

## Straws

Coming out of bio-stasis was supposed to be a nice slow, non-jarring process. It should have taken more than a day, instead it took less than an hour. Even in deep sleep, it was a terribly painful process. Steiner felt as if his heart was being violently torn from his chest. A person should never be pulled out this quickly, he thought. The risk was too great. A person's mind could be ripped apart. But he knew it was happening, just the same. For whatever reason, it was happening.

Before he had even reached complete consciousness, Steiner knew something was terribly wrong.

It wasn't coming out of stasis that he feared so much. He figured he could handle that. His sanity could withstand the pressures. What he feared was what would happen after he was completely awake. There must be some emergency that demands attention. Something complicated. Something life threatening. If not, the ship's computers could have dealt with the problem, whatever it was.

His whole body ached. It felt as if every muscle he had was horribly cramped. Random thoughts and faces of people he once knew ran through his mind. He heard familiar names repeated in his ears. He saw his whole life being repeated over and over again. He let the images come. Forcing them back would drive him toward insanity.

He felt his mind, slowly, come back into his body. The extreme physical pain was a symptom of that. Don't fight it, he told himself. To fight it means to scramble the electrical signals and possibly scatter them completely. Trying to force your mind too quickly back into your brain, can do that too. So Steiner tried to relax and let it all happen as it was supposed to.

He tried to ignore the pain as best he could. Concentrating too hard on the physical agony of the waking process could force the electrical impulses on the wrong course. They could be sent to the wrong sections of his brain or to another part of the ship or into someone else's brain. Concentrating on any one aspect of the process could do this also, so he let the images of his life pass before him, never thinking too much about each one, never thinking too much about any particular thing.

If the computer had allowed him the normal wake up time, he wouldn't have had any of these problems. He would have been able to think about anything he liked and there wouldn't have been any risk. But something was different this time. There was some reason he needed to be up and awake, and fast. There was something with which he needed to deal, although he couldn't imagine what that would be. He was certainly no expert on ship's systems. There were many people aboard more qualified to handle a possible problem than he was. He was simply a biologist, sent on this mission to study the life forms they were expected to find when they reached their destination. So why was he needed?

He thought about this as the last bits of his consciousness were being pulled from the storage unit, back into his old familiar body. It was never a comfortable feeling to have your mind literally in two places at once. It left him detached, with nothing to hold onto, as if he was not connected in any way to reality. It felt as if his whole life could fly apart at any moment.

The sensations eventually passed though, and despite the fact that the physical agony had increased, Steiner felt much more comfortable knowing that his mind was once again safely encased in his skull. After a few minutes he could feel himself being fully reconnected with his body. He began twitching violently, uncontrollably. At first he feared he might injure himself on the glass casing, just above where he lay, but then he realized that there were restraints holding him down. Big, heavily padded straps held his ankles, and wrists. There was one over his chest, one over the top of his head, and one over each of his knees. He wouldn't be able to hurt himself.

His convulsions lasted a minute or so. He opened his eyes halfway through and saw the dim light through the glass above him. It had probably been many years since he had seen light. His vision was terribly blurred, but he knew that would go away. He couldn't hear anything, but that too would pass with time. The twitching stopped and the restraints pulled themselves off him, retracting into the cushions he was lying on. He now had time to lie back, relax, and test his skill at moving his arms and legs.

Several minutes passed. His vision started to clear a little. It was time to get up.

With shaking fingers and arms that wouldn't work at their full strength, he pulled the latch on the inside of the stasis chamber cover, and pushed it open. A cold chill swept over his naked body and he gave a quick shiver. He lifted himself up over the edge of the long canister and plopped his feet on the floor.

He walked to the front of the stasis chamber, holding onto the edge for support in case his legs suddenly decided to buckle under his weight. Looking at the readout that was above the end of the chamber where his head had been, he saw that he had been in stasis for a little more than four years. That was a long time, he admitted, but he had been scheduled to be in for nearly sixteen. Whatever had gone wrong, had happened before the *Tomas* was even halfway through with its voyage. They must still be in the middle of empty space somewhere. Or, perhaps, they were just passing through the Calstner system. Steiner knew that they were going to use the sun's gravity as a course correction on their way to their ultimate destination, the Syntac system. Perhaps something had gone wrong during the maneuver.

