

She wasn't supposed to be medic on this mission. The ship had a doctor/surgeon who could handle any medical procedure from childbirth to an ingrowing toe nail. But Pyotr had instructed her to look after the reanimation process and it was she who had discovered the warning light on Julie's casket.

Tatiana sighed.

Her speciality was psychology and group dynamics but she was resigned to the fact she would probably be more medic than counsellor on this mission. She'd get the sprains and cuts and headaches that Andrew was too busy to deal with. Crew selected for an interstellar mission were far more balanced and stable than your average human being. Problems were rare. A psychologist was a kind of an insurance policy - in case tempers should flare in the long intervals spent in the cramped confines of the ship.

Tatiana brushed a strand of her tawny hair back from her face and looked up the bay towards the other caskets. She should check on Andrew, the doctor. If he wasn't awake something had gone wrong with his reanimation. He should have been the first one of all of them awake, including Pyotr.

Someone tapped her on the shoulder.

She turned to see the captain's implacable face. Tatiana always thought of him as a school teacher, half stern, half paternal but always in control. His white hair had made him look twenty years older than he really was. He put his hand on her shoulder and pointed to the other end of the bay.

"It might be a good idea to check on Andrew."

He was reading her mind.

"I'm on my way."

She grabbed a nearby handhold and flicked herself down the bay.

---

Andrew's casket was first in the bay, nearest the door.

As she approached she could see there was something wrong. The glass was opaque with frost. His casket should be at room temperature and the door should be open. A hairline crack ran from the top left to the middle of the glass. That was bad. The caskets should be impervious to any kind of damage, a fluctuation of a fraction of a degree could jeopardise the fragile human life within.

Tatiana braced herself and punched the manual override. She wasn't surprised when nothing happened. Steadying herself against the wall, she used her sleeve to protect her hand and reached out to open the door. It snagged at first, caught on some unseen obstacle, then swung silently open on frictionless hinges.

Tatiana looked up and her jaw dropped, slack in silent terror. She floated back staring at the apparition in the casket and the captain appeared at her side. He grabbed the edge of the casket and put a steadying arm on her back. "What's wrong?" he asked and looked into the casket.

Inside was a desiccated corpse. Brown, leathery skin was stretched over bleached bones and it looked more like a thousand-year-old mummy than a man. This had been their ship's doctor, Andrew Ciotto, a laughing, living, breathing man and a good friend. Sightless white orbs stared back at them from shrunken eye sockets where once had been laughing brown eyes and ragged yellow teeth poked out of shrivelled lips in a parody of Andy's warm grin.

The captain glanced around at the others in the recovery room. His face was a blank mask. He swung the door shut and grabbed Tatiana by the shoulder and shook her.

"Snap out of it, get yourself together," he said, eyes bright with anger and fear.

Tatiana looked up at him and nodded slowly. What could do that to a man? She'd seen explosive decompression victims that looked better than that. She looked around the bay.

It looked like everyone else had made it. She'd seen Hari head up to the bridge and Hans was here, putting out a fire in the roof. Azra

---

the engineer was talking to Georgie Chung, her second in command and the two were working on one of the systems in the bay. Ian Lowell, the science officer, and his assistant and wife Eva were helping a groggy Julie out of her casket.

It seemed like everyone had made it, except poor Andy.

The captain was watching her carefully but he looked around too.

The ship shuddered under a brief lurch of acceleration and the captain barked out some instructions, re-establishing order. He pushed Tatiana towards the door and grabbed Hans who was nearest to him and sent him in the same direction. "I need to know where we are, get to the bridge and get me a fix," he said.

Hans slipped past Tatiana, through the door and 'up' towards the bridge.

Tatiana paused on the threshold.

Pyotr raised his voice and spoke quickly and deliberately, "Azra and Georgina, get down to the engineering bay. Get the power stabilised and the engines back online. Ian, prep the boats for evacuation and load them with anything you think we might need. Julie and Eva, get the life support systems stabilised and make sure we have atmospheric integrity. Tatiana, you're with me. We'll do an inventory of the ship and see what's wrong."

