

~ Star Voyager ~

by Norsebard

DISCLAIMERS:

This is an original story. All characters are created by me.

All characters depicted in this story are fictitious. Any similarity to actual persons, living or dead is purely coincidental.

On a few occasions, the characters curse and swear, so people who are easily offended by bad language might want to look for something else to read than this story.

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

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The title is taken from a scene in Phil Kaufman's 'The Right Stuff',

Gus Grissom: "What does Astronaut mean, anyway?"

Gordo Cooper: "Star Voyager."

CHAPTER 1

"Ohhh, I'm late, I'm late, I'm SO late..." Lieutenant Xinda Falaan said to herself as she hurried through the endless corridors to get to the conference room.

"Room 8030... 8031... 8032! Finally!" she said out loud.

She closed her eyes, and took several deep breaths to calm down. She straightened her uniform, fixed her hair, and mumbled a meditation mantra that she knew would make her relax.

She moved her finger up to the button for the sliding door, but before she had time to press it, the door opened by itself. She cleared her throat, and prepared to step through... only to notice that the door had opened because a Captain was standing on the other side.

Falaan quickly snapped to attention and saluted.

"Good morning, Lieutenant. You're late."

Xinda studied the Captain closely - she appeared to be in her late 40s or early 50s, and she had a chestful of colorful ribbons on her dark blue uniform. She was sporting a crew cut, which was mostly pale brown, but with a few gray streaks here and there. Her face was weathered, but strong, and her eyes were dark gray - and very much shooting fire.

"I know, ma'am. I'm terribly sorry... I couldn't find the room..."

The Captain scoffed, and turned back to the three people sitting in the conference room. She walked up to a dais, and picked up a small pointer.

"So our navigator couldn't find the room...?" the Captain said, and put her hands behind her back.

"Yes... I know how that must sound, but..."

"Come in. Sit down. And listen."

"Yes, ma'am."

Xinda stepped inside, and briefly nodded to the people already there. She knew one of them, but the other two were unfamiliar to her.

She quickly found a chair, pulled out a Notepad from her bag, and turned it on.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, now that we're all here..." the Captain said, and turned to look at the new arrival.

Xinda blushed furiously, and looked down at her hands.

"... let's get acquainted. My name is Lorna Iverson, and I'm the Consortium's chief test pilot. I've flown experimental spacecraft for more than twenty years, including all the flights of the previous Star Voyager generations."

The Captain reached down, and turned on a hologram projector. A large 3D image of a spacecraft was created in the center of the dais, and all the people in the room leaned forward to see the details, Xinda included.

"Now, before I go on, I know that I have a certain... reputation at the Academy. I know that I'm referred to as Cap'n Ice. Well, it's not entirely true. When I'm off-duty, I enjoy booze, women and dancing just as much as the next pilot, but when I'm working, I demand professionalism, dedication to the project, and above all hard work from my crew. I hope you get the picture," the Captain said, and once again looked at Xinda.

"... because if you don't, the door is right over there," she continued, and pointed at the sliding door. The room was filled with an uncomfortable silence, and everyone looked down.

"All right. Professor Carlos Hernandez, the Consortium's senior scientist, is here to tell you about the scientific details of this mission. Dr. Hernandez?" the Captain said, and stepped down from the dais. She walked over to sit down next to Xinda - much to the young Lieutenant's discomfort.

A man in his late 60s, wearing horn-rimmed glasses and the standard gray uniform of the Science Department, got up from his chair, and went out to stand in the center of the dais.

"Thank you, Captain Iverson. This mission will mark the beginning of the so called Third Phase of the Star Voyager program. This is the final phase, where we'll attempt to achieve a speed of Hyperlight Factor 6. In order to reach this target, we'll..."

As the Professor spoke, Lorna studied the people that would soon form her crew - 30-year old Derro Penrum, a Master in computer science, was tall and slim, and didn't strike Lorna as being the world's most interesting fellow. 27-year old Tianna Venares, the engineer, had a very pale brown complexion, dark brown hair and eyes, and a look of focus and concentration on her face, and finally 27-year old Xinda Falaan, navigator and co-pilot. All three were fresh out of the academy, and all three had graduated #1 in their respective classes.

Lorna found herself looking closer at the Lieutenant - the young woman was very pretty, with blue eyes, and sunflower-blond hair that was perhaps a bit over the regulatory length. Lorna was surprised to see indications of early crow's feet in the corners of Xinda's eyes, but she surmised that it was because Xinda smiled a lot - the theory was backed up by two cute dimples on her cheeks.

Lorna suddenly noticed that Xinda's eyes were more on her than on the professor, and she turned her head, and raised a disapproving eyebrow.

Xinda quickly looked straight ahead, and a dark red color tinted her cheeks.

"... and those are the primary details. Captain Iverson?" Professor Hernandez said, after having spoken for fifteen minutes.

"Thank you, Professor Hernandez," Lorna said, and stepped up on the dais.

"I hope you paid attention... there's a test first thing tomorrow," she said directed at the group, earning herself a faintly heard groan from someone. Lorna had a pretty good idea where the groan came from, but she chose to ignore it for now.

"Right, that's it for today. Your orders are to meet me in Dock #4 at 0600 Hours Universal Time tomorrow morning."

The group closed their various computers, and rose noisily from their chairs.

"Oh, and if you're late... we'll leave without ya," she drawled, and winked at Xinda.

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Several hours later, Xinda entered the Officers' Mess, and looked around for somewhere to work on the notes she had taken during the meeting.

The bar room itself looked very much like the one at the Academy - it was held entirely in cool colors, with synthetic leather armchairs grouped around low glass tables, all carrying tasteful decorations made of glass and aluminum.

The center piece of the room was the shiny counter made of synthetic wood and a material Xinda couldn't recognize.

It was still early in the afternoon, so the bar was deserted, save for a bartender and a broad-shouldered man in civilian clothing who was sitting on a bar stool at the counter, sipping a beer.

Xinda spotted a larger table in the corner, and she made a beeline for it. She put down her bag, and took out her Notepad. She turned it on, and found the correct files.

Deciding that she needed something to drink before she got started, she walked up to the bar, and studied the various things on offer.

"Lieutenant?" a very familiar female voice said, and Xinda looked surprised at the person she was standing next to.

"Oh, Captain Iverson... I didn't notice it was you..."

"Not many people do when I'm out of uniform. Hey, Charlie, hit the music, will ya? It's so quiet in here I can hear myself think," the Captain said to the bartender.

"Will do, Cap'n."

The bartender walked over behind a curtain, and activated the sound system. Soon, relaxing lounge music wafted through the air, and Lorna nodded to herself.

"So...? Did you want anything, or are ya just going to stand there and admire the selection?" Lorna said.

"Oh... would you mind making me a coffee...?" Xinda said to the bartender.

"Of course not, Lieutenant. Which type?"

"Type?"

"We have eleven different coffees to choose from, ma'am."

"Can't you just make me a regular?"

"One regular coffee coming up. Do you need anything else, ma'am?"

"Not right now, thank you."

Lorna emptied her glass, and put it on the counter.

"Charlie, 'nother one, while you're at it."

"Yes, Cap'n."

"Come on, Lieutenant, let's go over to your table and talk," Lorna said, and took the fresh glass of beer Charlie had put on the counter.

"Talk? Oh, but, I really need to look over the files from the meeting," Xinda said, feeling acutely embarrassed.

"I'll drill ya. There's plenty of time. Come on," Lorna said, and pushed the young Lieutenant towards the table in the corner.

"Thank you, Charlie," Xinda said as the bartender put down a cup of coffee.

"You're welcome, Lieutenant."

"What did you think of the Professor's lecture?"

"Well..." Xinda said, and cleared her throat - she didn't dare to look at the Captain.

"I'm out of duty. You can call it boring if you will," Lorna said with a chuckle.

"Oh, it wasn't boring. Just a little... dry..."

"Dry. Huh, now there's an understatement. But it does have some important elements. For instance, did you know that the coolant for the Crystals can only be allowed to reach 850 degrees before we have to shut the whole thing down?" Lorna said, and looked over the rim of the glass with a cheeky sparkle in her eyes.

"650 degrees, Captain. Are you testing me?"

"Yes."

"Oh..."

"650 degrees is the right answer. No, I'm sorry, that was cheesy. I've read your file. You've done hundreds of hours in the simulator, and of course you'll know things like that."

