

Austin Station

A story of new beginnings....

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Chapter 1

Sareena, rather than concentrating on her calculus homework like she had meant to do, found herself staring out the huge windows that lined the little cafe. At this time of day, on this end of the station, she was able to get a pretty amazing view of the earth, a planet she had never in her life set foot on. That is why she came here every day at the same time to eat her lunch and study her math. But today, it seemed, she was unable to concentrate on either of these two. She simply sat and stared out the windows. How beautiful the world looked today! She wished she could visit it, somehow, but she would never in her life be able to afford a trip down there. Instead, she accepted Austin Station as her home. She was content enough with that.

She glanced away just quick enough to grab her tofu-burger and begin eating. She gagged on the first bite and spit it back onto her plate. That was enough to kill the mood. She shoved the plate quickly away from her, grabbed her books and backpack and headed out of the quaint little cafe. She glanced back momentarily to see a droid immediately disposing of the mess she had made.

It was a twenty minute walk home, through the wide corridors crammed full of people. The sidewalks seemed to be moving slowly so she went at a brisk walk next to them. This was an easy way of avoiding the crowds. She needed her exercise anyway. Since she was moving toward the center of the station, down spoke four, the earth was to her back and she couldn't look at it as she was walking.

Austin Station had a fairly simple design, eight spokes, extending from a central hub, and connecting with an outer wheel. A ninth spoke extended from the center at a perpendicular angle to the other eight. At the end, there was a large knob, that looked like a giant cattail. The knob housed the artificial gravity systems for the entire station. As Sareena continued on toward the center, closer to the ninth spoke, she could feel her weight increasing. She might weigh forty pounds now, when three minutes ago, in the cafe she only weighed thirty.

As compared to other, newer, stations in orbit around the homeworld, Austin was one of the smaller ones. Built nearly a hundred years earlier, it housed less than fifty thousand people. Sareena, however, did not see it as being at all small. She still hadn't explored every corridor, shop, or cafe, but she had never been off the station to even visit others. This was her home, and while she did wish she could see other places, she had no plans to leave. It was simply too expensive.

She turned the last corner on her way home. She stopped at her door. The identification system beeped happily as it scanned her thumbprint. The door slid open with a barely audible hum. Stepping inside, the first thing Sareena noticed was the strange woman standing in the kitchen. That didn't surprise her. Her father was constantly

bringing home strange women. She was tall, blond, heavy chested. The exact type of woman Sareena would expect from her father.

"Hello," said the woman. "I'm assuming you must be Sareena, correct?"

"That would be me, yes," replied Sareena. "And you're Sarah right?"

The woman looked confused. "What? I'm Carol. Hasn't your father told you about me?"

"He never mentioned any Carol to me."

"He hasn't?"

"Nope."

"So who's Sarah."

Sareena paused. Should I tell her?, she wondered. Dad might get pretty mad. But he had never mentioned anything about any Carol person to her. She had no obligation to help him keep secrets. Sareena said, "She's this girl he's been seeing for the last couple weeks."

Carol stared at her. "Like a girlfriend?"

"That's what he's been telling me."

"I see."

Sareena watched with stifled amusement as Carol glanced around the room as if she had just awoken in a place she had never before seen. "I think I'd better be leaving now," Carol said.

"All right, it was nice meeting you," Sareena said in a cheerful, almost mocking voice. "Is my dad here, by the way?"

"No, no. He's not here. I don't know where he is." And with that, Carol quickly left the apartment, with what seemed like a dazed look on her face.

Sareena chuckled lightly to herself as she carried her book bag to her room and flung it on the bed. "Music," she commanded, and the home computer immediately began playing a randomly selected mix of her preprogrammed favorite tunes. "Volume down three," and the sound was lowered accordingly. "I have to study," she murmured to herself.

She took her Calculus book from her bag and flipped through to the page she had been trying to read before she had left the cafe. She found it a little easier to concentrate on her work, in here where there were no windows to distract her. However, she was still unable to make sense of any of the problems. She tried for nearly half an hour, but in the end, gave up and went on to other homework.

Forty-five minutes later, she was done with everything but her Calculus. She did not want to go back to that again, so she simply sat and listened to her music and eventually fell asleep.

She was awakened by her father as he burst into her room.

He was not a large nor threatening looking figure. He was about forty-two, and starting to bald. He was short for a man of his age but still stood a few inches above Sareena.

"What did you say to Carol today?" he demanded of her.

"What? What are you talking about?" Sareena asked quickly.

"You know what I mean. You had a little chat with Carol. What did you tell her?"

"I talked to her for barely two minutes."

"But what did you say to her? You said something about me and Sarah, didn't you?"

"Yeah, so?" Sareena replied.

"Did you tell her she was my girlfriend."

"Yeah."

He paused, and stared at her, looking perplexed. "Why would you say that?"

"It's true isn't it?" Sareena said. "You told me yourself the other day."

"Well what right do you have to go announcing it to everyone?"

"She asked me who Sarah was. What was I supposed to say?"

He sighed angrily and glared at her as she glared back. "Music off," he said.

The music that had been playing throughout the conversation, continued.

"Music off!" he shouted.

The music continued.

"Computer, pause music," Sareena said, and the sound accordingly stopped. "You have to address yourself to it when there's another person in the room. You really ought to know that by now."

He looked at her, angrily. "Shut up," he said.

She chuckled lightly, raised her eyebrows at him, and pointed at the door. "Get out," she said, mocking his voice.

He took a threatening step toward her. "Don't you tell me what to do in my own home."

She shrugged in a mockingly apologetic way.

"Do you have any idea how much trouble you've caused me today?" he half shouted. "Now Carol says she never wants to see me again."

"Yeah, well, it seems to me that that's more your fault than it is mine."

And that's when her father stepped forward and struck Sareena, hard, across the face.

"Yo, Peterman, We're getting in the first pictures of Earth."

Stanley Peterman, slightly startled from the obtrusive voice, looked up, over his handheld computer pad he had been reading from. Estian, a short man in his mid to late twenties, working maintenance on the lower three decks of the ship, stood over Stanley, grinning wildly, apparently genuinely excited about the event.

"They're in already?" Stan asked quickly.

"Not yet," replied Estian, "but they're coming in, in about ten minutes. Are you coming down to see em with the rest of the crew?"

"Yes, sure I will. I wouldn't want to miss the excitement."

"Let's go."

The two went off together, walking briskly down the long corridors of the spacecraft. The meeting hall on deck four was their destination.

The *Galaxy Four* was the largest interstellar craft ever constructed, nearly six kilometers in length. It had twenty six decks, four mess halls, several general meeting areas, fifty or sixty bathrooms, and half a dozen massive "parks" or "gardens," complete with grass and trees and fruit and flowers and anything you could hope to find in a

genuine park on Earth. There were no windows on the ship. Ninety-nine percent of the time spent by the crew inside was when the ship was traveling at light speed, and there is absolutely nothing to see at light speed. Despite its large size, the ship carried only forty-three people, making its halls rather barren and lonely most of the time, but it gave each person a great deal of free space, and made it easy for someone to be alone when they wanted to. It had been carrying these forty-three people for seven years now.

It took the two about five minutes to get to the meeting hall. When they got there, Stanley noticed that the giant viewscreen had been erected at the far end. He scanned the room. At first glance, it seemed to him as if the whole ship was in attendance, even the captain. He looked around, searching for missing faces, but everyone was here. After spending seven years with the same small group of people, you learn to recognize them all at a glance, and can always tell the exact number missing from the total.

This was certainly not a required meeting. The pictures could just as easily be viewed from any other part of the ship, but apparently everyone had wished to see everyone else's reaction to the first glimpse of something that they hadn't seen for more than a half decade.

Everyone was talking at once. Stanley switched his attention back and forth from several different conversations he was hearing, as he sat down in an unoccupied seat next to Estian. They were all talking, in one form or another, about what they were about to see or about their voyage that was now about to draw to a close.

"This is great, isn't it?" Estian said, as his hands twitched excitedly in his lap. "It's all going to be over in a few days. I, for one, am glad too. No offense, but I'm getting pretty damn sick of you people."

Stanley, more interested in the event than with talking with Estian, simply mumbled something unintelligible, and stared forward at the front viewscreen.

"So what's the first thing you're going to do when we get back to Earth," Estian asked.

Stan looked at the young man. He thought about the question. "I don't know," he said. "Maybe go swimming."

"You know what I'm going to do? I want to go up into the mountains and go snow boarding. Doing that may be what I've missed most on this trip."

"Huh," Stan replied, staring again towards the front of the room.

"Hey Peterman?"

He looked at Estian. The boy had a serious look on his face. They stared at each other for several seconds until Estian let out what was obviously a completely artificial sob. "I'm gonna miss you man," and he buried his face in Stanley's shoulder. After several long seconds of emitting loud, fake cries, he pulled away from Stan, grinned at him and giggled wildly. "What'd you think? Good? Did I fool you?"

Stanley shook his head, annoyed.

"Oh, hell. Really, you didn't--?" but he was cut off as the captain stood up in front of the crowd and began to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said. "As you well know, we are about to receive the first pictures of the home world. They should be coming up on the viewscreen in another couple of minutes. Let's turn it on now,"--the screen flashed on and was filled with an array of dazzling, swirling colors--"and wait until we see something." The captain,

seemingly normal and calm, sat down in the front row, facing the huge screen, looming over head.

The crowd fell silent as the view changed from the swirling colors to a clear view of plain stars. There were hundreds of stars to be seen, dotting across the blackness of the viewscreen. They all were slowly moving towards the outer edges, and replaced in the center by what appeared as a blank spot. And there it was, in the center of the spot. It was tiny, impossible to make out anything but it's overall shape but it grew. A low murmur went up in the crowd, but died out as the planet grew larger--large enough to make out colors, oceans, continents. After several minutes went by, the Earth was large enough to fill the entire screen. The view stopped zooming in. Someone started clapping, and then a few more. There was a cheer that slowly began to rise from the mass of people seated in the room. It continued to rise, slowly, until all present were on their feet, screaming with joy. Stanley looked around the room and saw actual tears on some of the faces of his crewmates.

It was something he had seen hundreds of times since their departure seven years ago. Often times he had gone into the computer data banks and retrieved a picture of the planet he was now staring at, but those had simply been recreations, artificial, photographs. This was live. This was the real world he had come from. This was where he was going home to. Those old pictures had never effected him like this.

The sound eventually began to die down, and when it did, the captain, once again got up and stood to one side of the viewscreen and gave a speech. "All right, folks," he said, loud enough for everyone to hear. "I have some progress to report: We have begun to decelerate. We are now traveling at a little less than light speed. By noon tomorrow, we will be moving at half that rate. We are now less than forty-eight hours from our destination. In case you're wondering, we will be docking at a small space station in orbit around the planet. You can look it up. It's called Austin."