They scattered to their tasks.

~

On the bridge Hari was fighting an increasingly quirky ship's computer. Many of the systems were off line and even simple instructions required manual routing around damaged systems. He'd managed to get the telescopes and radio operational when Hans slid onto the bridge beside him.

"How is she?"

"Bugged! Everything is busted and nothing makes sense!"

---

Hari thumped the mission clock set into his console. It was showing an improbable number.

Hans nodded and slid into the other seat on the bridge.

“Can you take nav while I stabilise the ship?”

“Of course,” Hans said and started tapping out commands on his keyboard.

Hari thumped the mission clock again and then ignored it, switching his attention to the flight control and attitude systems. The main engine was off-line, but they only used it for interstellar flight and what they needed now was manoeuvring. Hari could feel the ship shimmying back and forth under him and knew they were wildly out of control. The flight computer had lost the plot. The system had a triply redundant emergency circuit that allowed basic manual control. Hari activated it and flipped on the intership communications.

“Brace for acceleration,” he called. “All hands brace for acceleration,” he repeated, not knowing whether anyone could hear him or not.

Piloting more by instinct than by the spinning inertial instruments, he fired two axes of thrusters in rapid succession, trying to slow the tumble. He tried it tentatively at first then increased the burns until he could feel the acceleration. He had the feel of it now, the ship was rotating on all three axes but was basically in an end-over-end tumble.

That was bad. The ship relied on the forward ablative shield to protect them from interstellar debris. If they were tumbling they were vulnerable to a meteor strike and that could be terminal.

Hari worked with the thrusters. He stopped the spin in two dimensions and then began long slow burns of the pitch thrusters, trying to stop the tumble. Still working by feel, he managed to slow it to the point where the instruments began to make sense. He gave a couple more burns to stabilise it and then turned to Hans, wiping the sweat out of his eyes.

---

Now the priority was to find out where they were.

“Have you got a fix yet?”

Hans was as steady as ever.

“No, I'm not certain yet. We are well below cruising speed, and we have entered a planetary system.”

“I need a fix soon!”

Below cruising speed was good but a planetary system was a mixed blessing. Travelling below the speed of light reduced the threat. A planetary system mean that they could stop for repairs, but planetary systems had a lot more things to bump into.

Now that Hari had stabilised the ship Hans was getting more data.

“There is a star nearby. . . and a planet.”

“How close?”

“Hard to say, radar is not functioning so I'm not getting Doppler readings. No response from laser either but I am seeing a small amount of parallax on the planet.”

Parallax motion meant that the planet was 'close'. Closer than the background stars in any case but how close? Too close and they'd be captured by the planet and spin down a short fiery arc into the atmosphere. Too far away and they might slip past and into open space and not have the delta-V to come back.

Hari waited impatiently.

After a few moments Hans raised his head and looked at Hari.

“I think we're all right, I'm pretty sure the computer has got us into a entry orbit for the planet.” He consulted the instruments, “I'm guessing on the mass of the sun and the planet but it looks right to me. We should be in high orbit, not too close.” He worked his computations some more. “I have a solution for orbit. It is a bit approximate so I am shooting for a high orbit with a margin of error.”

---

He flipped the diagram over to Hari's screen, "Can you give me a . . . 12 second deceleration burn?"

"Okay, I'm on it."

Hari keyed the intercom again, "All hands brace for acceleration, all hands brace," He plugged in the burn solution with his other hand, "Executing the burn in three. . . two. . . one. . ."

Hari triggered the thrusters and the pressure built up under their backs. Far away they could hear the distant clatter of objects striking their hull, their own debris cloud catching up with them.

Hans peered at his instrumentation intently and scribbled some maths on a work pad. He double-checked it.

"I think we have it, the solution looks good." He looked at his figures, "Give me a one-second correction, plus delta."