"That's right, I have. And I've always scored well in the test runs," Xinda said, and took a sip of her coffee to hide the fact that she was feeling somewhat miffed over the Captain's sneaky attempt to test her.

"And that's all well and good, but Lieutenant, it's always wise to remember that the simulator is not real life."

"I know, Captain."

"Please, call me Lorna. As I said, I'm off duty," Lorna said, and stretched out her hand.

"Oh. All right. I'm Xinda Falaan. How do you do?" Xinda said, and shook Lorna's hand.

"Just great. And you?"

"Nervous."

"Which is understandable. It's an experimental mission, after all. A lot of things could go wrong."

"You know... the thing I'm most worried about is hitting the wrong button while we're conducting the tests. What if I accidentally open the hatch... or something?"

"Well, I guess breathing vacuum would sting for a second or two, but after that we wouldn't really care either way," Lorna said, and chuckled.

"I guess we wouldn't. Have you ever had an accident?"

"Oh, sure. I've been flying for more than twenty years, after all. I've been in a couple of hairy situations, but that's where the professionalism comes into play, Xinda. Stay focused, and you'll survive. That's my mantra."

"That's a good one."

"Yes. Now, tell me something, Xinda. As I said, I've read your file, and while your grades were all perfect, or close to it, there's an unusual little incident mentioned there as well," Lorna said, and leaned forward in the chair. She put her elbows on her knees, and folded her hands.

"You were suspended for a week for engaging in fisticuffs. Well, excuse me for being direct, but you don't exactly look like a bruiser. What happened?"

Xinda leaned back, and sighed.

"Well. One of my fellow students had continually bullied me throughout my first and second semesters. And one day, I'd had enough."

"What was the issue?"

"My parents."

"Your parents...?"

"The bully told me that the only reason I was at the Academy was because of my parents. That I had no skills of my own, and that I had needed the help of my rich father to even get considered for the Academy."

"Hmmm. That sounds nasty."

"It was. Especially considering that I had to fight my father tooth and nail to make him accept my decision to join the Academy. According to him, I should've stayed at home and found a husband who could provide for me... and make me pregnant twice a year, no doubt," Xinda said, and shook her head angrily.

"It's the 27th Century. We really should have moved beyond such things by now... But anyway, after your suspension ended, you returned, and eventually finished first in you class."

"Yes."

"What happened to the bully?"

"He was suspended, too. He flunked."

"Oh, that's too bad..." Lorna mocked.

"Yes. A crying shame," Xinda said, and emptied her coffee cup.

"Well, I guess I better turn in. I have to be up at 0400 tomorrow to prepare for the mission. See you at six?" Lorna said, and rose from the armchair.

"I'll be there. Count on it."

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CHAPTER 2

At 0550 Hours, Xinda opened the door to Dock #4, and stepped inside. She marveled at the sight of the huge docking bay, and at the Star Voyager, standing on a surprisingly frail-looking landing gear in the middle of the area.

A large group of men wearing protective clothing were doing the final preparations before the launch, and they were milling around the craft, constantly checking and rechecking various

items.

Derro and Tianna had also chosen to arrive early, and they were standing in a spectator area at the far end of the docking bay. When Xinda saw them, she waved, and hurried over to where they were. On her way there, she spotted Captain Iverson standing in the hatch, apparently issuing orders to the men around her.

"Wow, isn't this exciting?" Tianna said as soon as Xinda had joined them.

"Yeah! Do you know how far along they are?"

"They're almost done. The Crystals haven't arrived yet, but when they do, it's ready for us."

As if on cue, the warning lights in the docking bay started flashing, and a loud buzzer was heard.

'Warning! Warning! Warning!'

A computerized voice repeated the message several times, and the people working on the Star Voyager all moved away.

The big door was opened, and a small shunter shuttle drove in, carrying a crate marked **EXTREME CAUTION - HYPERLIGHT CRYSTALS** on a small flatbed wagon.

The shuttle stopped at the rear of the Star Voyager, and two men in contamination suits picked up the crate, and carried it to the craft.

After a minute, they came back out of the engine compartment, and drove away.

Xinda had held her breath the entire time, and she released it with a contented sigh.

"Hey, if those Crystals are so damn dangerous, how come we don't have any protective gear?" Derro grumbled.

"Who cares, Derro... this is it! This is the real thing," Xinda said, and stared wide-eyed at the spacecraft.

The warning lights were turned off, and the large group of men returned to the Star Voyager.

Captain Iverson came out of the hatch, and waved the three spectators over.

A few minutes later, Xinda, Derro and Tianna were standing next to the craft while Lorna inspected them.

"I see you've made it on time today, Lieutenant Falaan."

"Yes, ma'am. I wouldn't want to miss it for the world."

"Indeed."

Lorna turned around to look at the front of the Voyager, and chuckled.

"When I first started working for the Consortium, I expected all spacecraft to be sleek and sexy... but look at this one. It's a lunchbox on legs! Oh, well. As with most things in life, it's not the looks, it's the performance. And I guarantee you, this lunchbox will perform."

"Captain Iverson, ma'am?"

"Yes, Doctor Penrum?"

"In the simulations, we never actually had any working Crystals installed. Are they dangerous?"

Both Xinda and Tianna groaned, and Xinda wanted to kick Derro in the backside for sounding like a big chicken, but she managed to restrain herself, and settled for rolling her eyes.

Lorna noticed, and a wry smile flashed across her lips.

"They're inside a containment field, Doctor Penrum. But, yes, they are dangerous, or rather, volatile. The energy created by a single Crystal is enough to supply this space station with electricity for a month. And we have three such Crystals onboard. But unless we want to take them out and use them to practice our juggling techniques, we'll be safe."

"Captain, even if the Crystals malfunction, the craft is still equipped with Sublight engines, isn't it?" Xinda said.

"Oh, yes, Lieutenant. It's not like we'll have to paddle upstream to get back to Earth. The Star Voyager has two 0.8-class Sublight reactors. Any other questions?"

All three crew members shook their heads, and Lorna put her hands behind her back.

"All right. The countdown is already running, and we have a checklist a mile long to go through before they'll allow us to get anywhere near the staging area, so... saddle up!"

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When Xinda stepped into the cockpit, she stopped, and took a deep breath.

'Wow, I've finally arrived,' she thought as she looked around. She had already spent hundreds of hours in a simulator getting acquainted to all the dials and knobs, but it gave her a real buzz to be standing in the door of the real thing.

Because of the risk of contamination from the Crystals, the cockpit was as far forward as it could be, and it was only twelve by twelve feet, creating a very cramped and even claustrophobic atmosphere.

The Star Voyager definitely wasn't a pleasure craft - the seats didn't even have cushions. The ceiling and all four walls in the cockpit were covered with computer panels and monitors. The only space in the cockpit that wasn't filled with panels was a two by nine foot slit in the front wall, which was one, large piece of transparent Plasteel instead.

"Hello, Earth to Lieutenant Falaan? We haven't even left the docking bay, and you're already lost in space..." Lorna joked, and gave Xinda a small push on her shoulders to get her to move into the cockpit.

"Oh...! I'm sorry... I..."

"Don't worry. I did the same thing the first time I saw it," Lorna said, and sat down in the chair on the front left. Xinda took the front right chair, and swiveled around, so she could watch Derro and Tianna get settled on the chairs in the second row.

'Star Voyager, this is base control. Do you read us?'

"We read you five by five, control," Lorna said into her headset, and pressed a button on the panel in front of her. She checked several levers, and made sure they were able to move freely.

'The technicians are finishing their preparations, Captain Iverson. We're almost done.'

"Roger that. Lieutenant Falaan, have you finished entering the data into the NAVICOM?"

Xinda pressed Enter on a small keyboard in front of her, and then pushed it into the panel.

"Just finished now, Captain."

"All right. Doctor Penrum, Lieutenant Venares?"

"I'm ready, Captain."

"Ready, and rearing to go, Captain," Tianna said, earning herself a crooked grin from Lorna.

"Lieutenant Venares, give me a readout on the status of the Crystals."

"The Crystals are at 89%, and still climbing. It'll only be a minute or so until they're fully charged, Captain."

"Good. Tell me when they are."

"Yes, Captain."

'Star Voyager, the technicians have finished. The docking bay is being cleared. Stand by.'

"Roger, control. Standing by."

Lorna leaned back in her seat, and looked out of the Plasteel window. At the end of the brightly lit docking bay, a huge door was slowly being retracted.