As he stood, looking at his face in the mirror, Tyson couldn't help feeling that dreadful pain in his stomach. At first he had thought it was simply caused from the extreme hangover he was enduring, but no, this pain was not something that could be brought on by a simple physical ailment. Not even close. It was the pain of guilt. It was the level of pain that cannot be reached but once in a lifetime. It was the pain you feel when you realize that you have taken someone's life.

He looked at himself, his bloodshot eyes, his reddened face. The events of the night before came rushing back. He remembered everything. He wished he couldn't.

* * *

He was out drinking at a downtown sports bar with a few of his friends last night. There had been drinking contests between the four of them. They played little games and such, chatted with the barkeeper, tried to pick up women. They became interested in a bowling game that was playing on a few of the television sets around the bar. They placed small wagers on the players. Tyson was the heaviest drinker between them, but that was mostly due to the fact that the others all had to go to work the next morning. His friends took off early and Tyson was left to himself and his drinking. He stayed for a couple more hours, drinking more and more, hitting on the ladies sitting near him, generally enjoying

himself. After he was shot down a good two dozen times, and received a great deal of threats from some of the women's boyfriends, he became frustrated, and got more and more loud and sometimes violent. The bartender finally kicked him out of the establishment, a little after three in the morning.

It was raining hard now, as Tyson tried for several moments to get the lock on his car door open. Finally, he got in, thoroughly soaked, sat down and told the vehicle to take him home. When the car did not respond, it took Tyson another minute or two to remember he had to turn it on first. He did this and said, "Take me to 2141 East Terrace. That's south of here."

The car slowly pulled out of the parking space, into the street and began to take Tyson home at exactly sixty kilometers per hour. "You can go a hell of a lot faster than this. There's no one in the way."

"Speed limit on this highway is sixty kilometers," the car responded with a computerized voice. "That is our current velocity."

"I don't care what our velocity is! Let's move it!"

Tyson watched as the digital speedometer went from sixty to sixty-one, sixty-two, sixty-three, and finally stopped at sixty-five.

"Faster!" Tyson shouted.

"Speed limit on this highway is sixty kilometers. Our current velocity is sixty-five."

"I want to go a-hundred and ten. Increase velocity to one hundred ten."

"That would be an unsafe speed. Recommend we increase to seventy kilometers."

"Ah, hell," he said to himself. "To hell with this crap. Release autodrive."

The car immediately responded. A steering wheel popped out from the dashboard, two small peddles emerged from the floor, and the car swerved to the left, toward oncoming traffic. Tyson grabbed frantically at the wheel and swung it violently back to the right. He felt a jolt as the car slammed into the curb, and bounced back into the street. He continued to drive on, the gas peddle to the floor, weaving back and forth across both lanes of traffic.

Occasionally he met with oncoming traffic but the autopilots in their cars expertly avoided him. Often times they needed to swerve off the road completely, but they never came dangerously close to hitting him. The cars in his own lane of traffic similarly avoided him and he easily passed them all, as he sped along the highway at well over one hundred twenty kilometers per hour. It was a rather entertaining experience--for awhile. He hadn't actually driven a car in many months.

But his fun ended quickly when he saw a young women step into the street, a good ways in front of his vehicle. She was young, maybe twenty-two. Short, blond. She carried a small purse in her left hand.

Tyson's reaction took several seconds. He slammed his foot down on the brake, and the car immediately began to skid. Things became blurred as the car spun wildly across his lane. He caught a second quick glimpse of the woman. She was the only thing he could see clearly. He frantically tried to bring the car under control but was only successful in making things worse.

He saw her again, out of the driver's side window. Much closer this time. And then she was there, her face against the window. He heard a thud as she connected with

his vehicle. He looked at her. She had blue eyes that seemed to look back at him. Her long blond hair, tinted slightly blood red, surrounded her head and pressed itself against his window. She had the most perfectly formed face he had ever seen. Clear complexion, two separate, well placed eyebrows, and full lips with just a hint of pink lipstick. A beautiful face. She could be a model, was the only thought he had.

Then the car spun back around to the left and was positioned straight, in line with the road. She fell away, and immediately the back left part of the car lurched upward suddenly.

The car eventually skidded to a stop, positioned sideways, across the center of the highway. He looked back and there she was, lying motionless in the middle of the road a good distance back, and he looked at the blood splattered across the left window and the left side of the windshield. The hard rain was already beginning to wash it away.

He never considered going back. He simply told the car to take him south, somewhere. He thought about going home, but simply couldn't bring himself to tell the car to stop. He went on through the night, until about noon the next day when he stopped and got a room at a small motel somewhere in northern California. He fell asleep immediately after getting into bed after not being able to get to sleep in the car. He slept for seven hours, and woke up just ten minutes ago.

* * *

He stared at himself for a few seconds more, then turned to the toilet and vomited. It was time to leave. He needed to go somewhere else. He had no idea how far he had come last night but however far it was, it was not far enough. He needed to get out of the country. Maybe Mexico.

He went out of the bathroom, into the main area of his hotel room. He found his bank terminal in his coat pocket and checked it to see his current funds. He had several thousand dollars to his name but it was in the form of electronic currency. Currency that could be traced. He would have to stop at a bank machine and exchange it for cash and would have to do it soon, before the police figured out who he was and put a tracer on his bank terminal. Hopefully they hadn't done that yet.

Another thing he would have to do was find a computer hacker who could get into the databanks of his car and erase all traces of what had happened and where he had been, but until then he would have to be careful to always drive under the limit, and hope that he didn't get pulled over.

Looking out the window, he was surprised to see that it was already starting to get dark. Fortunately he saw no police cars, and he recognized his own car parked at the far end of the lot. Still feeling dreadfully sick, he gathered his things and went down to check out.

It took Tyson about fifteen minutes driving around town before he found a bank machine. He parked the car across the street and sat for several moments, fearing what would happen when he inserted his terminal into the slot in the machine. He could see in his mind, dozens of police bursting out of nowhere, sirens blaring, pouncing on him as he tried to get at his life savings. He tried desperately to force the vision from his mind but found that he could not.

After another few moments, he gathered his will, ignoring the thoughts running through his mind, opened the door and walked across the street. He checked to his right

and left to make sure no one was watching him before he inserted his terminal quickly into the slot in the side of the machine. He pressed his hands tightly together, trying to suppress the shaking.

"I want to withdraw all of my money," he said quickly, as soon as the small computer screen prompted him to enter his command. "In cash. Fifties."

He expected alarms, something telling him he was under arrest. He at least expected to be told he couldn't withdraw his money. But no, nothing like that. His heart leapt with joy as the small tray at the bottom of the machine opened up and crisp, new, fifty dollar bills began pouring out in a neat little stack. He waited nervously until it was finished, grabbed the pile in two hands and managed to stuff it into his coat pocket.

Holding the wad of money in his pocket with one hand, he sprinted back across the street and got into the car as quickly as he knew how. "Go, now," he said. "Hurry. Go straight on this road."

He continued south, like he had the night before. As the car carried him along the freeway at one hundred twenty kilometers per hour, well under the legal limit, he tried to go over his options. There were so many things he needed to find out, but couldn't because he would need to go into a computer and give his identification. He needed to find a police report, something to tell him how the investigation was going. He needed to know if they were able to retrieve eye flashes, pictures pulled straight from the woman's brain of the last thing she would have seen before her death. If so, they would have pictures of his vehicle, possibly even a license number--or maybe, he feared, even an eye flash photo of himself. He needed to know but it was impossible to find out. He thought they might say something on the radio about it, but flipping continuously through the stations revealed no useful information.

Eventually he noticed a highway sign, giving directions to the local airport. He thought about that. He had enough money to buy a ticket somewhere but he would have to ditch the car, which was not something he wanted to do, but if it had already been identified, he would have to get rid of it sometime. The longer he drove, the closer he was to being caught.

"Pull off, next right," he said, and gave the directions to the airport.

He paid eighteen dollars for parking, parked, and walked briskly into the main terminal, constantly glancing over his shoulder at anyone that passed near him. He wandered the airport for a long while, asking himself where it was exactly that he wanted to go. He stopped at a computer terminal and asked it to bring up a list of all outgoing flights within the next forty-eight hours. The screen that popped up contained hundreds of different flight numbers, destinations, and corresponding prices. Off to one side he saw a listing of flights to the habitat worlds. This caught his attention. He brought it up. This list was much shorter, only nine entries. He checked the list. All were out of his price range--all except one. Flight 2131 to Austin Station. Four thousand, three hundred dollars for a one way ticket. He would have just enough left over to start his life over again.

Without giving the idea a second thought, he told the computer he wanted to buy the ticket. Immediately he began pushing fifties into the slot in the terminal that was specially designed for the rare occasion when someone wished to buy something with cash.

Chapter 2

It was several days before Stanley was able to get away from the group, the reporters and all his interviews, and wander Austin Station by himself. In fact, he had to sneak away when nobody seemed to be watching.

The place was huge. The captain had said that it was a small station. Stanley couldn't even begin to imagine what a large one would be like. He wandered aimlessly, frequently crashing into various people he had never before seen, and managed to make a great number of them mad at him. What amazed him most was the sheer number of people crammed into such a small space. He eventually became claustrophobic and spent all his energy, dodging left and right across the corridors, trying to find one without too many people. He had expected there to be more open spaces here than had been on the *Galaxy Four*, but the halls here seemed even more cramped for some reason.

He eventually came across a little cafe at one end of the station where he could sit down. This area was a little less crowded but even so, he was only able to find a single unoccupied table. He sat down and looked out at the stars through the giant picture windows that lined the far wall and the ceiling. He wanted something to eat. He looked down at the console on the end of his table that would allow him to order anything he wanted, but he had no money, no way of paying for anything that he could get. So he simply sat, rested, listened to other people's conversations, and stared out the windows.

After a few minutes of this, he heard a woman's voice. "Do you mind if I sit here?"

He looked up, startled. "No," he said. "Go right ahead."

"Thanks," she said as she dropped a backpack onto the table and sat down. "There's no other empty places."

He watched her as she studied the computer console and selected an entree for herself and paid for it with a handheld banking terminal. She was young. He judged maybe eighteen. She opened her bag and began rummaging through it but then simply set it on the floor under her seat and began rapping her knuckles on the table top.

A polite little droid brought out her plate a few minutes later. Stanley stared at her dinner. He was hungrier than he had thought. But she didn't take any notice to his gaze. He turned and continued looking out the windows.

"Aren't you eating anything?" he heard her ask.

"No, I'm not getting anything," he replied.

"Not hungry?" she said through a mouthful of hamburger.

"No money."

"No money?," she asked, startled. "What, did you forget your terminal at home?"

"I don't have a terminal. I just got off a ship, you see, and I haven't gotten around to finding out if I have any money left over from before I left."

"How long ago did you leave?" she asked.

"Seven years."

"You were on a spaceship for seven years?"

"That's right."

"Why would you want to do that? Was this one of those expensive cruise ships? Is that what you blew all your money on?"

"It was an interstellar craft, capable of light speed."

"You're kidding!"

"No. We were exploring a star system about ten light years away."