"Okay, correction burn in three. . . two. . . one. . ."

Hari triggered the one-second burn by hand.

Hans stayed locked to his scope and then raised his head, "It is a bit approximate but it should be good for about a dozen rotations." There was a pause as he retrained the telescope. "The system looks good."

"Is it Eighteen-Scorpii?"

Scorpii was their target star, a G-class in Scorpius about fifty light years from Sol.

"See for yourself," said Hans and punched the star up on the bridge monitors.

Hari turned to his monitor and swore.

The star was a red dwarf, not the mid-range yellow sun of 18 Scorpii. They had missed their target and by a wide margin. The flight computer was programmed to search for the next likely habitable system and this was what it had come up with. At least it had a planetary system, thought Hari. They could have ended up around some dead cinder of a brown dwarf and their party would be over.

---

“What about the planet?”

The Argonaut was an exploratory ship built for a one way trip to a single star, not for touring the galaxy. If she had missed her target star they could survive on her indefinitely but if they couldn't set foot on a planet their resources would eventually run out. Space was vast and engineering margins were thin.

“It is not bad from what I can see. . . a little bigger than Earth. . . a high albedo. It's close to the star so surface temp should be in human norm. The spectrograph is still off-line so I cannot determine the atmospheric content but there looks like activity on the surface.”

High albedo either meant ice or an atmosphere. Since it was close to the star, ice was probably out. A planet only slightly bigger than Earth wouldn't be a gas giant with crushing gravity and activity in the atmosphere indicated weather of some kind, another positive sign — you couldn't have weather without an atmosphere.

“No moon. . . I think it might be tidally locked to the sun. Not good but not impossibly bad.”

Hans straightened up from his scope and smiled at Hari.

“I am betting on it being habitable.”

Hari sighed and closed his eyes, “Looks like we made it then.”

~

Pyotr led Tatiana on a circuit of the lower deck, dealing with problems as they found them. The Argonaut had four decks, stacked one above the other. The middle two were the main decks with rooms in a ring about the open core.

The lower was the 'Machine Deck' with life support, hydroponics and cryogenics; the upper was the 'Living Deck' with the common room, galley and airlocks. Above the core was the bridge, below it the engineering spaces.

The Machine Deck was in a shambles. Systems were down, simple things like doors weren't functioning and there were sporadic fires

---

and leaks everywhere. Junk floated in the air. The Argonaut looked more like a derelict than a newly commissioned interstellar explorer.

The science lab looked intact, but then with everything packed away for the boost phase there was little to break. Pyotr pushed himself around the circular core to the next door – the ship's computer. Tatiana followed. There were more problems here. Diagnostics on a half dozen panels showed systems that had failed, despite built-in triple redundancy. Tatiana and Pyotr paused to switch over a few components manually and re-route some others. The destruction was widespread however and they could only restore minimal function to the ailing computer.

Hari's voiced floated out of the intercom at them, "Brace for acceleration. All hands brace for acceleration!"

"Hang on!" the captain called and snagged himself a position beside the door.

Tatiana wedged herself between the hull and a support pillar so she could continue working on a storage unit. The acceleration was lumpy and uneven, unlike a normal controlled burn. Hari must have his problems up on the bridge. Small bits of wire and discarded junk zipped out of the air as the ship surged under them and they acquired relative velocity. A fire extinguisher, inexplicably loose from its bracket, homed-in on Tatiana and she was slow to duck. She flung an arm up and the wayward missile cannoned off her arm and clipped her head, drawing blood.

"Are you okay?" called Pyotr, still braced by the door.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," she called, testing her bruised arm, "no harm done."

She put her hand up and touched the blood pooling in a globule near her scalp wound. She disturbed it and it floated off to one side under acceleration. She'd have to do something about that or she'd be trailing droplets of blood throughout the ship.

There was a break in the acceleration.

---

"I'm going down to check on the power, can you handle it here?" asked the captain from the doorway.