Once the door had fully opened, they were able to see out into space. A somber silence filled the cockpit - all four crew members realized that no matter how well they were prepared, something could always go wrong once they were out there, in space.

"Captain, the Crystals are fully charged."

"All right."

'Star Voyager, you are cleared for takeoff. Proceed to the staging area, and await further instructions.'

"Roger, control. Lieutenant Falaan?"

"Yes, Captain?"

"Let's go."

Xinda gulped, and had to blink a few times before she understood that the Captain had given her the responsibility of taking the craft out of the docking bay.

With a finger that trembled slightly, Xinda pressed the button that would kick the Sublight engines into life. A small gauge climbed quickly, and then flashed green. An electronic hum filled the cockpit, and they could feel the Star Voyager vibrating slightly.

"Captain, the Sublight engines have activated," Xinda said, gulping again.

"Proceed, Lieutenant. You've done it a hundred times in the simulator. There's nothing to worry about."

Xinda ran through the correct procedure in her mind. She pressed a button, and a magneto forcefield was created underneath the craft. Once she was certain it held, she retracted the landing gear, and waited for the bumps that would tell her that all four legs were locked in position. When she heard them, she gripped the crude Sublight flight control stick and gently pushed it forward, activating the thrusters.

She looked briefly at the Captain, who nodded with a smile.

With a further gentle push, Xinda took the ship out of the docking bay without any problems at all.

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"Lieutenant Falaan, what's our current speed?"

"0.2 Sublight, as per the regulations, Captain."

"Increase speed to 0.5 Sublight."

"Captain?"

"Otherwise it'll take us all day just to get to the staging area."

"Oh... increasing speed to 0.5 Sublight," Xinda said, and entered the new data into the computer, and pressed Enter.

"Captain, that's against the regulations," Derro said.

"I know. I wrote the regulations," Lorna said, and folded her arms across her chest.

"Captain, we're entering the staging area now," Xinda said, and deactivated the Sublight engines. The *Star Voyager* continued drifting until it was brought to a halt by the thrusters.

"Good. Now all we have to do is wait."

"For how long, Captain?" Venares said.

"For as long as it takes the eggheads back home to go through their checklists."

"Oh..."

"Anyway, it shouldn't take too long. It was a smooth ride here. Well done, Lieutenant Falaan."

"Thank you, Captain," Xinda said, and blushed.

'Star Voyager, you have a go for Hyperlight Factor 2.'

"Roger that, control. Hyperlight Factor 2 is go," Lorna said, and pressed a button on the panel, transferring control of the craft to her own computer.

"I better take over now," she said, and winked at Xinda.

"That's probably a good idea, Captain."

"All right. Doctor Penrum, any unusual readings?"

"Negative, Captain."

"Lieutenant Venares, on my mark, engage the first Crystal for a fifteen second burst."

"Roger, Captain," Tianna said, and let her finger hover above a large red button.

"Mark!"

Tianna pressed the button, and they all felt like they had been given a kick in the backside. Outside the Plasteel window, the stars changed appearance, and were transformed from pinpoints into long streaks of light.

Xinda's eyes popped wide open as she realized that she was actually flying through space at more than twice the speed of light. She clenched her teeth, and gripped the armrests of her chair.

"Fifteen seconds, disengaging," Tianna said, and pushed the Abort button.

"Doctor Penrum, what do your computers say?" Lorna said, as the stars returned to being pinpoints of light.

"All readings are in the green. Coolant temperatures are good, currently reading 470 degrees, and falling. They spiked at 530 degrees during Crystal activation, Captain."

"Good. Lieutenant Falaan, did we go where you expected us to?"

"We did, Captain... that was exciting!"

"Yes. Congratulations, you've now lost your Hyperlight virginity. Unfortunately, you won't get a ribbon for that," Lorna said, and chuckled.

'Star Voyager, all readings are good. You are cleared to return to the staging area. Call in once you're there.'

"Roger, control. Returning to the staging area."

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"So, that was the easy part. Lieutenant Venares, evaluation, please," Captain Iverson said after the Voyager had returned to the staging area.

"The first test was successful, no data tells of extraordinary occurrences, or..."

"Funnies," Lorna said drolly.

"I'm sorry?"

"Extraordinary occurrences are usually referred to as Funnies."

"Oh. Well, we didn't get any of those, either. The onboard systems all work as they should, and the Crystals are recharging themselves as we speak. They should be back up to 100% in a short while."

"Very good, Lieutenant," Lorna said, and keyed the radio mic.

"Control, we're at the staging area."

'Roger that, Voyager. Stand by.'

"Standing by," Lorna said, and furrowed her brow.

"Anything wrong, Captain?"

"I hope not. But I would've expected them to clear us for the Factor 4 test."

'Voyager, this is Professor Hernandez. Do you read?'

"Loud and clear, Professor. What's up?"

'We've analyzed the data thoroughly, and we've decided to skip the Factor 4 test. We're proceeding directly to the Factor 6 test. Please acknowledge.'

Xinda took a deep breath, and turned around to look at Derro and Tianna - they both had identical looks of surprise on their faces.

"Professor, you do realize that I have three rookies up here, right? They could use the Factor 4 test to prepare."

'Captain Iverson, we feel that it's possible to achieve Factor 6 with this test, while still staying within the recommended stress limits for the crew and the spacecraft. If we felt such a test would present you with unnecessary risks, we wouldn't have approved it.'

"I see. All right."

'In short, you're go for the Factor 6 test.'

"We copy, Professor. Stand by."

'Control standing by. When you're ready, Captain.'

Lorna let out a long sigh, and rubbed her forehead. After a few seconds, she turned around to face the others.

"All right. It looks like the eggheads have decided that we're clear to attempt Factor 6. I understand that you're all eager to show what you have learned, and so far you've done well... *but* I hope you understand that you'll need to stay focused. A Factor 6 test isn't simply a Factor 2 test multiplied by three. If you do not feel you're ready for this test, speak up now. Backing out will not go on your record."

It didn't take long for the crew members to make up their minds:

"I'm in." -- "So am I, Captain." -- "I'm ready, Captain."

"All right. Doctor Penrum, run a full diagnostics. I want to know exactly what this baby is doing before we go anywhere."

"Yes, Captain," Derro said, and activated a diagnostics program.

"And Lieutenant Venares, you need to keep a very sharp eye on the gauges for the coolant temperatures. And keep your finger on the Abort button. As soon as the needle goes above 650 degrees, you hit that sucker, get it?"

"Loud and clear, Captain."

"Lieutenant Falaan, I need you to plot in a target for us. With Factor 6, we'll cover an insane amount of space in a very short while, so we'll need to know where we are at all times."

"Yes, Captain. I'm already on it."

"Control, the Star Voyager is ready for the Factor 6 test," Lorna said, and made sure her seatbelts were tight. Xinda noticed, and tightened her own, just in case.

'Star Voyager, you have a go for the Hyperlight Factor 6 test.'

"Roger that, control. We're go. Lieutenant Venares, on my mark, engage the first Crystal."

"Yes, Captain," Tianna said, and let her finger hover above the red start button.

"Mark!"

Tianna pressed the button, and the kick in the backside returned. As before, the stars changed, and the streaks of light returned.

"Doctor Penrum, numbers, please?" Lorna said, as the stars whizzed by outside the craft.

"Everything's A-OK."

"Good. Lieutenant Falaan, how many seconds since activation of first Crystal?"

"... 22... 23... 24... 25..."

"Keep counting out loud. Lieutenant Venares, at forty seconds, engage the second Crystal."

"Yes, Captain," Tianna said, and wiped some sweat off her brow.

"... 37... 38... 39... 40!" Xinda said, and Tianna pressed the button to activate the second Crystal.

Once again the stars outside changed - this time they became solid bars of light, and the color of space itself began to change from a deep black to a purple hue.

"Whoa!" Xinda exclaimed loudly as she saw the colors change. As soon as she realized she had said that out loud, she blushed, and looked down.

"What's our speed, Lieutenant Venares?"

"Factor 3.5, 3.8, 4.1, 4.0... holding at Factor 4.0, Captain."

"Lieutenant Falaan, I hope you're tracking our progress on the NAVICOM...?"

"I am, Captain. We're on course."

"Good. Lieutenant Venares, prepare to engage the third Crystal. Once again at forty seconds, please. Lieutenant Falaan, count out loud."

"38... 39... 40!"