She looked at him suspiciously. "Are you completely serious?"

"Of course."

"Wow, I've never met anyone who's actually left the solar system." She held out her hand. "I'm Sareena."

"Stanley Peterman."

"Look buddy," she said, "I don't care what you tell me but I'm not buying you dinner. I thought I should tell you that in order to entice you towards truthfulness."

"You think I'm lying?"

"The thought crossed my mind."

"Well I'm not," he said. "And I'm not that hungry anyway."

"So what did you do on this ship?"

"I was an engineer. Helped make sure everything ran okay."

"An engineer, huh? Aren't engineers supposed to have backgrounds in math?."

"I do. Why?"

Taking a bite of a potato wedge from off her plate, she said, "I'm having a little trouble in my math class,"

He gave a little motion with his hand. "Let's see the book."

She fetched a thick blue Calculus book from her pack and gently laid it on the table in front of him. She got up and walked around behind him and stood looking over his shoulder. She reached down and selected a page. "Right there," she said, pointing to a particular problem. "I can't figure it out. I keep getting different answers."

He looked at the problem. "That's it?" he said sarcastically. "Don't you have anything harder than that?"

She looked at him angrily. "I knew it," she said. "You don't have a clue, do you?" She reached for the book like she was going to take it back.

He grabbed for her hand and held it back. "No, I can do this. Just give me a second." He thought for a few seconds about how to do the problem. His hand was lying over hers, resting on the table top. "Okay, so here's what you do..."

It took ten minutes or so until she had grasped the concept of the first problem. Then they went on to more problems. She sat down beside him. They spent nearly forty-five minutes working. She seemed to get truly interested in the subject of mathematics and she was obviously understanding at least most of what he was telling her. He was actually pretty proud of himself. I should be a teacher, he thought.

Finally, it came to a close. Apparently satisfied with her new found knowledge, Sareena closed and put away her book. "Are you really not hungry?" she said.

"I'm starving."

She smiled, pulled out her bank terminal, and inserted it into the slot at the end of the table. "What do you want?"

He found a nice, moderately priced pasta dinner and ordered it. "Thank you," he said.

"I should be thanking you," she said. "You have no idea how much you've helped me out today."

He looked at her, smiled. "You have no idea how hungry I am."

She laughed lightly.

Then she did something completely unexpected. She pulled herself closer to him. She leaned her face in towards his, pausing slightly before closing the gap and kissing him quickly on his lips. She pulled away again and looked down at the table top. His stunned gaze remained constant. She turned back to him. She looked strange, nervous, embarrassed, and Stanley could think of nothing to do to relieve her, but lean back and return the kiss. This one remained for longer. He felt her start to move her lips across his, he felt a little wetness, and finally, he felt a tiny tongue, burrowing it's way between his clenched teeth. He opened up and let her in but he looked upward, away from her and saw out of the giant windows, what he had been missing since he had been concentrating on her calculus. The view of the planet below now filled his entire line of sight. It was enormously, overpoweringly, beautiful, much bigger and fuller than he had seen on the Galaxy Four's computer screen and this time he knew he was looking directly at it.

"Holy shit!" he blurted.

She screamed and pulled away from him. She put her hand across her mouth. "What the hell do you think you're doing? You bit me!"

But he was still staring up at the Earth looming above him and her voice didn't quite reach his inner consciousness.

She pressed her tongue against the back of her hand for a few seconds then looked closely at her hand. "Owe, hell. That hurts. Now why'd you have to go and do that?"

Now he looked at her. "What?"

"I'm leaving," she said, and grabbed her bag and slung it across her back.

Stanley looked back up at the windows. Then he realized what had just happened. "No! Wait!" He reached out for her but she was already beyond his grasp. At a last desperate attempt, he leapt from his seat, fell on his stomach flat on the floor but managed at least to grab a strap hanging down from her pack and hold her back. "Don't go. I'm sorry. It caught me off guard, that's all." As he looked up at her, he noticed, on the edge of his vision, all the people in the cafe seated near them were now staring intently at him.

"You bit me," she said softly enough so only he could hear.

"I didn't mean to," he said.

"Get up," she said. "You look like an idiot."

He picked himself off the floor and they stared at each other, consciously aware of the dozens of people still watching. "Can we sit down now?" he asked her quietly.

They sat back down at their table and tried to look calm as they waited for everyone around them to lose interest. "I'm sorry," Stanley finally said. "I've been away a long time."

"It shows," she replied.

"Next time we do this, " he said, "do you think it would be possible to find someplace without so many people watching?"

She smiled. "I think that could be arranged."

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Take-off was delayed six hours because of technical difficulties on the shuttle. This made Tyson a little uneasy. He had already had to wait nearly thirty hours. He didn't want to wait any more. It was as if he could sense the authorities getting closer and closer to his location with every minute he idly wasted.

He sat in the passenger lounge near his terminal for most of this time. The droids servicing the shops in that section of the airport got to know him rather intimately as he would pass through each one every couple hours, rarely buying anything. He did however, buy a short horror fiction novel to pass the time but was done with it within just a few hours. He thought about getting a second but decided it was necessary for him to save his money for when he finally got to Austin. If he ever would get there.

The car was still out in the lot. He had gotten a two day parking pass so they wouldn't have towed it yet. In a way he wished they would. The car was something that could be traced and if it wasn't in the same location he was, he would be a great deal safer. As he thought about his vehicle sitting alone out there in the parking garage, he became more and more worried that someone would find it and recognize it. He finally decided, as much as he feared going back, he would have to check to see if the car was okay.

He decided not to ride the high-speed subway that ran the entire length of the airport. It would kill time to walk, and he was not at all anxious to arrive at his destination anyway. It took Tyson nearly forty-five minutes to fight the crowds all the way back across the other side of the airport and into the massive, sixty-six story parking garage. When he arrived in front of the elevator that would take him up, he pulled out the little card his car had printed out for him to remind him where he had parked. He looked at it and read:

Lot: B
Level: 23
Blue Section
Row: 19
space # 63

When the lift hit the twenty-third floor, he stepped off slowly and cautiously, prepared to see masses of cops gathered around just waiting for him to return. He saw no police around, however, just a few stray people searching for their cars. He allowed himself to breath a quick sigh of relief before he continued on.

The big blue arrows painted on the walls pointed him in the right direction. He followed the numbers down the walkway, frequently glancing over his shoulder and around in any direction searching for any sign of someone that might be watching him.

He reached row nineteen and began cautiously walking down it, scanning in all directions and eventually he saw his car, nestled snugly between a large family station wagon and a full-sized pick-up truck. No one was in sight.

After walking around his car once he slipped into the drivers seat and relaxed. It was much more comfortable in here than it had been in the waiting area inside the airport. He allowed himself five minutes to rest and calm down, then he told the car to bring up the video log-book.

The little viewscreen built into the dashboard flashed on and Tyson saw a view of the parking garage, much how it looked if he simply looked out the window.

"Scan log," he said. "Look for anything out of the ordinary."

The screen blurred and another view of the surrounding parking lot came up, this one from a different angle. A man, possibly thirty years old, crossed in front of the screen and disappeared on the other side. The screen blurred again and Tyson watched and waited as he saw dozens of people walk past along the viewscreen, none of them ever looking in his direction and probably completely unaware of the fact that they were being recorded.

"When was this recorded?" he asked at one point.

The computer responded by putting up a readout on the screen, displaying the time when each significant event--if you could call them significant--happened.

At one point when the screen blurred, Tyson was greeted by an old woman with severely wrinkled and hanging skin and too much eye-shadow, staring directly at him. She turned away from him and yelled, "I think--I think I might have found it." She looked back, squinted. "What?" she called out to someone obviously several rows away. "I think this is it. What? Oh, you have it? Oh, okay." She backed away, turned and was gone from view. "Why didn't you tell me you got a printout?" she said just before she was out of audio range.

"Forget this," Tyson said. "There's nothing here. Cancel search."

The screen obediently went blank again.

He thought about what he should do now. Would it be safe to leave the car here?, he wondered. He didn't like the thought of abandoning it. It was an expensive piece of machinery and to simply throw it away would be such a waste. And it provided for him a sense of security, that if anything happened to go wrong, he could just drive away. Without it he would be stuck. If he told it to leave, then the flight to Austin was canceled, he would be stuck here forever.

But he knew that the car was something that could be traced. As soon as the police found it, they would simply go through the list of outgoing flights and it would only be a matter of finding which one was paid for with cash. They would have him pinpointed, trapped on one of the puny habitat worlds.

I have to ditch the car, he decided. There's no getting around it.

He took a deep breath. "Okay, in three minutes I want you to pull out of this parking lot, head towards the freeway going east and travel in that direction until there's no you're out of gas."

The vehicle made a little beep that meant it understood the directions. A map appeared on the computer screen and the route Tyson had just programmed was shown in red. He looked at it. "Yeah, that's good," he said.

He got out slowly and walked back towards the elevator. Halfway down the row of cars, he stopped and watched his car pull easily out of its space and drive off. It was like watching the last bit of his former life drifting away.

On his way back towards the waiting area, he noticed an unoccupied computer terminal. He thought about the danger of being caught. He knew almost nothing about the inner workings of a computer and had no idea how much information he could retrieve before someone caught on to who he was and what he had done. He didn't even know if

he would be able to get any information. Any police report might be classified and not open to just anyone wanting to see it. However, he was simply too curious about the fate of that young woman to head off without finding out whether or not she was actually dead.

He slipped his bank terminal into the slot and watched in suspense as he logged on to the world-wide net. There were probably thousands, maybe millions of people logged onto computers in this area. It would probably be nearly impossible for someone to get a good lock in on his terminal. Just the same, Tyson wanted to get in, get the information and get out as quickly as possible.

"Show me the obituaries for Roseburg, Oregon." That seemed like a good and safe place to start.

A list of names appeared on the screen. Too many of them.

"Exclude the males," he told the computer.

The list shortened by about half.

"Exclude all that died of natural causes."

The list was still too long.

"Exclude everyone that died in their home."

Now the list was only six names long. Alphabetical order. He touched the first name. "Bring up this one," he said.

The words "Auto Accident," caught his attention. He read on, not paying much attention to the photo in the upper right corner of the screen. He thought he might have dreamed up what she looked like and couldn't trust a picture alone. He found that this woman had been driving a vehicle with faulty auto drive and had been dozing. The report said she had died instantly when her car crashed into a large pine tree at 190 kph.

Tyson went on to the second obituary, an elderly woman who had been knifed to death by an anxious mugger.

The third woman had died of a drug overdose.

The fourth was a suicide.

Tyson was, by this time, growing a little less concerned. Perhaps he hadn't killed her. Maybe she was just fine, in a hospital somewhere, recovering slowly but surely.

He brought up the fifth one and was relieved to find she had died falling from the sixth floor of an office building.

With shaking fingers he touched the sixth name. The screen flashed, seemed to pause longer than it had on the previous names, and went clear again to reveal the last obituary.

And there she was.