Feeling a little more sure footed now, he started his walk towards the end of the room that housed all of the hibernation chambers. There were fifteen of the coffin sized tubes for eleven people. Four were kept in reserve. Steiner knew there were also twelve in the escape capsule, located on the other end of the craft. He had a feeling that those might be needed sometime soon.

In the back of his mind was the thought that he should get to the main control room as quickly as possible since he might be needed, but he couldn't help stopping to take a look at Istana, still sleeping in her stasis chamber. His eyes ran up and down her naked form. He had never seen her like this before and it depressed him a little to know that he would probably never see her this way again. He desired her greatly. They had been friends for several years but over those years she had made it clear to him that she was not interested in him as a lover. In the past he had tried to keep his attraction toward her completely hidden, but now, as she lay sleeping quietly, unaware of his presence, he took no pains to control how he looked at her.

Maybe he still held on to some hope that he could bring her around. Perhaps something would change and she would start thinking about him the way he thought about her. He could admit that that was a long shot, but he still held on to the hope.

For so long now he had desired to see her without clothing and it upset him a little that his vision was so poor that he couldn't fully enjoy the moment. It felt as though he was invading her space by staring like this. Even so, he found it difficult to tear his eyes from her.

She stirred suddenly.

Startled, Steiner jumped back. He looked back down at her once he realized she wasn't waking so soon. Her face was twitching a little and he could see bits of movement around other parts of her body. Looking up at the readout above her head, he saw that she still had another twelve minutes before she would be conscious. He thought it a little ironic that he would be up before she. She was actually a member of the crew. She would know how to run ship's systems. He was mostly an observer on this mission. She was more important to the mission's success than he--or so he had thought. Perhaps something out of the ordinary occurred that the computer thought he could deal with better than she. He doubted that. It was more likely that the computer had decided that he would be more capable of surviving the quick wake up time. It had determined that he had a more stable mind than she had.

Steiner felt a small wave of superiority come over him, and he felt a little embarrassed for feeling that way. Just because he woke up before she did, didn't mean he was in any way superior to her. It was a judgment call on the part of the ship and he knew that semi-sentient ships like this didn't always make the right choices. Sometimes they made extremely poor judgment calls. That was the price you had to pay to have a craft that ran itself.

It's time to get moving, he told himself.

Quickly checking the other stasis tubes, he determined that he was the fourth to awaken. The captain and two of the mission specialists were already up. Their tubes sat empty with the lids hanging open.

As he was about to leave he noticed one chamber's readout was blank. It was not displaying the status of the person inside. That was odd. There should at least be something to show that he's still alive. Steiner looked at the man in the tube. He recognized him as Drakin, one of the mission specialists. The man was perfectly still.

Moving on, Steiner clapped his hands twice to see if any of his hearing had returned. Surprisingly enough, he could make out bits of sound. In another twenty minutes or so, he predicted, he would have his normal hearing back.

He entered another small room and found a uniform that fit him and pulled it on quickly. Then he hurried out, down a long corridor toward the main control room.

When he reached the control room, he saw the three men who had awakened before him were all sitting, hunched over computer screens. As he got closer to them he saw that they were staring at an image, of what appeared to be a white colored planet. Possibly one in the Calstner system.

Tomathin, one of the mission specialists, looked up as Steiner came closer. He gave a polite nod. They did not say anything, knowing that they wouldn't be able to hear each other anyway, instead, Tomathin motioned to Steiner, drawing him to his computer screen. The view changed to display a writing program, and Tomathin typed out, *Something wrong. Mid-flight collision. We don't have details. We're making an emergency landing on the sixth planet.*

Steiner took the keyboard from Tomathin and wrote, *This ship was made for landing? Can we make it?*

Tomathin replied, *Not designed for landing on planet surface but ship-consciousness says we can make it. Not to worry.*

*Returning to Earth?* Steiner wrote.

*Yes. We're abandoning mission,* was Tomathin's reply.

Steiner nodded. "I guess I'll get out of your way then," he said out loud. He was surprised that his voice didn't sound garbled; it was, however, very quiet. He had to strain his ears to hear himself.