Tianna pressed the button that activated the third and final Crystal, and the gauges for the coolant temperatures immediately climbed to more than 600 degrees.

"Captain, it's getting hot."

"When it reaches 650 degrees, you hit Abort."

"Yes, Captain."

"Speed reading, please."

"Factor 5.7, 5.8, 5.8, 6.0..."

"No problems with the computers, Captain," Derro said, tapping away like a madman to keep up with the flow of data.

Suddenly, the lights in the cockpit blacked out for a split second. Lorna furrowed her brow, and looked out of the Plasteel window, where all the stars were still solid bars of light. At first, she thought it had only been an optical illusion, but when she looked down at the panels, she immediately noticed that all the computers were rebooting.

"Fuck!" she roared, making the other crew members turn around and stare at her.

"Hit the Abort! We're in trouble," Lorna said to Tianna, who hurriedly thrust her hand down on the Abort button.

"Oh, God! It's not working!" Tianna cried out, and clutched her head.

At the exact same time, the temperature of the Crystals climbed above 650 degrees, and all sorts of alarms and warnings went off in the cockpit.

"665 degrees, and still climbing!"

Lorna took a deep breath, and rubbed her forehead.

"All right. Doctor Penrum, go in the backway, and disable the son of a bitch, on the double!"

"Yes, Captain," Derro said, and started typing even faster.

"702 d-degrees!"

"What's our speed, Lieutenant Venares?"

When no answer was forthcoming, Lorna turned around, and grabbed hold of Tianna's arm.

"We might be fucked, but unless we work together, we're definitely going to be. Do you understand?"

"Y... yes, Captain. Factor 6.0 and h-h-holding."

"Lieutenant Falaan, are we still on course?"

"I can't say, Captain. The NAVICOM hasn't recovered from the crash yet."

"Terrific...."

"810 degrees...! 875 degrees...!"

"Critical mass for the Crystals is at 1050 degrees. Once we reach that, it's all over," Lorna said, and snorted.

Suddenly the Star Voyager lost all power, and everything became pitch black. The Crystals disengaged abruptly, and the craft returned to normal space.

After a minute of frantic activity by the crew, the emergency lights kicked in, and bathed everything in a reddish light.

"Great. That's all we needed. Status report," Lorna growled.

"All my computers are down, Captain," Derro said.

"As is the NAVICOM. Actually, it still hadn't recovered from the first blackout, so..." Xinda said, and shrugged.

"Lieutenant Venares?"

"Well, the speed indicator is still showing Hyperlight Factor 6, but that's..." Tianna said, and turned around so she could look out the window.

"... rather obviously not correct. The temperature gauge has stabilized on 920 degrees, but I can't tell if that's bogus or not, Captain," she continued.

"Base control, this is the Star Voyager, do you read us? ... Base control, this is the Star Voyager, do you read? No, they don't. Great," Lorna said, and took off the headset - it was only transmitting static.

"Now what?" Xinda said, and leaned back in her seat.

"First we wait for the backup batteries to get online, and then we start working on a solution, Lieutenant."

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CHAPTER 3

Ten minutes later, the power had been partially restored, and most of the computers had come back.

Xinda stopped punching in numbers into the NAVICOM, and looked around. None of the others seemed to have noticed the small vibration, so she shrugged, and went back to work.

A few seconds later, the vibration returned, only this time, it was so strong they all felt it.

"Wh-what was that, Captain?" Tianna said.

"I'm not sure. But the way things are going, it's probably bad news," Lorna said, and turned a few knobs.

"Captain, I've managed to get a partial reply back from the sensors. Some of them are only transmitting garbage, but some are good. The coolant temperature is confirmed at 925 degrees... and climbing. A minute ago, it was at 922 degrees," Derro said.

"Oh, god!"

"Don't panic, we're not toast yet," Lorna said strongly. She picked up the headset, and held it to her ear, but it was still only sending static, so she grunted, and put it down again.

"Lieutenant Falaan, is the NAVICOM up yet?"

"Not yet, Captain, but I'm on the last set of coordinates. It won't take long."

"All right. As soon as you have established where we are, activate the Sublight engines, and turn the lunchbox around so we can head for home."

"Yes, Captain."

"The Sublight engines are online, and standing by. Should I proceed?" Xinda said, holding her finger on the button.

"Go ahead," Lorna said, and watched Xinda press down on the button. The small gauge climbed quickly, and then flashed green. They could clearly hear the hum from the engines, and also a small vibration.

"Sublight engines have been activated, Captain. Turning for home," Xinda said, and followed the progress on the NAVICOM's readout.

"Go to 0.9 Sublight, Lieu..."

Suddenly a violent vibration shook the Voyager, and a shockwave swept through the craft, nearly

throwing the crew members out of their seats.

"Captain! All three Crystals have engaged!" Tianna cried out, her voice increasing in volume along the way until it was a near-shriek.

Outside the window, the stars changed, and became long streaks. The strong vibration returned, and made it almost impossible for the crew members to hang on - then space changed color to purple, indicating that the Voyager had reached Factor 4 or higher.

"Falaan! Where are we going?!"

"I can't tell, Captain! We're off the charts!"

"Captain, the speed indicator is going crazy...! We're at Factor 6.0, 6.7, 7.5, 8.2... 8.8... and still climbing!"

"Disengage the Crystals!" Lorna barked, hanging to her chair on for dear life.

"I can't! Nothing works!"

Another strong vibration shook the craft, and space changed appearance again - this time all the streaks disappeared, and were replaced by a solid wall that pulsed between a bright purple and a dark red.

After a while, the vibrations mercifully receded and then stopped completely.

"The coolant temperature is at 1026 degrees, Captain! Everything's boiling hot back there!"

"Everything's so quiet... are we still flying? Did the Crystals disengage? Derro?"

"Not according to the sensors. The speed indicator is still climbing."

He reached past the trembling Tianna, and tapped his finger on the small display showing the speed. He sighed, and shook his head.

"I can't explain it, Captain, but it appears that we're going at Factor 289."

Lorna's head whipped round, and she turned her chair.

"Come again, Doctor?"

"The display says Hyperlight Factor 289, Captain."

"I'll be... Lieutenant Falaan, which direction were we headed when everything went haywire?"

"We were roughly headed for home, Captain."

"Well, I think it's safe to say we're well past home now," Lorna said, and looked out of the window at the creepy red and purple wall.

"Hyperlight Factor 289, that's insane. I distinctly remember our professors at the Academy telling us that anything above Factor 10 wasn't even hypothetically possible. It must be a garbage reading, Captain," Derro said.

"And Man couldn't break the sound barrier, either. Well, whatever it is, I've never seen anything like that in the twenty years I've been out here," Lorna said, and pointed at the screen.

"But it doesn't feel like we're moving at all!"

"Perhaps we've unleashed the true power of the Crystals?" Xinda said, trying to keep the NAVICOM updated.

"Perhaps we have. Too bad that no one will ever find out," Lorna said.

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"Coolant temperature at 1020 degrees, which is slightly below the last reading, Captain," Tianna said, and wiped some sweat off her brow with a trembling hand.

"Oh...! Wait a minute! The Crystals only read 20% charged... and falling," she continued.

"Captain, what'll happen when the Crystals are spent?" Xinda said, and turned to look at Lorna.

"Quite honestly, Lieutenant... I don't know. As far as I know, no one has ever run a Crystal dry before. I guess we'll be the first to find out. Lieutenant Venares, keep an eye on that gauge."

"I will, Captain."

A few minutes later, a vibration shook the Voyager, and Tianna's panel showed several warnings.

"Captain, the second Crystal has disengaged itself."

"The second? Not the third?"

"Negative, Captain. It's the second. The first Crystal is down to 7%, but the third is still running at 25% charge."

Lorna shook her head, and looked out of the window. As she was watching, the stars changed back to being solid bars of light.

"What's our speed?"

"The indicator's stuck at Factor 289, Captain," Derro said.

"Well, we're not going that fast anymore. All right, it appears that once all three Crystals have reached zero, we'll come to a halt. Lieutenant Venares, inform me when the first Crystal is close to running out."

"Yes, Captain."

"Lieutenant Falaan, in the mean time, you and I will try to come up with a procedure that'll redirect power from the Sublight engines to the Crystals."

"Captain... are you planning on reactivating the Crystals?" Xinda said, shocked.