He recognized the picture immediately: the young blond, clear complexion, perfectly shaped facial features as if they had been carved from stone. He read the words, "killed by drunk driver," and nearly doubled over from the return of that terrible pain in his stomach.

He closed his eyes, tried to calm himself. "Oh, God."

He read the caption. She had been a law student, home for the weekend. Her name was Anathene Ravanis. She had grown up in north-west Washington with her natural parents. They moved to Oregon to be closer to the rest of the family when Anathene was fourteen. She moved back to Washington state when she was barely into her twenties to

study to become a lawyer. She was twenty-four when she was tragically run down in the middle of the street three days earlier. She was survived by her two parents, her husband of three years, and her six month old daughter.

"Exit out," Tyson said quickly, now suddenly, not wanting to learn any more. "Turn it off."

The screen changed to show him that it had charged him three dollars for the retrieval of the information. His bank terminal popped out of it's slot. He grabbed it and hurried off towards his shuttle, the tears just barely standing out in his eyes, the pain in his stomach spreading towards his chest and growing with every step he took.

Sareena decided to bring Stanley back to her apartment. When the two arrived, she was happy to find that her father was not home. They sat on the couch in the living room, listening to music, talking. Their conversation shifted from subject to subject, never sticking in one place too long. Stanley told her a good deal about life aboard a starship, and she told him bits and pieces of what it's like to live on Austin station. She mostly tried to avoid talking about herself though. She felt her life was small and meaningless when compared to his.

Eventually they became bored with talk and moved on to other things.

They started out small--little pecks on the cheek--but it did not take them long before they were into the long, deep, passionate kisses that Sareena enjoyed so much. She pulled herself close to him. As she felt his hand, slowly and cautiously, moving under her shirt, she thought to herself, perhaps things are moving a little too quickly. At first she had an urge to push his arm back, to tell him she wasn't ready, but she quickly rejected the idea. She was too into the moment.

Then, suddenly, she heard a low, almost silent, hiss as the front door slid open.

Her reactions were quick. She slammed her hand down on his arm, driving his hand out from under her clothing and at the same time leapt away from him. She turned, straitened herself on the sofa and looked towards the door as her father entered, looking somewhat tired out.

"Hello, Daddy," she said, trying her best to sound calm.

"Hi," he replied. He seemed to immediately notice Stanley, sitting next to Sareena "And who would this be?"

"This--" Sareena thought as quickly as she could to come up with a worthy lie. "This is my math tutor, Stanley Peterman." That seemed believable enough. She paused. "Oh, and Stanley, this is Spanfell, my father."

"It's nice to meet you."

The two men shook hands.

Her father's eyes visibly narrowed. "Where's your math book, Sareena?"

"We haven't started studying yet," she replied quickly. "We were just talking"

"Well then, I guess I'll leave you two alone," He quietly left the room and headed towards the back of the apartment. Sareena saw him glance back over his shoulder at them once as if he suspected something.

"You live with your parents?" Stanley asked after Spanfell was completely out of earshot.

"Just my dad," Sareena replied.

"I figured you lived by yourself. It's a little surprising to have someone burst in like that. What does your father do anyway?"

"He's a courier," Sareena answered.

Stanley didn't seem to understand her meaning.

"He pressures people into giving him money so he can show them around Austin. He gets them hotel rooms but that's about it. They pay him pretty good money for it too--when he actually has a client. Most of the time he's just looking for newcomers who don't know their way around."

"That sounds like fairly interesting work," Stanley said.

"He seems to think so."

Sareena looked at him. She wanted to restart what had been so rudely interrupted. She wanted to move in closer to him again but couldn't seem to bring herself to close the gap between them. It didn't seem appropriate anymore. They sat silently for a long while.

Finally, Stanley said, "They're probably missing me back at the docking bay and on the ship. I never told anyone I was leaving. I really ought to be getting back."

"All right," she said. "Are you coming back here sometime?"

"Sure. I'll stop by in a couple of days."

"I guess I'll see you then," she said as she watched him cross the room to the door.

"Thanks for the pasta," he said, just before the door closed.

Sareena was left to herself. She contemplated what she was going to do for the rest of the day. She sat for a long while, thinking. It had been a strange day, one to remember. She didn't know what to make of it all.

Eventually she got up and went to her room.

Before she had settled in, her father entered. "Did your friend leave already?" he asked.

"He just left," she said.

"Did you two get much studying done in that short time?"

"Some."

They stared at each other for several seconds, not speaking. She tried her best to put on an innocent-looking face, but, while she could not see herself, she was unsatisfied with her attempts.

Spanfell sat down on the edge of Sareena's bed. "So who is he?"

"He's my Calculus tutor."

"That's a likely story."

"He is!"

"Why'd he have to take off so quickly after I got home?"

"He had to get back to his class."

"Is he a student or a teacher?"

Sareena randomly chose one of the two options. "Teacher," she replied.

"So why did he come here at all if he had to leave so early?"

"He didn't leave early," she said. "We were studying for a couple hours before you got here."

"You told me you hadn't started yet."

"I said that?"

"Yes you did."

"I don't remember saying anything like that. No, we studied for a long time before you came home. I had just put my book away."

"What were you studying?"

"My math!" Her voice was raised to a high level now from the frustration of the conversation. "Don't you listen to anything I say?"

"I happen to listen very well," he said, calmly. "I have very good ears. I also have very good eyes. I can see what's going on between you and that guy."

"What makes you think anything is going on between us?"

"Your tongue down his throat was my first clue."

She stopped, glared at him. He glared back, but in a sort of triumphant way, apparently proud of himself for discovering her lies.

"Well so what?" she said after a long while. "What does it matter to you anyway?"

"I'm your father, Sareena. I worry about you."

"I'm sure you do but I think I can make my own decisions about who I spend my time with."

"You don't seem to be making very sound choices, Sareena. He's too old for you."

"That's for me to decide," she said.

"So you're not going to obey your father?"

She thought about how to handle the situation. He seemed to be acting coolly. He seemed to be calm, rational--at least on the outside. He had probably planned out everything he was going to say to her.

"What do you want me to say?" she said.

"I want you to say you'll stop seeing him."

"I'm not going to do that."

She could see his anger rising. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes for a second.

"He's no good for you, Sareena. What is he, twice your age?"

"I doubt the difference is that great," she said.

He sighed. "So how long have you been seeing this guy anyway?"

"Oh, I'm not seeing him," she said. "I've just been fucking him off and on. Surely you of all people would understand that." She regretted saying the line even before the words had exited her mouth.

He stood quickly. "God damn it, Sareena! Can't you take anything seriously?"

As he raised his hand, Sareena suddenly thought he was going to strike her again, like he had several days earlier. She flinched, put her arm up to block. But he didn't hit her. He clenched his fist tightly, as if he was trying desperately to hold himself back. Taking a deep breath, he looked away from her and walked quickly out of the room, pounding his fist into the door activator. A second later, it closed behind him.

She looked after him. She shook her head and sighed. Why do I do this?, she thought. Why can't I just think before I say things like that?

She sat for a long time, wondering what she should do. She didn't want to apologize to him for what she had said, but she also couldn't stand the idea of him staying mad at her for any long period of time. Why should I have to do this?, she thought. He's the unreasonable one. Why can't he just let me run my own life, and quit butting in? I can make my own decisions. Why doesn't he see that?

But she knew she was going to have to do it. She was going to have to go out and talk to him, but she waited a while longer and planned out exactly what she was going to say. Finally, she took a deep breath, got up, and went out towards the main room of the apartment.

She found him sitting at the kitchen table, silently, his head resting in his hands. She leaned up against the counter top, a few meters away and watched him, not saying anything. Eventually he looked up at her. They silently stared at each other for a while.

"Look," she said finally, "I appreciate your concern in this matter, but really, it is not needed. I know what I'm doing. Besides, I'm not interested in Stanley. That kiss you saw was just a one time deal. It's not going anywhere between us, and he understands that. He's just a friend." It was all a lie, of course, but he seemed to buy it.

"That was all I wanted to hear, Sareena."

"I know it, but what if I did like this guy? I'd like to think that you wouldn't go blowing up on me if I brought home a guy you didn't approve of."

"I'm sorry I got so mad at you," he said. "It's just that I worry about you so much. I don't want to see you get involved with someone who's no good for you."

"I understand that, but you can't decide that. I think I can decide for myself who I want to be dating. All right?"

"All right. From now on, I'm going to try to stop making your decisions for you, but if I see you making a poor one, I'm still going to tell you."

"Just don't be too pushy about it, okay?"

"Sure."

"Look," she said, "I'm sorry about what I said to you earlier."

"Don't worry about it," he replied.

"So are we squared away now?"

"Yeah, we are."

"Good. I'm glad."

"So you're not going to be bringing Stanley by here anymore?" he asked.

"Well, yes, I am. He's still going to be helping me with my Calculus."

"You weren't lying about that?"

"Of course not." She grinned at him. "Have you ever known me to lie to you?"

He felt the cold rain of the roadway, soaking through his pants. He was dazed. He could barely stand. Every time he would try, he would get to a low squat, and the gravity would shift and he would topple to the ground. It was raining hard. He knew it was raining, but for some reason, the only dampness he could feel was coming from the road he was lying on. It was dark. Blackness was all around. Penetrating blackness, the kind that chills the soul, but for some reason he could see. He could see the buildings standing tall above him on both sides of the road, or perhaps he simply sensed that they were there. They were all dark and empty, as if they had been abandoned long ago. He looked all around him. The area was somehow familiar, but he couldn't remember when he had ever been here. He realized he was crying, but couldn't seem to remember why.

"Get out of the road," someone said.

Tyson looked around, frantically searching for the source of the sound.

"Get out of the road."

"Who are you?" Tyson shouted.

"Get out of the road."

"I can't."

He turned, and suddenly, standing high above him, was a man of great size with a wicked glare on his face and a long dark beard, hanging down to his chest.

"Get out of the road," the man said.

"I can't. Can't you see I can't move?"

"You're blocking traffic."

Tyson looked up and down the road. He could see no cars. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I'm here for you."

Waves of fear crashed in on him. They had found him! They had finally found him. But who were they? And why were they looking for him?

"No!" Tyson screamed. He curled himself up, making himself as small as he possibly could, putting his arms over his face to block the view of the hulking figure. "No, please. Leave me. Leave me alone. Please!"

Then, everything was silent. He looked up and the man was gone. He got to his knees, and with a little bit of trouble was able to stand up. Looking down the road, he saw something lying there. It was a woman, face down. He slowly staggered over to her.

"Get out of the road," he said.

She didn't respond.

"You're blocking traffic."

After a moment she replied, "Please, leave me be."

"Why?"

"Just leave me be. I beg of you."

"You're going to get hurt."

"That's my choice."

"Very well." He turned to walk away from her but her hand caught him by the back of his pantleg.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"For what?"

"I'm sorry."

"You didn't do anything."