Tomathin shrugged. "You're not in the way. We can't do anything until everyone else is out of bio-stasis."

Steiner wondered if he caught everything that Tomathin had just said. "What exactly is wrong with the ship? Will we need to make repairs?"

"We don't know yet," Tomathin replied. He seemed to be having an easier time speaking out loud than Steiner was. "We need to wait and see what kind of damage we do to her when we land. We may need to use the escape capsule to get home."

"Why are we landing if we're only going to do more damage to the *Tomas*?" Steiner asked.

Tomathin looked back and forth quickly. He turned to the computer screen. Apparently he didn't want Steiner to misunderstand his response. He wrote, *We're running out of oxygen. Need to get some from planet surface.*

Steiner stared at the screen. Running out of oxygen? How could that be? They had brought more than enough. What could have possibly happened that would make them lose so much so quickly?

"How much do we have left?" Steiner asked.

Tomathin's on-screen response: *Couple hour's worth. Maybe less.*

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Steiner counted heads. There were ten people present in the control room, including himself. He counted again and came up with the same number. Who's missing? he wondered. Then he remembered what he had seen earlier, in the stasis room. "Where's Drakin?" he asked.

"Drakin was brought out of stasis too quickly," the captain replied.

Steiner didn't need any more explanation than that.

So there was already one dead. This was more serious than Steiner had thought. He could imagine all too clearly what it must have been like for Drakin. Having your mind carried too quickly. Parts of your consciousness breaking apart. Desperately grasping for them, trying to hold on, only succeeding in making things worse for yourself. One part of a person's mind cannot survive without the presence of the others and when they are separated too far, the entire consciousness disintegrates, fades into nothingness. Steiner could imagine how it would feel. It had only been half an hour since he had awoken from stasis. He could still remember the sensations fairly well.

"All right," said the captain to the group all seated in the main control room. "We will be landing in twenty or thirty minutes. This is, of course, not a normal maneuver. It can be potentially very dangerous. But it is necessary for our survival. Besides, the ship-consciousness already made the decision and we cannot override. Once on the ground, it will be safe to attempt a direct interface with the computer and we will be able to find out exactly what has gone wrong. As of now, we are a little uninformed. All we know is that there was some mid-flight collision--perhaps a malfunction caused the shields to drop--and sections of the port side have been torn apart. There's been a severe oxygen drop so we will be collecting enough from the planet's surface to get us safely back to Earth."

"We're abandoning the mission?" Tanyan asked. Tanyan was the general maintenance man for the ship's systems.

"We have no choice," the captain replied. "The ship is already badly damaged and it's going to be damaged even worse when we land. More than likely it will be beyond use. We're going to use the escape pod to get back home." He paused, waited for any questions but everyone was silent. "Well then," he said. "Take your seats, please. Put on your safety harnesses. This could get a little bumpy."

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Steiner felt himself getting a little more nervous now, as he looked over at Istana, sitting next to him. She was desperately gripping the armrest of her seat. Her knuckles were starting to turn white and she had a tense look on her face. She must be terribly frightened about the landing, he thought.

But Steiner, on the other hand, was relatively calm. Perhaps that was because he didn't have the understanding of the ship's capabilities that she did. He didn't have any idea what was possible and what wasn't, and had no logical means of determining the chances for his own survival. The computer had stated that there wasn't a great deal of risk in attempting this landing, but it could have been lying. Was the *Tomas* capable of lying to its crew about such matters? Would it do such a thing in order to keep the tension level down? Steiner didn't know and he didn't exactly want to know. It's healthier if I stay uninformed, he thought.

Looking over at Istana again, he decided she was in need of some sort of reassurance. He wanted to comfort her, tell her everything was going to be okay, but, of course, she knew better than he did about whether it was going to turn out okay or not. Steiner decided, rather than saying anything, to simply reach over and put his hand over hers.

She looked startled when he did this. She glanced at him, smiled, and lightly patted the back of his hand. Then she pulled her hand away from his and rested it on her knee.

Steiner pulled his arm back, feeling a little ashamed. I shouldn't try things like that, he thought. It only ends in embarrassment when she rejects me. But it was such a simple action. Why wouldn't she want to hold someone's hand if this situation was as frightening for her as it seemed to be?