"Well... I realize it's risky to try, but I can't see we have much choice, Lieutenant. The Sublight engines won't be of much use for us way out here, and we don't even know where 'here' is, I might add. I doubt that we've been travelling at Factor 289, but even at Factor 10, we'll have flown through half the galaxy by now."

"I understand. We're literally in uncharted territory," Xinda said, and leaned back in her chair.

"Heh. That's a good description, Lieutenant."

"Captain, the first Crystal is down to 3%."

"All right. Stand by for a jolt," Lorna said, and gripped the armrests of her chair.

When the Crystal reached zero %, the familiar vibration returned, and the craft slowed considerably.

"Captain, the speed indicator has reset itself. It's now showing Factor 2."

"That's more like it, Doctor Penrum. All right... Lieutenant, try Aborting."

Tianna pushed the Abort button, but at first, nothing happened. Just when she felt a panic creeping up on her, the third Crystal disengaged, and the Voyager returned to regular Sublight flight. The automatic thrusters kicked in, and stopped the craft.

"Phew..." Tianna said, and closed her eyes.

"We salvaged 18% energy in the third Crystal, Captain."

"Excellent, Doctor Penrum. That gives us a little breathing space. Lieutenant Falaan, I need your help... Lieutenant, are you all right?" Lorna said, as she noticed Xinda Falaan was sitting with

her eyes wide open, staring into space.

"Buh... S-s-ship... A-a-aliens..." Xinda said, and raised her arm to point out of the window.

Lorna turned her head to follow Xinda's hand, and when she saw the same thing Xinda did, she felt her jaw fall further and further down towards her chest.

Just a few hundred yards beyond the Plasteel window, a large, sleek starship was hovering in space. At least six times larger than the Voyager, the alien starship was cigar-shaped, and painted in red and black colors, save for a row of windows near the front that were illuminated by a pale blue light. The starship was apparently put together seamlessly, as not a single rivet protruded from the surface, nor were there any visible hatches or ladders.

"Good lord almighty!" Tianna croaked, and put her hands on the panels in front of her.

As the alien starship crept closer, Xinda thought she could see a humanoid figure standing in what she surmised was the cockpit, waving its arms furiously.

"I... I t-think they want us to move!" she whispered.

"One second later, and we would've knocked straight into it!" Lorna said.

"Captain, I think we should move... it looks like we're in their way."

"What...? Oh, yes. Good thinking, Lieutenant. Activate the thrusters. Let the... the... aliens slide past us."

"Yes, Captain," Xinda said, and fired the thrusters.

A minute or so later, the alien starship flew above them, and out of sight.

"Wow. I guess we can tick off the 'Is there life in space?'-box, huh?" Derro said, and ran a hand through his hair.

"It's sort of ironic that we're actually the aliens in this particular situation," Lorna said, and took a deep breath.

She shook her head, and fell back into her customary role.

"OK. We've wasted enough time. Lieutenant Falaan, turn the ship around. I want to see where that huge thing went. While you do that, I'll be working on rerouting the power from the Sublight engines to the Crystals, as we agreed on."

"Yes, Captain," Xinda said, and activated the thrusters, to make the Voyager spin on its axis.

Lorna unbuckled her seatbelt, and got out of her chair. She was surprised that the artificial

gravity still worked, but as it would make her job easier, she wasn't about to complain. She got down on her knees, and started turning a screw to remove a panel.

"Ummmm, Captain...? You better see this."

"More problems?"

"More aliens..." Xinda said, and once again pointed out of the window.

As the Voyager turned around, a large group of alien starships came into view. Some were similar to the one they had just met, and some were even larger. It appeared they were all traveling to or from a space station of gigantic proportions, painted in the same colors as the ships, and sporting a multitude of blinking red lights.

"O... K. I don't think we should get any closer to that station, Lieutenant."

"I agree, Captain. Do you think it's some sort of trade station?"

"Could be. Or it's a military outpost. We better just play possum, but we probably shouldn't hang around too long... or else they might get interested in this 'alien' ship. Lieutenant, start working on the NAVICOM's logs. Try to extrapolate a heading that will take us home."

"Yes, Captain."

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After wading through endless logs filled with nothing but garbage data, Xinda let out a long sigh, and leaned back in her seat.

"Captain, I think we have a problem."

"Another one?"

"I'm afraid so. The logs are useless, and we're apparently so far away from even the nearest node in the Galaxy-Wide Positioning System that the NAVICOM only picks up static, static and more static."

"We're doomed!" Tianna said.

"We're not doomed until I say so! You understand?" Lorna said strongly, and looked directly at Tianna.

"Y-yes, Captain."

"Good. I refuse to give up before we've even tried to get back. I'm no quitter, and I know none of you are, either... and besides, there'll be plenty of time to panic later."

The other crew members stared wide-eyed at the Captain, who couldn't hide a smug grin.

"Sorry. Poor choice of words," she said, and winked.

"I'll get back to the data, Captain," Xinda said, and briefly wondered if Lorna was suffering from a lack of oxygen.

Lorna got off the floor, and dusted off her hands.

"So, that's the last of it. Doctor Penrum, tell me your readings?"

"There's not much happening, Captain. The coolant temperatures have dropped considerably, though."

"Well, I guess that's at least something."

"Yes, but I can't read any power being transferred at all. I don't think it'll work this way, Captain."

"Hmmm... what's the status on the Crystals?"

"The first and second both read zero, and the third is stable at 18%."

"Doctor Penrum, try to reprogram the sequence of the Crystals. I have a feeling the reason it doesn't do anything is because it's the third Crystal that's still charged. Maybe it can't see past the first, empty, Crystal."

"That's a good theory, Captain. I'll get to it at once."

"Good."

"Captain, I think I may have found something. It's not much, but it definitely resembles a pattern," Xinda said, and pointed at the NAVICOM.

"Oh?"

"Yes, take a look at this... this set of numbers is repeated ever so often. At first I thought it was a coincidence, but it's too regular to be so."

Lorna leaned in over Xinda's shoulder, and studied the numbers. As she did so, she couldn't help noticing the pleasant scent of the young woman, and she felt a pang of regret that they couldn't have met in a slightly more friendly situation.

'That might've been verrry interesting...' Lorna thought, and cleared her throat.

"The homing beacon?"

"Possibly. Or the nearest GWPS relay satellite."

"That would help us, too. That's good work, Lieutenant. It's about time we got a break. Turn the Voyager around until it lines up with those coordinates."

"But Captain, we don't know if that's actually a heading for home...?"

"It can't hurt to try."

"I suppose not... All right, hang on, we're coming about," Xinda said, and activated the thrusters.

The Star Voyager slowly spun around, leaving the alien space station behind. Soon, they were looking at a myriad of foreign stars peppered across the blackness of deep space.

"We're lined up, Captain."

Xinda sighed, and leaned back in her seat. She put a hand over her stomach to quell the uneasy feeling that was growing there.

"Good. Don't worry too much, Lieutenant. We'll get home," Lorna said, and patted Xinda's shoulder.

"Captain, I couldn't change the sequence of the Crystals, so instead, I've made a small program that instructs the computer to ignore an empty Crystal. And since both the first and the second Crystals are empty, it'll go straight to the third... in theory."

"Well done, Doctor Penrum. We're about to test that theory."

Suddenly the white noise in the headsets changed modulation, and began sounding like a sequence of very fast beeps.

"Captain... are... are they trying to communicate with us?" Xinda said.

"It's possible. I guess it's something we'd try, if the situation was reversed. Damn thing is that we don't know how to say that we've broken down, and could need a push," Lorna said, and quickly sat down in her seat.

"It sounds a lot like very fast Morse code..." Derro said.

"Don't be ridiculous, Doctor. We're on the other side of the galaxy, how would these guys know Morse code? No, it's just a series of beeps. But it's still amazing... Doctor, are we still recording the cockpit communication?"

"Well, we were, but it never came back online after the first blackout."

"Damn."

Abruptly, the transmission ended, and a huge starship flew very close past the Star Voyager. It completely blocked out the sun, and blanketed the cockpit in darkness.

"Wow... will you look at the size of that thing... it must be a mothership of some kind," Xinda said, gawking out of the window at the alien starship.

Silently, it moved further and further away, until Xinda and the others were able to see the entire ship. It was cigar-shaped like the first one they had met, and it was painted in the same red and black colors. It also appeared to have been put together seamlessly, but unlike the first ship, it was dotted with thousands of little red lights.