"Yes I did," she said. "I hurt you. I made you this way. I didn't mean to do this to you. I didn't. I'm sorry." She turned onto her back and looked up at Tyson. For the first time, he saw her face. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He knew immediately who she was.

"You're supposed to be dead."

"I was," she replied.

That confused him. He had always believed that a person could not be dead one moment then alive the next. He thought about that a long time, and finally concluded that he must have been mistaken on that point. A person could be alive one moment then dead the next, so why couldn't it work the other way around? He wasn't the type of person to question the way of the world anyway.

"Here," she said. She took his hand and directed it towards her face. "Do I feel dead to you?"

"No," he said as he ran his palm across her warm cheek.

"Everything comes back," she said. "Did you know that? Things happen again and again and again. They're beyond our control. We live in a wheel. It goes round and round and around, and we can never get off. Never. It will spin around some day and this will come back to haunt you."

He stared at her, barely comprehending her words. She was standing now and he was lying on the pavement again. "Who are you?"

"You know who I am."

"You're supposed to be dead."

"I've come back."

"Have you come back to haunt me?"

"I've come back to show you things."

"Like what?"

"Like what I just told you--how we live in a wheel. How things will come back for you. Like how this will come back for you." She pointed down the road and Tyson saw a car coming towards him.

He looked at her, tried to move towards her but found himself immobile. She took a cautious step backward. "Help me," he pleaded.

"I can't. It was meant to be. It's coming for you. They're coming for you. Deal with it."

He tried desperately to move but found himself stuck to the roadway. He was strapped down, by some invisible harness. He watched the car speeding closer and closer, making no move to avoid him. Covering his head with his arms, he gave out one last frightful scream, a plea to the woman to help him, but she did not, and he finally felt the incredible impact of the car's bumper as it connected with his body.

* * *

He awoke with a start, drenched with sweat, the safety harness digging into his flesh. He breathed a deep sigh of relief realizing he was still on the shuttle. The people around him were all still sleeping. His sedative must have worn off early. He looked out one of the side windows and saw the earth, looming before him. He was escaping. In a few hours he would be on the station, a brand new world to him, and he would start a new life.

Chapter 3

Spanfell stared for a long while, through the glass wall that separated him from the shuttle's passengers that were now starting to come off. He searched the crowd, looking for one who seemed like he didn't know what he was doing or where he was going. It didn't take long to find one. That one, right there, he told himself. The one who's trying so desperately to blend into the crowd.

He watched as the new arrivals exited their shuttle. Where was this one from?, he wondered. Earth? One of the other habitat worlds? But it didn't matter where they were from as long as they had money and didn't know their way around.

He watched the young man he had selected, burned his face into his memory so he could pull him aside as soon as he exited the decontamination chamber. He walked along, keeping pace with him until the group of new arrivals were all herded into a side chamber where they would go through the process of decontamination.

Hurrying towards the gate where he knew his target would be coming from, Spanfell tried to get ahead of the rest of the masses of people, some of who were waiting to meet incoming family members, but most of who were couriers, like himself, out to make a buck off the tourists.

He made it to the main gate, stopped and waited. After a few moments, the doors opened and the people started piling out. He saw his target in the middle of the crowd, saw that no one was coming to meet him. Watching intently so as not to lose him, Spanfell plowed through the rest of the people and started walking close to the young man he had selected.

"Hello, my name is Spanfell. I'm here to give you a hand in finding your way around."

The man stopped. "What?"

"My name's Spanfell. I'm a courier. I'm here to help. This is quite a large and confusing station, but I can guide you all through it--for a small fee of course."

"A tour guide?"

"And much more. What do you say?"

"I don't think so buddy. Sorry."

"Oh, now come on. I haven't told you what it is I can do for you."

"What can you do for me?"

"I can get you hotel or restaurant reservations. I can hook you up with just about any type of person you'd want to meet here. If you're thinking of moving here, I can handle all it takes to get your citizenship. I can do basically anything you need done."

"Can you get me a job?"

"I could do that. What kind are you looking for?"

"One that pays."

"I think I can handle that. But first we need to get the business of my fee out of the way."

"What is it that you charge?"

"I never caught your name," Spanfell said.

"Tyson. How much do you charge?"

"I'll offer you a deal. Two hundred a week. You may actually save money by hiring me though, since I can get you the best deals on anything around. Anything you can possibly get on Austin Station. So is this your first visit to this fine habitat world?"

"Yes, it is," Tyson said.

"Have you ever visited any other stations?"

"No."

"Then you don't know much about station life do you?"

"I guess not."

"Well, I can help you out there. I can teach you anything you need to know. Station life is pretty confusing you know, but I've got it down and I'll help you get it down too."

Tyson pulled Spanfell aside, out of the stream of traffic and said to him, "Okay, I'm going to need a job, a place to stay, a citizenship here, and I need it all to be completely confidential. I don't want anything entered into the computers about my being here. Nothing that could get back to Earth."

"I think I could pull that off. No problem. May I ask why it must be confidential though?"

"No you may not."

"So am I hired?"

"Two hundred, you say?"

"Uh-huh."

"I suppose I could handle that, assuming you find me a paying job real quick."

"I'll get on it right away. Do you have a place to stay?"

"I'm expecting you to find me one. Not too much though. I'm rather short on funds right now."

"You have enough for my fee though don't you?"

"Barely."

"Well, let's say we get that out of the way right now, shall we?"

"How do I know you won't just run off with my money and leave me hanging?"

"You can trust me."

Tyson shook his head. "No. I can't risk that. I can't afford to put all of my funds into something before I even have a job here. I'll pay you fifty now, and the rest when you find me a way for me to make some money."

"That would be acceptable I suppose." Spanfell pulled out his bank terminal and presented it to Tyson. "Fifty now, and I should be able to find you some sort of work within the next few days, but you can't take the job until you've paid me the other one-fifty."

Tyson shook his head. "I don't have any electronic funds. You're going to have to accept cash."

Cash? That was certainly odd. Who used cash these days?

Spanfell shrugged. What did it matter? Money is money. "Whatever you say."

Tyson handed Spanfell a fifty dollar bill. Spanfell stared at it for several seconds. It had been a few years since he had seen actual money like this. I wonder if it's real, he thought. Going to have to check that out before I do anything big for this guy.

"All right," Spanfell said, "you say you need a place to stay. Should I show you to a place I happen to know?"

"The cheapest you can find."

"Of course."

Spanfell led Tyson down the crowded halls of the station towards a small hotel that he often used for his clients. He wondered why this man was here. Probably running from someone. That was fairly obvious. He hadn't brought any baggage with him so it must have been a fairly hasty decision.

"So where are you from?" Spanfell asked.

"Earth."

"I know that. Where on Earth?"

Tyson didn't answer, and Spanfell decided that it probably wasn't a good idea to push the subject.

They soon arrived at their destination. Tyson checked in and paid for a room and Spanfell followed him up to it. Tyson gave a quick run around the small apartment, checking it all out, came back and sat down on the bed with Spanfell.

"Okay, What kind of a job do you think you can get me?"

"What are your qualifications? What did you do on Earth?"

"I was a salaryman for Microsoft."

"What level?"

"Thirteen."

"Hmm." That probably wasn't going to help much. A thirteenth level salaryman wasn't too far up the corporate ladder, but it would probably put him at the top of the list for any menial, minimum wage job that happened to be open. "What we're going to need to do, is first of all, put your information down in the computer." He went over to the desk sitting against a wall and flipped on the computer terminal.

Tyson went over and stood by the desk. "What sort of information do you mean?"

"Anything that would be relevant to prospective employers. Where exactly did you work before you came here?"

"Look, I don't know if I can do this."

"What?"

"I'm not supposed to be here. I can't enter in anything that could pinpoint who I am."

"Well now, that could be a problem. How am I supposed to find you work if I can't tell them about any of your past experience?"

"I have faith in you."

Spanfell flipped the computer terminal off. "All right then. This may take a while. Shall I go now and start looking or is there anything else you're going to need tonight."

"No. Go now. My money is running short already. I need a way I can get ahold of you though. Give me your I-D number."

Spanfell found a small piece of paper in his pocket and wrote out the eighteen digit code and gave it to Tyson. "Why don't you give me yours too."

Tyson shook his head. "Can't do that. I'm going to have it changed soon anyway."

"How do you plan on doing that?"

"I have no idea. I'm trusting you to find me a way. Go, now. Find me work. Hurry. You can call me here. I should be right here for the next couple days."

As Spanfell was shoed out of the room, he thought to himself, Jesus Christ, this guy's going to be a real problem.

Stanley Peterman sat, waiting at the same table where he had first met Sareena. They had agreed to meet here. He was anxiously awaiting her arrival. Picking at his french fries absently with one hand, he stared up through the huge windows at the Earth that was just beginning to come into view.

"You came," he heard Sareena say.

He looked at her as she took a seat across the table from him. "I told you I'd come," he said. "I missed you the last couple days."

"Me too." She leaned in and gave him a quick kiss then began picking at his plate of fries.

"So what do you want to do?" he asked her. "Do you want to go back to your place?"

"Don't you have a place here yet? I don't really want to go to mine. I'm afraid my father's going to be there."

"What is with him anyway? Do you fear him or something?"

"No," she replied. "It's just that I don't want him to know what's going on here."

"I don't understand why not."

"I had a long talk with him just after you left the last time. He thinks your just my math tutor."

"You know, Sareena, I think your life would be a lot easier if you were just honest with him. A lie can get quite complicated if you don't know how to control it."

"I know how to control myself," she said. "I have a great deal of practice with this." Her voice softened as she said, "He can't handle the truth anyway. He wouldn't know how to deal with it. He still thinks of me as his little baby girl."

Stanley shook his head. Sometimes he wondered about her. Was she a pathological liar or did she actually have good reasons for avoiding the truth when dealing with Spanfell? He wondered what kind of secrets she might someday start keeping from him.

"So should we go to your place?" she said.

"I suppose we could do that. Come on. I think I remember how to get there."

As they left, Stanley watched a human attendant come out and clear his half eaten plate of fries.

He led the way this time, through the crowded corridors, away from the little cafe. After a time, she took his hand in hers and they walked in that fashion for half an hour or so around the outer wheel of the station. Every once in a while, a window would open up along the roof of the hall they were walking through and they would both glance up at the planet above them.

After a time, Stanley said, "I'm going to be leaving here soon."

Sareena stopped and turned to him. "What?"

"I'm scheduled to take a trip to Earth in three weeks."

"You're leaving me?"

"I wasn't planning on it," he said. "I'd like it if you came with me."

"What? How? I don't have enough money to finance a shuttle trip."

"I'll pay for you."

"I thought you didn't have any money," she replied. "I had to buy you lunch not too long ago because you were flat broke and starving."

"I wasn't broke. I just didn't have a bank terminal at the time."

"And you do now?"

He pulled it out and showed it to her.

"And you expect me to go with you down to the planet? Just like that? Not a second thought?"

"It doesn't have to be forever, Sareena. You can come back whenever you like."

"Will you pay for my return too?"