Tatiana nodded, "Yes captain, I can do this deck," she said and watched him somersault away from the door and down the core crawlway to Engineering. "Never mind about my head," she muttered to herself, launching out of the computer room and hooking round the doorway towards sickbay. The door to sickbay was slow to open but the rest of it was fine, all packed away like the science lab. She stopped to use an absorbent dressing to mop the blood from her scalp wound and headed for the next door along, the hydroponics lab.

The door to hydroponics was stuck, jammed in its tracks and without any purchase she couldn't move it. She doubled back to the science lab and picked up a long handled screw driver from a rack. It was tricky, jimmying a door in micro gravity, but she managed to brace herself long enough to move the door a stubborn inch, after that it refused to budge. She put an eye to the door and peered into the dim interior of the lab.

Hari's voice barked out of the intercom again, "All hands brace for acceleration, all hands brace," and she grabbed a couple of handholds. The burn this time was long and steady and her feet drifted up towards the ceiling. A deceleration burn. As it tugged at her arms, her brain mulled over what she'd seen.

The hydroponics lab was overrun. Every square inch had been covered with a tangled mass of withered greenery. The top half foot to the light panels in the ceiling was still alive but the rest was thorny, woody undergrowth. Through the crack in the door, she could barely see half a metre into the interior.

Normally hydroponics would have been rack upon rack of orderly green plants. The lab would be their main source of sustainable food so it had received a lot of attention during the design. The lights and temperature control had independent systems from the rest of life support and a separate backup. The plants were bred for stability and resistance to disease and mutation and the systems should

---

maintain the plants over decades. Something had gone wrong. What she had seen should have never happened.

A shout interrupted her reverie.

“Medic! I need a medic!”

It was Eva's voice and she didn't sound happy.

Tatiana flipped over in the doorway and kicked off, heading for the life support bay where Eva and Julie were supposed to be. As she entered the room she could see Eva cradling an unconscious Julie in her arms. The air here was full of junk too. Several large pieces of equipment floated around including a pump the size of a man's head.

“What happened?” asked Tatiana, flicking across the intervening space to the two women.

Eva was panicky. “The pump broke loose under acceleration and just flew across the bay. . .it hit poor Julie in the back and smashed her against the wall. . . I had to wait till the acceleration stopped before I could get to her.”

“It's okay,” Tatiana reassured her and took hold of Julie.

Cradling her by the shoulders Tatiana rolled her over to look at her back. Pulling up her coveralls she could see a massive blue bruise spreading across her back. She rolled Julie the right way up again and began checking for signs of concussion. Her breathing was regular and her heartbeat was strong so probably no permanent damage done.

The captain appeared in the door. “What happened? Is she all right?”

“I think she's fine, just concussed. She might have a few broken ribs but nothing serious I think. Eva, help me get her to sick bay.”

The Captain helped them manoeuvre the stricken girl out the door and towards sickbay and then kicked off for the bridge.

“Captain! Wait!” called Eva to his back.

---

Tatiana stopped Julie on the threshold of the sickbay and waited for Eva.

"The life support system is off-line," Eva said urgently. "We're on emergency life support and there's more than one leak around the hull. We're losing pressure constantly and we haven't been able to plug all the leaks." Tatiana frowned. The emergency life support system was based on bottled air, it didn't manufacture its own or re-process stale air like the main system. That meant it had a very finite life span.

"How long have we got?" asked Pyotr, the strain telling in his voice. Eva frowned, "My best guess is about five or six hours. No more."

The captain nodded grimly, "Very well, look after Julie." He floated back into the core and headed up to the bridge.

~

On the bridge Hari was running through diagnostics, trying to get some more systems back on line. While he did so his mind churned over the situation. The fact that they were lost was very, very bad. If they missed their target nobody would be coming to look for them, they were on their own. Still, the fact that they'd found what looked like a habitable planet was an enormous bonus. Hari wondered idly how far they were from home. In the far corner of the bridge, Hans was trying to find out. He was plotting a solution from the available constellations but the damaged computer and instrumentation was making it difficult.