"They've probably given up trying to communicate with us. We're nothing but flies to them," Lorna said, and put down the headset.

"I wonder what they were trying to say..." Xinda said to herself.

"Where the hell did you come from?" or something close to it. Oh, enough of this nonsense. Doctor Penrum, Lieutenants, get ready to engage the Crystal. It's time to go home," Lorna said, and slammed her fist down on the armrest of her chair.

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"The third Crystal is now at 39% and holding, Captain."

"Good, at least that part seems to work. Let's see if the next one does as well. Everybody, buckle up. It might get bumpy."

They did so, and once again turned around to look at the Captain.

"Lieutenant Falaan, are you certain we're pointed in the right direction?"

"As certain as I can be, Captain."

"All right. Lieutenant Venares, on my mark, engage the Crystal."

"Roger, Captain," Tianna said, and let her finger hover above the large, red button.

"Mark!"

Tianna bit her lip, and pressed the button.

At first, nothing seemed to happen, but then the familiar vibration returned, shaking the crew members momentarily - and then they could all hear a tell-tale crackle of electricity that definitely wasn't supposed to be there.

Suddenly, the panel right in front of Lorna's legs blew out in a shower of sparks, and a long flame reached out for her. Even though Lorna moved her legs away, the flame got hold of the fabric of her uniform, turning it black in a matter of seconds.

"Captain!" Xinda shouted, and thumped down her hand on the quick-release mechanism of her seatbelts. She jumped out of her chair, and began to douse out Lorna's smoldering uniform with her hands.

The panel crackled again, and released a small cloud of green smoke that rose up and made both Lorna's and Xinda's eyes sting.

"Captain, we need to get the fire out!" Xinda said in a near-panic, but Lorna put her hand on Xinda's arm and held on tight.

"Calm down, Lieutenant, it's already out."

"But...!"

"It's out. Doctor Penrum, did it affect the Crystal?"

"Negative, Captain."

"Good. Jeez, Lieutenant, look at your hands!" Lorna said as she noticed the sorry state of Xinda's hands.

Xinda looked down, and felt her heart skip a beat. The palms of her hands were blackened, and they had already begun to sting terribly.

"Oh, god, it hurts..." Xinda said, and clenched her teeth. The pain worsened, and she almost began to hyperventilate.

Lorna quickly reached behind her chair, and pulled out a first-aid kit. She unclipped the lid, and took out a disinfectant spray and a roll of bandages.

"What were you thinking, Lieutenant?"

"I was... I w-was trying to..."

"I know what you were trying to do, but we have a lot more need for your hands than we do for my legs. Doctor Penrum... come over here, and grab hold of the Lieutenant's shoulders. I'm sorry, Xinda. This is going to sting like hell," Lorna said, and held up the spray.

"All right..."

Lorna sprayed the fluid onto the burns, and Xinda's eyes popped wide open. She opened her mouth, but not a sound came out. When the pain continued to get worse, she squeezed her eyes shut, and a few tears ran down her cheeks. After a minute, she started shaking from the pain, but Derro held on tight to stop her from falling out of her chair.

A few minutes later, Xinda's hands had been treated with an ointment, and were safely wrapped in the bandage, leaving only the tips of her fingers free to work the NAVICOM.

Lorna patted Xinda on the shoulder, and leaned in towards the young Lieutenant's ear so the others wouldn't be able to hear what she said.

"Thanks for trying to rescue me, Xinda. You've proved you're worthy of the bar on your uniform. I'll make a note of it in my report when we get back," Lorna whispered.

Xinda looked up and locked eyes with Lorna. She managed a weak nod, and a faint smile.

"You're welcome, Captain... and thank you," she said hoarsely.

"Captain... I've been thinking. Is it possible to get to the engines and work directly on the Crystals? My reasoning is that if we could get there, and take a look for ourselves, we'd be able to fix whatever's wrong. It might only be a little thing," Tianna said.

"Well, yes, it's possible to get to the engines... but once you're there, you needn't worry about making plans for the rest of your life, because you'll only have ten minutes left. The radiation will roast you from the inside out."

"Oh... never mind."

"We might need to do it, Captain," Derro said quietly.

"Look, we'll cross that bridge when we get to it. I think I know what went wrong with the panel, so I'll give it one last shot. If it still fails, I'll go back there."

"But, Captain!" Xinda said, shocked.

"I have the command, I'll take the risks, Lieutenant. But as I said, we're not there yet."

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CHAPTER 4

"So... let me see... if I assume that the chip on card A still works, I could take it off and insert it on card B, and then move card B to slot C... it might work..." Lorna mumbled to herself, kneeling on the floor in front of the opened panel.

She reached in, and started to check all the solderings on the print cards. She furrowed her brow, and wiped off her sweaty face on her sleeve.

"Doctor Penrum, inform me at once if there's a change in the charge in either the Crystal or the Sublight engines."

"Yes, Captain."

Lorna yanked one of the ruined print cards out, and pried the chip off it. She tried to smell it, but the penetrating stench of burned plastic drowned out everything else.

She grimaced, but put the chip carefully down on the floor anyway. She reached in, and took out the second print card. She checked it thoroughly, and came to the conclusion that it was all right.

Trying very hard not to ruin both items, she used her thumb to press the chip down into the socket of the print card - with a mighty squeeze, it finally clicked into place.

She dusted off the print card, and inserted it into slot C. After checking that all cards were firmly in place, she closed the panel, and got up from the floor.

"All right, let's see if that did the trick," Lorna said, and sat down in her chair. She locked the seatbelts in place, and turned around.

"Lieutenant Venares, are you ready?"

"Ready, Captain."

"Engage the Crystal."

Tianna pressed down the red button, but instead of the expected vibration, the lights and the panels faded until they were almost out - they stayed that way for a few seconds, and then they came back to full strength.

"Damn!" Lorna growled, and hurriedly checked her computers to see if any of them had suffered from the loss of power.

"Captain, the NAVICOM is still online," Xinda said, trying to keep up with the data flow with only her index fingers.

"The Crystal's status is unchanged, Captain. Holding at 39% charge," Derro said.

Lorna leaned back in her seat, and covered her eyes with her hand. She sighed, and rubbed her brow. She turned the chair around, and looked at the hatch in the center of the cockpit floor. Four screws were all that separated her from the access tunnel that led to the engines - and certain death.

With a shiver, she recalled an incident that had happened many years ago on one of her first flights when she was still a rookie Lieutenant. When a craft she was a crewmember on was docked for repairs, the containment field for the Crystals had collapsed without warning, and the subsequent implosion had blown a lethal cloud of radiation through the ship.

She could still remember the overwhelming sense of sorrow and grief she had felt when she had returned from an insignificant task only to see an emergency team carry her colleagues, her friends, out of the craft, all dead, and all scarred beyond recognition by the radiation.

Lorna sighed again, and ran a hand through her hair.

With a muted curse, Lorna got back down on the floor, and opened the panel that had caused them so much trouble.

She had almost finished checking, when she suddenly spotted an item deep inside the panel that definitely wasn't supposed to be there. Her eyes narrowed down to gray slits as she leaned forward, stretched out her arm, and reached in - almost to the back wall. With a grunt, she pulled out a piece of wire that had been lodged in between two print cards.

She looked at it, and quickly established that it was the culprit. The insulation was worn off in both ends, and there was no doubt in Lorna's mind that it had been the cause of the short-circuits.

She growled, and put the wire on the seat of her chair. She stuck her entire head in through the panel opening, and gave it a thorough once-over. Satisfied that she couldn't see more errant wires, she closed the panel, and tightened the screws.

"All right. That should do it. Hopefully. Lieutenant Venares, let's redo the ignition sequence from start. First of all, check the coolant temperature."

"Coolant temperature is A-OK, Captain."

"Charge levels, Doctor Penrum?"

"All the Sublight energy has been rerouted to the third Crystal, which still reads 39% and holding."

"All right," Lorna said, and put the errant piece of wire into her pocket. She sat down, and buckled up.

"Lieutenant Falaan, is the heading correct?"

"It should be, Captain," Xinda said, only using the tips of her index fingers to check the NAVICOM.

"Lieutenant Venares, on my mark, engage the Crystal."

"Standing by, Captain."

"Mark!"

Tianna pressed the button, and the familiar vibration returned. After a few seconds, space changed appearance, and the stars became long streaks of light.

"Yay!" Tianna cried out, and threw her arms in the air.