"Of course."

"I don't know if I can ask you to do that. We've only just met. Shuttle tickets are expensive."

"They paid me well for taking the *Galaxy Four* trip."

"But still--"

"Please, Sareena?"

"But what about my father?"

"Forget about him for the moment. Don't you want to see the world down there. You've never been there have you? I know I'm anxious to see it again."

"We'll see," she said. "We'll just have to wait and see."

Spanfell wandered the station aimlessly, stopping here and there, asking if there were any employment opportunities for an inexperienced man who, for one reason or another, was unable to look for a job himself. He wasn't having much luck.

As he turned out of a small antique shop, he happened to notice his daughter some distance away, down the corridor. She was stopped, talking to someone. He started towards her, wanting to ask her to keep her eyes open for a possible job opportunity. But then, he saw who she was with. It was that guy--what's his name?--Stanley. Her math tutor, or so she says. Spanfell stopped in his tracks and watched them for a short while. They were just talking. He crept closer to them, making sure to blend in with the crowd. When he had gotten as close as he dared, he stopped and continued watching. It appeared as if they were simply having a discussion. Hopefully about her math, but it seemed a little too animated of a conversation to be about school work. Eventually they began walking again. Spanfell followed the two for a while.

Then he noticed something about them. They had started holding hands. So they were lovers. This enraged him. She had lied to him. He wanted to run up and throw Stanley to the ground and beat him, but he held himself back. He stopped, glared and watched them disappear into the crowd.

The prospect of finally seeing Earth firsthand was both exciting and frightening at the same time. This was something she had wanted--or thought she had wanted--for all her life, but now she wasn't sure if she wanted to leave her life on the station, even for a short while. She knew this place. This was her home. She knew her way around almost perfectly. On Earth, she wouldn't have the first clue how to get anywhere. She would be tiny, insignificant. Here she felt as if she was somebody, large, important in some way.

Sareena turned to Stanley. They were sitting close together on the couch in his apartment. "When would we leave?" she asked.

"Three weeks. There's still more work for me to do on the ship before we can go."

"I'm not even sure I'll want to go," she replied. "I don't know if I can just pack up and leave my home like that."

"I'm not asking you to leave for good. Just a little vacation. You could come back at any time."

"Would you come back with me?"

He waited a long while before answering, "I don't know if I could. I don't like it here. It's too crowded, feels as though the walls are closing in. I want to see the open sky again. I want to live out in the open like I did before I left on the *Galaxy Four*."

"I want to too," she said. "But--" and she stopped herself. How could she say no? This was something she had wanted all her life. To see the world up close. Could she ever live with herself if she let an opportunity like this slip through her fingers. How could she ever live with herself if she let him walk out of her life? "All right," she said. "I'll go. I'll need to talk with my dad first though."

"I wouldn't let you leave without telling him."

"But he may not let me go," she said. "I'm going to have to tell him about us. I may end up having to sneak away from here without his permission."

"I figured you'd be up for something like that," Stanley said.

Now that things had finally settled down for Tyson, he had a chance to finally sit and think to himself. Alone in his hotel room, he thought, for once, not about Anathene, but about his past life, the one he left behind down on Earth. He had been a salaryman for a large American company. Not a glamorous job, or an exciting one, or a well paying one, but it was better than he could ever hope to achieve on this tiny station. He wondered if his boss had found a replacement for him yet.

He missed his family, his friends, his coworkers. He wondered if he could ever see any of them again. It's strange, he thought, how one instant, one moment in time, one tiny decision can completely alter your life forever.

But he didn't want to get too tied down thinking about the past. What's done is done. There's no going back. What he had to do now was look toward the future. He had to make a new life for himself here on the station, and he had to do it quickly before his funds ran out. He needed to get in touch with Spanfell, see how the job search was going.

Tyson went over to the little computer on the desk against the wall and entered Spanfell's I-D code, instructing it to seek out Spanfell and get in touch with him. He turned around, and began to wander the apartment, expecting the search to take several minutes, but instead, Spanfell's face appeared almost immediately on the small screen.

"Hello," he said.

"I just called to see how the hunt is going. Have you found me anything yet?"

"Not yet," Spanfell said. "I'm still working on it."

Tyson noticed that Spanfell looked agitated, angry about something. "Is there something wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing wrong," Spanfell replied. "Family troubles is all. Just sit tight. I'll find you work very soon."

"Within the next couple days?"

"Very soon. Don't worry. I've done this before. I should go now, continue the search. Was there anything else you needed?"

"No. I just wanted to make sure you were out and looking. I'm rather desperate you know."

"Don't worry. I'm doing a good job out here. I'll find you something." And the screen went blank.

Instead of continuing his job hunt like he said he was going to, Spanfell went home. He sat for a long while at the kitchen table, trying to stifle his anger, waiting for his daughter to return home from wherever she was. He knew she would be here soon. Her book bag was here and she needed to be at school in less than an hour now.

Why am I making such a big deal out of this?, Spanfell asked himself. Why should I care? I should let Sareena make her own decisions.

He couldn't understand why it mattered to him that Sareena was seeing someone who was so much older than she was. He had always believed that age shouldn't be a factor in a dating relationship--or thought he had.

It was because she had lied to him. That's all he cared about. He hated being lied to. If she had simply told him the truth from the beginning, instead of trying to hide it, he probably wouldn't have had a problem with her relationship with Stanley. It was a frustrating situation. He was frustrated because she had been so stupid to lie to him. It would have been so much easier for everyone if she had just been straight with him. Why didn't she understand that?

He wanted to just forget it all. He wished he could just let Sareena alone and allow her to live her life as she saw fit. She deserved to be able to do that. But, for some reason he knew, he would not be able to just leave it alone.

Sometimes, he thought, I just have no control over myself. This thought set his mind racing back to one of the most recent times where he had been unable to gain control over his own actions. He saw himself stepping forward, menacingly, towards his daughter, unthinkingly, raising his hand, striking her across her cheek. That one moment kept running through his mind, over and over again. One moment of weakness. He had just been so upset from being dumped by Carol that he was simply unable to control himself, but that was no excuse.

It doesn't matter, he tried to tell himself. She probably never even thinks of it. It probably never even mattered to her at all. It was just a little slap, barely worth mentioning. It never happened before. It'll never happen again.

It will never happen again, he told himself. Never. I won't do it again. I couldn't.

But for some reason he couldn't make himself believe that.

Spanfell shook his head wildly, trying to force the thoughts from his mind. He wished he could stop thinking about it all, for once, put it behind him. Burying his face in his hands, he began vigorously rubbing his eyebrows with his fingertips, as if he could physically force the unwanted thoughts from his mind.

Just then, he heard the front door open. Looking up, he saw Sareena come in. He had forgotten he was waiting for her. He wanted to talk to her on a subtle level, hinting at

what he had found out about her and Stanley, but as soon as he saw her, he couldn't help blurting out, "You lied to me didn't you?"

"What?" she replied quickly.

"I saw you with that Stanley person today. You two were holding hands."

"Oh, Jeez! Why do you have to do this? You were spying on me again weren't you?"

"No. I just happened to notice you two together, that's all."

"Well what the hell should it matter to you anyway?" said Sareena.

"You lied to me."

"I had to. You would have gone berserk if you knew the truth."

"Do I look berserk to you Sareena?" Spanfell was sitting, his hands folded, calmly watching his daughter. But it was taking all he had to contain himself.

She shook her head. "I don't care. I don't care what you think. Just stay out of my life. Quit spying on me." She said this as she was walking back towards her room. A moment later she returned, carrying her backpack across her right shoulder, and hurried towards the door.

"Sareena," Spanfell said.

She stopped. "What? What do you want?"

He paused. He decided it would perhaps be better if he let the subject drop for now. "My latest client is looking for a job. Could you keep your eyes open, look for any openings?"

"Sure, I suppose I could do that," she said, heading for the door.

"Thank you," Spanfell tried to tell her but she was already gone.

Chapter 4

Spanfell was becoming more and more worried that he would never be capable of finding Tyson a job. He had had no idea how difficult the search was going to be. The calls from Tyson were becoming more and more frequent. Apparently he was even more agitated about it than Spanfell.

Spanfell made a quick stop at his apartment for a meal break. He was there for fifteen minutes or so, and was just about ready to head out the door again and continue the job search when he heard the door chimes. He got up and opened it.

It was Stanley.

Spanfell hadn't seen Stanley since he had spied him and Sareena holding hands in the corridor several days earlier. Since then he had kept his distance from his daughter and had tried his best not to think about the subject. But now, the sight of this man enraged him. It was mostly the frustrations of job hunting that made him so angry but Stanley was his most immediate target.

"Is Sareena here?" said Stanley.

Spanfell lunged, driving his right fist hard into Stanley's jaw.

Stanley was forced backwards and landed five or six feet away on his back, but quickly rolled to his feet. He put a hand to his chin. Spanfell saw blood.

"What the hell?" Stanley said.

"Stay away from my daughter."

"What? I'm just her Calculus tutor. We had a study session scheduled."

"Stay away! The next time you show up at this door, I'll kill you."

"But--"

"Do you understand me? I'll kill you."

Stanley said, "So I take it you know what's been going on between us."

"Leave! Now! Go! I don't ever want to see you around here again."

Stanley rubbed at his chin where Spanfell had struck him. "It's not really a good idea to go around hitting people," he said as he turned to leave. "One of these days someone is gonna hit you back."

After the unexpected encounter with Spanfell, Stanley decided to head home and call Sareena from there. It didn't take long for the computer to track her down. Fortunately she had not been at home. She was on her way home.

"I just had a rather interesting discussion with your dad," he said to Sareena.

"Oh, what happened? What did you say?"

"We didn't say much, actually. He seemed kind of mad about something. Did you tell him about our plans to go to Earth?"

"I haven't found the right time yet," she said.

"I'm beginning to think maybe you shouldn't tell him. Maybe we should just leave and you can call him when we get there."

"What?" she replied. "Why do you say that? You were the one who was pushing me to always tell him everything about us."

"I didn't realize what kind of a guy he really is."

"What do you mean? What happened when you spoke to him today?"

"He hit me, Sareena. He attacked me."

"You're kidding! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. He doesn't hit that hard. It was just sort of stunning. What is his problem anyway?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "He doesn't have a girlfriend. He's upset about that. And he has this client who needs him to find a job for him, but he can't come up with anything. He's been out looking every day for the past week. It seems like no one on the station is hiring these days."

"What kind of job does this client want?"

"Just some menial job, I guess. Minimum wage. Look, do you want me to come over? I should be on my way to school right now but I could miss a day. I could come to your place and we could talk about this whole trip."

"Hmm." Stanley paused to think a moment. "No," he said. "Go to school. You could drop by here afterwards if you want. We can talk then"

They said quick goodbyes and disconnected the phone link.

Stanley sat and thought for a few minutes, then got up and headed out the door. After about a half hour walk, he found himself at Sareena's door. He knew she wouldn't be home but he rang the bell anyway. After a few moments, the door slid open with a

small hiss. Standing before him, was Spanfell. The two men glared at each other for a long while.