Hari headed over to help him when the captain drifted onto the bridge.

"Morning captain! What's for breakfast?" quipped Hari.

The captain was in no mood for jokes, "Report!"

Hari bristled and Hans drifted over to intercept.

"We have entered a system at manoeuvring speeds, Captain. Hari and I managed to get the ship into a temporary orbit around a

---

planet. We cannot get much data off the planet but it seems to have a Ni-Ox atmosphere and gravity and temperature should be within Earth norms. It is a one-face world though."

"18 Scorpii?"

"No it is not, it's an M3V not a G-class. The constellations are all wrong too. My guess is that we are a long way from 18 Scorpii."

The intercom beeped and Hari thumbed a button to answer it. It was Azra, the senior engineer.

"Is the captain there?"

"He just arrived, go ahead."

"Captain, we have a serious problem. The reactor core is extremely unstable and we can't settle it down. The energy output is very low as well and I doubt we can power many of the main systems."

"What's the danger from the core?"

"Significant," Azra replied bluntly, "without any control there's a fair chance we could get a power excursion if we warm it up and there's nothing we can do to stop it except scram it."

Hari blanched, 'power excursion' was a euphemism for 'meltdown'. But scrambling the core meant flooding it with sodium polyborate to soak up emitted neutrons and halt the chain reaction. It would prevent a meltdown but the reactor would be unusable from that point, there being no way to safely clean out the boron. Without the reactor they would have only solar power on the ship to generate heat and oxygen.

"What if we leave it?"

"Unknown."

"How long before it goes?"

"I don't know," the engineer replied after a pause, ". . . it could be hours, could be days, could be months. It might go in the next ten minutes, I just don't know."

---

The captain digested this new fact .“How much drive fuel do we have left?”

“None.”

“None?”

“Only our manoeuvring reserve.”

Hari whistled under his breath.

The Argonaut's main engine was powered by a nuclear pulse rocket. The 'fuel' was deuterium/tritium 'pellets' which were ejected out into space behind the ship and ignited with an x-ray laser. The blast, cradled in a shaped magnetic field, was absorbed by a buffer plate and the pressure on this thrust the ship forward. Their fuel store was divided into two sections, a main drive section which should contain enough fuel for a one way trip to their target destination and a small reserve for emergencies. The reserve represented nearly five hundred tonnes of fissionable material but even that couldn't move a five thousand tonne spaceship across interstellar space. If they had used up all of their drive fuel there was little chance of escaping the system until they could refine some more.

The captain floated quietly with his hands behind his back, his head bowed, his brow furrowed. Finally he lifted his head, “Azra?” he prompted.

“Yes, Captain?”

“Scram the core.”

Hari swore out loud and Hans did too.

Without waiting for a response from Azra the captain reached out and flicked the general broadcast switch on the intercom. “All hands, this is the captain, prepare to abandon ship. I repeat, we're abandoning ship, grab everything you can and load the boats.”

“Captain!” protested Hari, ready to argue.

“Damn it! Follow my orders. Prepare to abandon ship.”

“But captain, we don't know if that planet is liveable!”

---

The captain's brow darkened and he pulled himself a foot closer to Hari. He glared into the other man's eyes but spoke calmly. "Life support is badly damaged. It will only give us six hours at most and that's if we patch all the leaks in the hull. The computer is shot, we have no drive fuel and the power plant is unstable and may explode. If it doesn't explode it won't supply us enough power to run all the systems. We're in an uncertain orbit with a ship that probably won't manoeuvre properly and some of the crew are injured!"

The captain stared at Hari and said in measured tones, "Obey your orders. . . abandon ship!"

Hari studied his face for a moment longer and then saluted smartly, something he'd never done before.

"Aye, Aye captain," he said and left the bridge.