"All readings are good, Captain," Derro said.

"Heading is good, Captain," Xinda said, constantly checking and rechecking the NAVICOM.

"Crystal running normal, coolant temperature at 590 degrees and slowly climbing, as expected. We had a momentary spike to 610 degrees when it was engaged, but everything's within the limits at present. So far, so good," Tianna said, and tapped the display with her index finger.

"Oh... the speed indicator is once again relaying garbage data. Presently, it's showing Hyperlight Factor 311, Captain."

"Ignore it, Lieutenant."

"Yes, Captain."

"Doctor Penrum, monitor the Crystal closely. Once the charge level drops from 39%, run a calculation on its life expectancy. That would be an interesting figure to know."

"Will do, Captain. Still at 39%."

"Captain, the Crystal has dropped to 38% charge. It took four minutes, 42 seconds. That means we'll run out of Crystal power in two hours, 58 minutes and 22 seconds."

"Thank you, Doctor Penrum. Keep monitoring it," Lorna said, and turned her chair around.

"Lieutenants, listen up, please. As you heard, we have slightly less than three hours' worth of power left. Once that runs out, we'll be drifting aimlessly through space, so we better hope we'll

be close enough to the base to send out an automated distress call, or better yet, get in actual contact with them."

"We're still on the correct heading, Captain... but like I said before, I don't know if that'll lead us home. There's a risk it might be wrong," Xinda said.

"Well... I guess we'll find out sooner or later. But it's about time we've had some good luck. All right, that's it. Get back to work," Lorna said, and started turning some knobs on her panel.

After a few minutes, Lorna moved over to Xinda, and checked if the bandages were still in place.

"Are you still in pain, Lieutenant?"

"Some. It's not too bad, thank you."

With a smile, Lorna nodded, and patted Xinda on her shoulder.

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"Captain, the third and last remaining Crystal is at 5%," Derro said.

"All right. Stand by to disengage the Crystal, Lieutenant."

"We're not going to let it run dry?"

"No, we're not, Lieutenant Venares. I've given it some more thought, and I've come to the conclusion that if we've not ended up where we thought we would, a little extra energy might come in handy."

"Sounds like a good plan, Captain. Standing by," Tianna said, and moved her hand to the Abort button.

"Disengage the Crystal, Lieutenant."

"Disengaging, Captain," Tianna said, and pressed the button.

The craft returned to normal space, and slowly began drifting forward.

"Speed is 0.1 Sublight, Captain. Must be the drifting, because none of the sensors in or near the Sublight engines register any energy," Derro said, and typed away on the panel's keyboard.

"As predicted. Doctor, proceed with the regulatory shut down of the Sublight engines, and also the Crystal. And for God's sake, monitor the containment field."

"Yes, Captain."

"Lieutenant Falaan, what does the NAVICOM say?"

"Not much at the moment, I'm afraid, Captain. Stand by... please."

"All right, standing by," Lorna said, and chuckled over Xinda's way of phrasing the request.

A few minutes later, Xinda had run a full frequency sweep, but had found nothing. She scratched her temple, and wiped away a drop of sweat that had found its way onto her forehead.

"Captain, with your permission, I'd like to reboot the NAVICOM."

"Reboot it?" Lorna said, and got up from her chair.

"Yes. I have a feeling that it's still misbehaving. I'm not picking up anything, not even the signal we followed to get here."

"Hmmm. Proceed."

"Proceeding, Captain," Xinda said, and reset the navigational computer. After a minute or so of running all kinds of startup-tests, the NAVICOM came online, and a handful of signals immediately pinged in on the monitor - Xinda recognized one of them in particular.

"That's it! That the homing beacon of the base!" Xinda said, and almost jumped up and down in her chair.

"And you're sure it's not garbage data, Lieutenant?"

"It's not garbage, Captain. Recognizing that pattern was the very first thing we were taught on the very first day at the Academy. It's the base."

"Excellent work, Lieutenant. Compose and transmit a distress signal."

"Yes, Captain. According to the NAVICOM, we've arrived just outside the Sol system, but inside the Kuiper Belt."

Lorna looked out of the Plasteel window, and shielded her eyes with her hand.

"So that's Sol, eh? Can't really tell the difference, to be brutally honest. Doctor Penrum, what's the mission time?"

"Seven hours, 49 minutes, Captain."

"That's all? It feels like twice that," Lorna said, and shook her weary head.

"The distress signal is being transmitted, Captain."

"Good. Let's hope it won't take too long for the Consortium to send out a tug boat. Take a moment to relax, everybody. You've all worked hard, and... honestly, I'm very proud of you. You've done well," Lorna said, and sat down in her seat. She stretched out her legs, and put her hands behind her head.

"Thank you, Captain," all three crew members said.

"Captain, we have two ships incoming," Xinda said, and double-checked her monitor.

"Two ships? Hopefully ours?"

"Yes, they have the Consortium's Friend or Foe code, Captain. We've got our back turned to them."

"How rude. Activate the thrusters so we can face our guests."

"Yes, Captain."

The thrusters kicked in, and slowly rotated the craft so the two approaching ships came into view.

"There they are. The big one's a tug... and the small one looks like it's a patrol craft," Lorna said, and furrowed her brow.

"I didn't mention anything about injuries in the distress signal, Captain."

"Hmmm..."

Suddenly the radio came alive for the first time since the aliens tried to communicate with the Voyager, and Lorna put on the headset, and adjusted the earpiece.

"Say again, please," she said into the mic.

'Unknown craft, identify yourself,' a male voice said from the radio.

Lorna's eyebrows shot up her forehead, and then they slowly started moving down again.

"Patrol, this is the Star Voyager. How many lost ships do you have, anyway? What's going on?"

'Star Voyager, you are to follow us back to the base.'

"That's a negative, Patrol. Our Sublight engines are depleted of energy."

'Stand by.'

"Standing by."

"Captain, what on Earth is going on?" Tianna said.

"I'm not sure, Lieutenant. Maybe they're afraid we're a bio-hazard..."

"Why did they ask us to identify ourselves, Captain?"

"I don't have an answer to that question, Doctor."

'Star Voyager, prepare to be towed.'

"Patrol, we're ready."

The tug boat moved up, and hovered immediately ahead of them. Two long arms with magnetic suction cups were extended from the craft, and drifted back towards the Star Voyager. After a minute, the cups attached themselves to the Voyager's hull with loud clangs.

'Star Voyager, this is Shuttle 419. The suction cups are locked in position. Stand by for towing.'

"Shuttle 419, commence towing at your discretion," Lorna said into the headset, and then covered the mic with her hand.

"Lieutenant Falaan, disable the thrusters. We can't have them online while we're being towed."

"Yes, Captain," Xinda said, and quickly punched in a few commands.

The tug boat started, and a few seconds later, the Star Voyager moved forward with a sudden jerk.

"Easy does it, big fella!" Lorna said, and held on to her armrests.

She tapped her fingers on her thigh, and then reached for the headset.

"Patrol, this is the Star Voyager. Why did you request that we identified ourselves?"

'I'm sorry, Captain, that's a topic that cannot be discussed on an open frequency.'

"I see. Star Voyager out," Lorna said, and took off the headset. She put it on its hook, and shrugged.

"Perhaps it's because we met the aliens?" Tianna offered.

"Well, there's no way the Consortium would know about that," Lorna said with a smile.

"Oh... of course not," Tianna said, and blushed.

"It's best not to speculate. We'll know what it's about soon enough," Lorna said, and leaned back in her seat.

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Some time later, the tug boat had brought them close to the space station. The magnetic suction cups were released, and the long arms were retracted.

'Star Voyager, this is as far as I can take you. Use your thrusters to enter the docking bay.'

"Shuttle 419, we copy. Star Voyager out," Lorna said, and turned to Xinda.

"Reactivate the thrusters, Lieutenant."

Xinda went to work on the panel, and pressed Enter.

"The thrusters are back online, Captain."

"Take us home."

"Yes, Captain."

Xinda took the flight control stick, and activated the thrusters. The craft began to move forward, inching ever closer to the space station. The huge doors opened for them, and they were soon able to see the brightly lit docking bay.

She rotated the craft to line up correctly on the Z-axis, and pressed the button to activate the magneto forcefield. As soon as they were through the doors, she extended the landing gear, and looked for a suitable place to touch down.