Spanfell spoke first: "Did you not hear what I said to you before?"

"I heard you."

"Then why are you here? Are you stupid or something? Do you not really think I'll do what I said I would do?"

"I think you're overreacting a little, Spanfell."

"I don't care what you think. I want you to leave, now. Leave. Do I have to smack you really hard this time?"

Stanley thought quickly about what he had come here to do. There was something else he wanted to do first though, but didn't know if he should. Why not?, he wondered. He deserved it. What could Spanfell do anyway? And with that little thought, Stanley took a quick step forward and gave Spanfell a hard right jab, just to the left side of his nose.

Spanfell staggered back, his hands to his face. "Oh, Jesus!" he said. He pulled his hands away slightly to reveal a great deal of blood, dripping from his nose. "You little bastard!" And he lunged at Stanley.

Stanley stepped aside, easily avoiding the attack. Spanfell stumbled past him and Stanley wrapped his arm around Spanfell's neck from behind in a kind of headlock, pulled him inside the apartment and threw him to the floor. The door slid closed automatically, giving the two men privacy. Stanley stood over Spanfell in triumph. He smiled down on him, and said, "I have a job opportunity for you."

"What?" Spanfell said, still lying on the floor, still holding in the blood from his nose with his hands.

"Sareena tells me you need a job for some client of yours. I happen to know of an opening. I can get this guy in, if you're willing to do something for me."

Spanfell staggered to his feet and moved away from Stanley. He went to the sink in the kitchen and washed the blood from his face. "What the hell are you trying to pull here buddy?" he said.

"I'm not pulling anything. We need people to help clear off all of the equipment from my ship. We're short handed and I heard you had someone looking for a job. It seems to me like it's perfect."

Spanfell looked across the room at Stanley. "You hit me," he said.

"You hit me too."

"You deserved it."

"So did you."

"What are you trying to do here?" Spanfell asked.

"I'm trying to give you a hand. I want to help you out."

"No you don't. You just want to get at my daughter."

"I've already gotten at her. This has nothing to do with her. Nothing you say or do could change what is happening between us. What I am doing here, is trying to offer you something in return. You can take it or leave it. I suggest you take it because if you don't, you'll still need to be out looking for work and there's no guarantee that you could find this guy anything. Whether you take my offer or not, it won't change anything between me and your daughter. That's something you will need to learn to accept."

There was a time of silence. Spanfell wiped more blood off his face and said, "This does not mean that we're friends now you understand."

"I understand."

"I still don't approve of you and Sareena."

"I know."

"You're too old for her."

"That doesn't matter."

"All right," Spanfell said. "Let's go give this guy his job."

Tyson was nearly in tears as he sat alone in his motel room. He was now completely out of money. He had spent it all, just living here. Station life was expensive. That was something he had not planned for. Now, he was without options. In another three days he would be kicked out of the motel, and would be forced to roam the station, homeless, looking for work. Eventually he would be picked up by the police and they would most definitely find out about what he had done. It was over. You can't hide from the world unless you have a good supply of cash to do it with, and he had none. He would have to turn himself in. That was his only option left. Coming here had been a grave mistake. Possibly the worst mistake of his life--besides switching off the auto drive.

The door bell rang. Tyson checked himself and got up to answer it. Standing just outside was Spanfell with a man Tyson did not recognize. They seemed to be smiling. "I found you something," Spanfell said.

Tyson felt a surge of joy rising from within him. A job? A real job?, he thought.

"This is your new boss," Spanfell said, indicating the man next to him. "This is Stanley Peterman."

Tyson resisted the urge to grab Stanley in a tight embrace and smother him with kisses. "Hello," he said. "I'm Tyson. Pleased to meet you."

Tyson and Stanley shook hands.

"What exactly is it that I'll be doing?" Tyson asked

"Have you heard of the *Galaxy Four*, interstellar space craft that has been docked here?"

"No," Tyson said.

"Well, it's here, and we need people to help get it ready for it's next voyage. You see, we don't have any androids programmed for work on this particular type of craft. Therefore, we need human workers. Do you think you can help us out?"

"Oh, yes. Does it pay well?"

"Minimum wage. It's only a temporary job, of course. It should take about a month and a half before we're finished, so you should have a job for about that long."

"Great. When do I start?"

"Right now."

"Let's go."

This is it, Sareena told herself. It has to be now. Let's tell him and get it over with.

She opened the door to her home. Her father was sitting at the kitchen table. He seemed to be smiling. Good.

"Hello," he said happily.

"Hey."

She went back to her room and dropped her school bag on the floor and came back out. She sat down at the table, across from her father. He didn't pay much attention to her at first. He was eating a bowl of soup.

"I need to talk to you," she said.

"Oh, what about?"

She thought about what the best way was to approach this, and finally decided to just say it. It probably wouldn't help much to tell him craftily. The meaning would be the same anyway. "Stanley is taking me down to the planet for awhile. We're leaving next week. You don't have to worry; I'm coming back. It's just a little vacation."

She saw his smile fade into a deep glare. "You're leaving me?"

"Only for a little while," she said.

He glared at her. The spoon he had been holding, dropped from his hand and clattered on the table top. He got up, threw his chair back, glared at her for another moment, then stormed out of the room. She heard him slam his fist into the door activator in the back bedroom.

She sighed. Was it really worth it to go back there and try to talk to him? No, she decided. Let him calm down first. I don't care anymore, she thought. Let him be like this. I'll just leave with Stanley. Forget about Spanfell. I'll just leave and never come back. I don't need him.

But how could she do that? This was her home, the only place she had ever known. How could she just leave without a second thought? It wasn't Spanfell that she was reluctant to abandon so much as it was the place, Austin Station. She had been here for so long that no other place could possibly feel like home.

But if she ever wanted to come back here, she would have to make peace with her father. She knew that was something she had to do or she would never feel comfortable visiting. He was just as much a part of this place as anything else.

But not now. Not right now.

She stood up slowly, and went to the front door. She glanced back. He was still locked in his bedroom. And with that, she turned and walked out and headed towards Stanley's place on the other side of the Station.

Chapter 5

As far as Tyson could see, the job was working out fairly well. It consisted mostly of him pushing carts, piled with boxes of supplies, on and off the huge spacecraft. His job would vary from day to day. He would move around the ship, organizing the supplies needed for the *Galaxy Four's* next voyage or removing supplies left over from the last one. He rarely had the same supervisor two days in a row, but everyone seemed impressed by his work performance. Growing up with Earth's gravity had given him more

strength than most of the other workers and he was able to put them all to shame with his lifting ability.

The one problem with the job, however was that it was only temporary. In a month and a half, Tyson would have to be out again, looking for work, and this time he would have to do it himself. He had already paid off Spanfell and was no longer using his services. Tyson worried about what was to come, whether or not he would be able to find permanent employment. He still had not settled completely into station life, but he was getting used to it.

It was now more than a week since that night when he had had so much to drink and unintentionally run down that woman. He still thought about her all the time, but now, the pain in his stomach was gone. He was surprised at how quickly he seemed to get over accidentally killing someone. He was beginning to believe that he would never be caught. It's strange, he thought. You kill someone one day, then a week later you've forgotten all about it.

But he hadn't forgotten it. He only thought he had, wished he had. He kept seeing himself, in her place, standing in the middle of the road, watching as some unknown vehicle plowed into him.

Anathene was like an old girlfriend to him. That's how he thought of her. He felt as if he had known her intimately, and somehow hurt her and she had left him forever. Gone forever, but still alive. There was nothing he could do now. He couldn't change how things were. He could only change how he thought.

He knew he wasn't thinking clearly, but he couldn't find anything to do about that. He needed to get away. Farther. Leave everything behind. Not only Earth, but civilization entirely. Maybe then, he could finally be free of Anathene Ravanis, the girl that haunted his mind, day and night.

One day, as he was riding a gliding sidewalk to work, he stopped to look out a large picture window that was set into the side of one small corridor. He looked out at the stars, glittering the sky, wondering which one the *Galaxy Four* would be visiting on its next trip. The perfect escape, he thought. He wondered if it would be possible to somehow sneak aboard the starship before its departure and travel with it to that unknown solar system. He wondered what they would do with him if he somehow succeeded. Would they turn back and make him get off again or would they keep going, allowing him to tag along? He figured they would keep going. It was probably tremendously expensive to send a ship into light speed and they wouldn't wish to waste so much fuel for just one stowaway. They would be forced to deal with his presence.

But was it a good idea? Twelve years he would be gone. He thought, maybe, that would be going a little too far. And when he got back, he would almost certainly be charged with stowing away and they would probably be able to find out about the death of Anathene and would probably charge him with that. But that would be twelve years from now. That's nearly an eternity, he thought.

As he turned to continue on his way toward the docking bay where he worked, he began to formulate a plan.

"Why don't you show me your ship?" Sareena said to Stanley.

The two were sitting at a table in the cafe where they had met. They had just finished their evening meal and were getting ready to leave.

"You want to see it?" asked Stanley.

"It was your home for seven years, wasn't it? I feel as though I should at least see it once before it's gone. I want to know what it was like for you."

"All right," he said. "Right now?"

"Good a time as any," she replied.

They arrived at the docking bay and Stanley proceeded to show Sareena all over the huge starship. They went first to his quarters and to the meeting hall where he had watched the first pictures of Earth coming in, only a couple weeks earlier. He showed her a few of the storage areas and cafeterias. She seemed to be fairly interested in it all, but he wasn't. It was all so familiar to him that it was nearly boring. He had spent so long here, but now that he was back in the middle of a huge civilization, it seemed as if those seven years had slipped by in a matter of hours.

As they were leaving again, they ran into Tyson. "Oh, hello, Mister Peterman," he said.

"Please: Stanley."

"I'd like to thank you again for getting me this job."

"It was no problem." Stanley looked down at Tyson and noticed he was carrying a blanket and pillow under one arm and a flashlight and paperback novel in the other hand. But they were in the food storage area. Why would he be taking those things here? Stanley shrugged off the question, assuming Tyson had some logical reason.

"I'd like to introduce you to Sareena," Stanley said.

"Hello," said Tyson. "You're Spanfell's daughter, correct?"

"That's right," Sareena replied.

"He talks a lot about you."

She smiled. "I'm sure he does."

"Well I really ought to get back to work," Tyson said. "I guess I'll see you later."

"Actually, you probably won't," Stanley said. "We're leaving for Earth in two days."

"We'?"

"Yeah, Sareena and I," replied Stanley, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"All right then, I guess I should say, have a nice life--both of you."

And they departed. Stanley looked over his shoulder once at Tyson and thought that he sensed something not quite right about the man, but he quickly forgot all about it as he walked out of the ship, his arm around Sareena's shoulders.

Chapter 6

Spanfell saw his daughter coming closer. She was carrying boxes of luggage.

"You're here," she said when she got to where he stood. "I didn't think you'd come."