The Star Voyager slid to a halt in the middle of the bay, and Xinda lowered the craft down, hoping to execute a soft landing. As soon as she could feel all four legs touch the floor of the docking bay, she deactivated the thrusters and the magneto forcefield.

"We're home, Captain," she said, and wiped her damp brow.

"Excellent work, Lieutenant," Lorna said, and got up from her chair. She looked through the Plasteel window, and furrowed her brow.

The docking bay was apparently in full quarantine mode, as all the warning lights were flashing, and the blast doors separating the bay from the space station itself were locked.

"Doctor Penrum, what's the status on the Crystal containment field?"

"The containment field is operating at 100% efficiency, Captain. The Crystal coolant temperature is at 480 degrees and falling. All the readings are good."

"Good."

As if on cue, one of the blast doors opened, and a small army of technicians swarmed in. They were all wearing bright yellow contamination suits, and they were all carrying electronic equipment so they could quickly pick up any possible radiation leaks.

'Star Voyager, this is base control. Do not, I repeat, do not unlock and open the hatch until we're there.'

"Control, we copy. The hatch will stay sealed," Lorna said.

"That's odd. I guess they're following some kind of emergency procedure I'm not familiar with," she said to the others, and shrugged.

Soon, the army of technicians had moved a strange looking ladder up to the hatch. A contraption resembling a large tent was at the top of the ladder, and two workers attached the tent to the hull of the Voyager.

One of the workers waved his hand, and two men walked up the ladder, both carrying a large bag. A door was opened in the tent, and they stepped inside. Behind them, a worker sealed the door, to prevent radiation from escaping from the craft.

'Star Voyager, you may unlock and open the hatch,' the first man said, as he was waiting by the hatch.

"Roger, control," Lorna said, and reached over to press a button on one of the panels.

The magnetic locks on the hatch retracted, and the door was opened. The two men stepped inside the Voyager, and at once started checking the radiation levels with the electronic equipment.

"The containment field is holding, gentlemen. There's no need for all the drama," Lorna said at the sight of the two suited men.

"Unfortunately there is, Captain. I'm Colonel Robert Jones. Welcome back."

"Well... thank you, Colonel."

"Captain Iverson, Lieutenants, Doctor, you need to put these contamination suits on immediately."

"Look..."

"Immediately, Captain."

Lorna put her hands on her hips, and thrust her jaw forward.

"This is probably a good time to tell us what the hell's going on."

"I don't have the security clearance to tell you. Sorry, Captain. Professor Hernandez will tell you everything when you meet him in the debriefing room."

Lorna sighed, and shrugged.

"All right. There's no point in arguing. You heard the Colonel," she said, and reached for the contamination suit the man was holding.

The others all grumbled, but took their suits.

"Colonel Jones, is it really necessary for us to be escorted by a heavily armed detail of the Black Guard?" Lorna said as the group walked through a hallway on an upper level, headed for the debriefing rooms.

"I have my orders, Captain."

"I'm sure you do, Colonel," Lorna said surly.

"Captain, what's going on?" Xinda said.

"Beats me, Lieutenant. I hope Professor Hernandez will be able to shed some light on this peculiar tale."

"Oh, Captain Iverson! I'm so glad you made it back alive," the elderly Professor said, as Lorna and the others entered the debriefing room.

"Thank you, Doctor," Lorna said, and pulled out a chair.

"Lieutenant Falaan, Lieutenant Venares, Doctor Penrum, I'm happy to see you, too," Professor Hernandez said, and smiled broadly.

"Thank you," Tianna and the others said, returning the doctor's smile.

"Come in. Sit down."

"Can we lose these clown suits?" Lorna said.

"Not yet, I'm afraid, Captain."

"You better have a damn good explanation, Professor," Lorna said, and sat down on the chair. Because of the suit, she could hardly move, and she sat down rather clumsily.

"Well... perhaps we should start at the beginning," Professor Hernandez said, and moved to the head of the room.

"That's usually the best place to start," Lorna said, and tried to cross her arms - only to find that she couldn't.

"I don't know how to tell you this, but... how long was the mission time?" the Professor said.

"Doctor Penrum?" Lorna said, and gave up the unequal struggle with her suit.

"Seven hours, 49 minutes when we returned to the Sol system. Eight hours, 30 minutes after the towing."

"Well... that's the problem right there. It wasn't eight hours. It was eight months."

A shocked silence spread out between the crew. Xinda's eyes grew wider and wider as the message sunk in, Tianna looked like she'd seen a ghost, and Doctor Penrum just shook his head.

"Come again, Doctor?" Lorna said, and leaned forward so she could put her elbows on the tabletop.

"You've been missing in space for eight months, Captain Iverson."

"But..."

"And I'm afraid your quarters have long since been cleared out."

"OK, now wait just a minute..."

"Your belongings have been put in storage. We needed the space for the new crews," Professor Hernandez said, and shrugged with an embarrassed smirk on his face.

Lorna threw her arms in the air, and growled.

"And... that's not all."

"Can it get any worse, Professor Hernandez?"

The elderly Professor blushed, and looked down.

"Unfortunately, it can. You've all been declared 'missing, presumed dead'. And your next of kin have all been notified."

"Well, they're just gonna have to be un-notified. This is a disgrace, Professor!" Lorna said, and slammed her fist down onto the table.

"You were gone for eight months, Captain. The only thing we could do was to follow the regulatory procedures."

Lorna sighed, and wiggled out of the top of her suit. With a disgusted growl, she threw the yellow monstrosity on the floor, and then kicked off the lower part of the suit.

"But, Captain Iverson! You can't..."

Lorna straightened her uniform, and held out her Captain's insignia for the Professor to see.

"I'm pulling rank, Professor. Lose the suits, everybody."

The others took off their suits too, and threw them in a pile on the floor.

"But...!"

"Now, if you'll excuse me, Professor. We all have a few long distance calls to make," Lorna said, and got up from her chair.

Several hours later, Xinda walked into the Officers' Mess, searching for Lorna. She found her sitting at a table, holding a coffee cup, and staring blankly into the room.

"Captain?"

"Have a seat, Lieutenant," Lorna said, and pushed out a chair with her foot.

"Thank you, Captain."

"Oh, for Pete's sakes, call me Lorna."

"All right."

"Which reminds me... you have a very poetic name, Xinda. Where are you from, anyway?"

"Kansas."

"Oh... that's slightly less poetic," Lorna said, and took a long swig from the coffee cup.

"Well, I happen to like my home state. Where are you from, Lorna?"

"Nebraska."

"See? We're neighbors. Knew it all along."

Lorna chuckled, and emptied her cup. She put it down on the table, and sighed.

"It's crazy, though, isn't it? Yesterday, eight months ago, we were sitting over there..." Lorna said, and pointed at the table they had shared the night before.

"... thinking we were about to go on a regular, standard, piece of cake test run."

"Yeah, well, this hasn't exactly gone the way I expected it to. Not for my first mission, anyway."

"I'll bet," Lorna said, and chuckled again.

Xinda took a deep breath, and looked down at her bandaged hands. She let the air out slowly, and fidgeted for several seconds. Then she took another deep breath, and raised her head so she could look directly at Lorna.

"Listen, Lorna... I've been thinking. You said you like booze, women and dancing just as much as the next pilot...?"

"Yes?"

"I do, too. Well, two out of three, anyway. The last two," Xinda said, and couldn't help blushing slightly.

"Oh...?"

"Yes, and I've been thinking... would you be interested in... you know, going out for a talk and a dance some time?"

Lorna looked up, and their eyes met.

"Well, I guess that since we're officially dead, the standard rule of not fraternizing with a fellow officer can't possibly apply to us. You're on. But I need a shower first."

"Oh, I didn't mean right now..."

"But I did. It's late, but there's a club up on the Ninth level... or rather, there was yesterday, eight months ago. It's called The Panther. It's a very cozy place, very quiet and undisturbed, and..."

well, it's just what the Doctor ordered, basically."

"The Ninth level...?" Xinda said, and pulled out a small map of the space station. She flipped it first one way and then the other, trying to find the correct elevators for the Ninth level.

"You know, perhaps we should meet here instead?" Lorna said with a chuckle.

"That's probably a good idea. Getting lost in space twice in one day isn't my idea of fun," Xinda said, and put the map on the table.

A shy, but genuine, smile creased her lips as she looked up, and locked eyes with Lorna.

"Well, Xinda, I can't wait to find out what your idea of fun actually is," Lorna said, and returned the smile.

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THE END

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