"I had to see you off," he replied. "I couldn't just let you leave like this, without saying goodbye."

"Well, I'm glad you came. I couldn't stand the thought of leaving you without letting you know."

"Are you sure I can't talk you out of this?"

"No, you can't," she said. "I've made up my mind. It's my decision."

"You're coming back right?"

"Of course I am."

"When?"

"I don't know. A couple weeks. Months maybe. It depends on how I like Earth. But I will come back. I promise you, I will return. You know I wouldn't leave you for good. I couldn't do that to you."

He smiled at her, looked into her eyes. "Yeah, I know."

But he actually didn't. He did not know if she was ever coming back. He had lived with her for long enough that he knew she could lie right to his face, and did often. He hoped to God that she would return, but her promise did not convince him of that.

"I've got to go check in my baggage now," she said. "Be back in a second." She hurried off, lugging her bags along with her.

A few seconds later, Stanley showed up. "You're here," he said, looking a little nervous.

"Of course. I couldn't let you two leave without saying good-bye."

"Does this mean you're okay with all this?"

"No, of course not. But at least I know you a little. I know you'll take good care of my daughter." The two men stared at each other for a moment. "You will, won't you?" Spanfell added.

Stanley shook his head. "No, I won't," he said. "I think she can take care of herself. You should be trusting in her, not me. She's old enough to make her own decisions."

Spanfell considered that. He smiled. "Maybe I should try thinking that way."

A couple minutes later, Sareena returned, empty handed. "Are you all ready to go?" she asked Stanley.

"Yes, I am," he replied.

The three sat down on a nearby bench in the waiting room of the docking bay, and waited for the boarding call that would announce Sareena and Stanley's shuttle.

When the call finally came, neither Stanley or Sareena immediately got up to leave. After a few moments, Stanley stood and said, "I think I'll go find our seats. You can catch up with me." He turned to Spanfell. "It's been nice knowing you," he said, holding out his hand.

Spanfell took it. "You too."

Stanley walked off, following the small crowd of people boarding the shuttle.

"I guess this is good-bye," Spanfell said.

"Yeah, I suppose it is," Sareena replied. "I'll be back before you know it."

He hesitated in his response. "I know you will."

"I'll miss you," she said. "You'll call me right?"

He laughed. "Do you have any idea how expensive a call like that would be?"

"But you will won't you?"

"Of course I will."

"All right then," she said. "Good-bye"
"Bye."

He watched her walk off, following the continuing crowd of people, heading towards the shuttle that would take her down to Earth and out of his life. After a while, he moved to a window to watch the departure. A long wait, and he finally heard the docking clamps disengage and he saw the little shuttle emerge from its place in the side of the station. It moved quickly away and was soon out of sight.

Turning to leave, he noticed a tall, attractive, blond woman had been standing next to him, also watching the departure. He looked around. There was no one else in their immediate vicinity. What the hell, he thought.

He looked at her and said, "Somebody you know on the shuttle?"

She looked at him. "My parents. They were here visiting."

"Did they like station life?"

She smiled. "They liked being able to jump higher than they could on Earth."

Spanfell laughed. "That's always the first thing everyone notices about this place."

She nodded. "That's probably true," she said and turned back to look out the window.

"So are you married?"

She looked back at him and cocked her head, looking a little stunned. "What?"

He gave her an inquisitive look.

Laughing, she looked down at the floor, then back up at him. "No, I'm not," she replied.

"So are you free for dinner tonight?"

She put her hand to her face. "I don't believe this," she said. "You're trying to pick me up."

"I'm making the attempt," Spanfell replied.

She shook her head. "No, I don't have any plans for dinner."

"Would you like to eat with me tonight?"

She nodded. "Yeah, sure. I'd love to."

"I'm Spanfell."

"Kelsey," she said.

They turned for a moment, and looked out the window again. "So who was it that you knew on that shuttle?" Kelsey asked.

"My daughter."

"She going on vacation?"

"She's going home," he said.

The box he chose was a large gray plastic container about the length of a long coffin, but nearly three times as wide as an average coffin. That would provide him with enough room to move around comfortably. Tyson knew he would need to spend at least two and a half weeks in that box.

It was his last day of work. He got his final paycheck transferred to his account and said a few good-byes to his coworkers and went out, looking as though he was

leaving the ship, but as soon as no one was looking, he turned back and headed quickly but quietly down the halls toward the food storage area. No one saw him.

He reached the door to the storage area. His anxiety rose as he placed his hand on the security panel. The door slid open and Tyson was relieved that they had not yet taken away his access.

The narrow aisleway was lined on either side with myriad forms of containers, stacked high to the ceiling which was nearly ten meters to the top. Creeping slowly, he found the section that held his selected container. There was a small ladder just to the right of the stack of coffin sized boxes. He began climbing it. His, was the third from the top. He thought now that perhaps he should have chosen the one at the very top, since he wanted to be as far away from anyone that might pass by as possible, but it was too late now. The top container was already stuffed full of--Tyson believed--crackers.

Opening the door on the side of the container, Tyson peered inside. His stash of stuff was still there. His blanket and pillow; reading material and flashlight; scale, and of course, his three week supply of food and water. He crawled in and closed the door behind him.

Darkness.

He picked up his flashlight and flipped it on. The light illuminated his surroundings very well. He read the little readout on the side of the flashlight. It had three hundred hours worth of battery left. Perfect. Tyson did some calculation in his head and decided that he should keep the light turned off approximately half of the time, in order to conserve the energy and make it last for the duration of the time he would be in here. He didn't think the light would cause him any sort of problem since the hall outside was always brightly lit. It wouldn't tip anybody off to his presence.

Tyson sat cross legged in the middle of his new home, and set the scale he had brought, down on the floor. He weighed the first of the three novels he had brought along and recorded it's weight on the inside of it's front cover. He did this for the next two, concentrating hard, so he could get an exact reading, and recorded their weight on the inside covers. The only way he would be able to tell when the ship had left the station was when the gravity changed. It would probably be too slight for him to notice himself, without the aid of equipment. When the gravity changed, he knew it would be less than forty hours before they were completely out of the solar system and heading at full speed, towards the unknown destination.

It had been nearly three days since he had slept, not because of his anxiety about attempting something like this but because he hadn't allowed himself to sleep. He wanted to be able to rest as much as possible while in the crate. Adjusting his position, he laid his head on his pillow, wrapped the blanket around him, switched off the light and fell instantly into a deep sleep.

Chapter 7

The gravity had changed nearly two days ago. It was time to leave the crate. Taking a deep breath, Tyson kicked open the door, and crawled out. He grasped hold of the ladder to his left and climbed down.

It was like coming out of a cocoon. He was changed somehow, different, metamorphosized. He was starting a new life. Everything looked different to him for some reason even though nothing had actually changed. But in fact it had changed. The ship was no longer docked at Austin Station but was now traveling at some unimaginable speed towards some unimaginable destination. He looked around at his new surroundings and thought, I've made it. I finally escaped. Once and for all.

Tyson quickly left the storeroom, anxious to look over the ship.

At first, nobody he met seemed to pay much attention to him. They treated him as if he was just a part of the crew. Some gave friendly little nods or smiles. Tyson was beginning to think, after a while, that he would simply be able to blend in and nobody would ever find out that he wasn't supposed to be here.

Eventually he found himself entering one of the ships gardens. Somebody approached him. A large, clean shaven man. "Hello," the man said, giving Tyson an odd sort of confused look. "Who would you be?" he asked.

"My name is Tyson."

"Tyson? I don't remember anyone by that name on the crew roster. In fact, have I ever seen you before?"

Tyson shrugged.

"Who are you."

"I told you."

"What's your job here?"

"Don't have one."

"You don't have one? You have to have one. Everyone has to have a job here."

"I was loading some crates before."

"You're not part of the crew, are you?"

"Nope."

"Who are you?"

"I told you. Who are you?"

"I'm the captain. You're a stowaway, aren't you?"

"Yup."

"Oh my God. Do you have any idea what you have done to yourself?"

"Pretty good idea," Tyson replied.

"Why the hell would you want to stow away on this ship? What kind of an idiot are you?"

"An idiot who wanted to leave the world behind."

"Yeah, well I guess you've certainly done that now haven't you? Didn't you think of all you're leaving behind. You're never going home, do you realize that?"

"What never? Twelve years isn't so long."

"Twelve years?" the captain said.

"Twelve years till we come back home."

"Who told you that?"

Tyson paused for a moment. "Stanley Peterman."

The captain looked surprised. "You know Stanley?"

"Yes."

"What exactly did he tell you about this trip?"

"He said it was going to take approximately twelve years. His trip took seven. This trip is going a little farther, so it's going to take twelve."

"Wrong."

"What?" Tyson replied.

"Your friend, Stan, was mistaken."

"What?"

"You're not going home."

"What?"

"This journey isn't twelve years long. It's as long as we make it. Our destination is unknown. We will go until we find an inhabitable planet somewhere out there, then we will stop. We won't be going back. Not ever. And we can't turn back just for you."

Oh, my God, Tyson thought. What have I gotten myself into?

"It looks like you just made a life changing decision, there buddy."

"It was kind of a snap decision, I guess," said Tyson.

"A snap decision can still change your life forever."

"I know all about that," Tyson said.

The captain smiled and shook his head. "Come on," he said. "I'll introduce you to the rest of the crew. They're going to have to meet you sooner or later."

The glass door slid quietly open. Sareena pushed her walker in front of her, out onto the porch of Stanley's house. The cold suddenly hit her and a shiver ran down through her body. That was something she would have to get used to. On Earth, the temperature is not always perfect. She ignored the chill and stepped outside. She let the door close automatically behind her.

Staring up at the night sky, she saw the stars. They were much dimmer here, than they had been when she looked at them from Austin Station. It was the atmosphere between her and them that was making them appear less bright. She thought about that. But there was nothing solid between her and the stars. There was no glass window separating them. Nothing. She felt as if she could reach out and touch one of them. Nothing would stop her.

She wondered if one of those tiny sparkles was actually the world she had left behind. Can you see the habitat worlds from the planet's surface? She liked to believe that you could. She liked to think that she could still look up at the night sky and see Austin Station there, somewhere.

She wasn't going home. She knew that now. How could she? She was happier now, than she had ever been in her life. Heavier--much, much heavier--so heavy, in fact, that she could barely stand straight without the help of her walker. But she knew that would pass. In a few months she would grow strong and be able to walk erect without any help at all.

Glancing at Stanley who was sound asleep in the bed, she thought about the life she had left behind. She thought about school, about her father, about what it had been like to wander aimlessly around the station. That world was gone, now. She missed it, but she knew that what lay ahead for her, here, would be much greater. Everything on this world was totally new, unexplored. There were myriad things to do, things to experience.

It had been a rash, snap decision to leave the station, but she knew it had been the right one. It was a decision made in an instant, but one that would affect her life more than any other decision she had ever made.

Quietly, she turned and walked back inside the house.

This was her home now.