Don't think about it, he told himself.

After a few moments a shudder ran through the ship, startling Steiner a little. "We're hitting the outer atmosphere of the planet," he heard someone say. A few minutes wait and the ship shook once again, this time more violently. He felt the safety harness digging into his flesh as the jolts ran up through his seat. As time went on, the shaking became worse.

He thought he had been securely fastened to his chair. All those straps over his chest and legs and shoulders, but somehow he still had room to be thrown around. His head whipped from side to side. One moment he would feel great pressure on his chest, as if it was going to rip apart and slide right past the safety harness, and the next he would be forced back against his seat and his shoulders would feel as if they were going to collapse from being pushed so hard. It felt as if his internal organs were being thrown wildly back and forth beneath his flesh. He wondered how much damage the human body could take before it shut down. Probably much more than this, he decided. You can take quite a lot before any permanent harm is done, but Steiner knew he would still have some nasty bruises to remember this by when it was all over.

Being thrown around like this made him feel rather queasy. He wanted to throw up, but fortunately his stomach was empty. Steiner laughed to himself as he realized it had been nearly half a decade since he had last eaten. That's quite a long time. He suddenly found himself feeling hungry. That's good, he thought. Take your mind off what's happening.

Perhaps this is all just some foolish trick. What if the ship consciousness was simply making some idiotic joke? Was that possible? Steiner didn't see why it wouldn't be possible. The computers onboard had circuitry that mimicked a human's mind, and a human might try something like this.

The whole situation felt like it could be a joke. It all seemed so hard to believe. Come out of stasis so quickly then immediately be thrown into some insane set of circumstances, of which he has absolutely no control over. He had seen no evidence that there was even anything wrong with the ship. There was nothing out of place. There were no conduits ripped apart, like the reports had said there were. It all seemed so fake, just too phony to be real.

Steiner had always wondered if it was safe to be riding in a ship that was, in fact, alive. In many ways, he knew, the *Tomas* had what could be considered to be emotions. And there were other aspects of the ship's mind that had human equivalents. A human could make mistakes and so could the *Tomas*. But could it actually go insane? Trusting in the ship was, to Steiner, like entrusting your life to some randomly selected person off the street.

But he knew that it couldn't be a joke. These ships were designed with certain human attributes, sure, but they were also designed to be very predictable. It would never decide to do something like this, just for fun. That was too far from the normal pattern. Steiner doubted, seriously, that the computers were advanced enough to even understand humor. This had to be for real. But that thought was just as frightening as the alternative.

The quaking abruptly stopped. He now had a little time to relax. There was still a little shaking, so he knew they couldn't have landed yet, but it wasn't nearly so violent anymore. He looked down at himself. Realizing how hard he had been gripping his arm rests, he forced himself to let go. He checked himself all over and noticed that he had been terribly bruised. His whole body ached. He leaned as far forward as the harness would allow and rubbed his legs. Stretching his legs out in front of him, he realized that a lot of the pain he was feeling was caused from simply being tense. He had been trying desperately, using all the muscle strength he had, to hold himself steady in his seat.

He relaxed himself and tried to get rid of whatever muscle cramps he had accumulated.

The next jolt caught him off guard. His head was thrown violently forward; his chest forced hard against the safety harness. It took him a moment to recover, but he was able to pull his legs back in and brace them against the bottom of his chair, regaining his original defensive position.

The shaking was more violent this time but did not last nearly as long. Then there was one final push. It seemed like the whole weight of the ship was coming down on him, pushing him back into the deep cushions of his seat. But it lasted only a few seconds and afterward everything was still and silent. He looked around quickly. After a few moments he saw some of the others begin to get out of their seats. Steiner tried to do the same but found the safety harness difficult to remove. The straps and clips confused him and he found his fingers were not working exactly right, maybe because he had been clutching so desperately at the arm rests or because he had just recently gotten out of stasis and still wasn't completely used to being in his body again. He didn't know and he didn't care; he just wanted to be free of the straps. Tearing violently at

them, he was finally able to pull himself free. He stood, perhaps a little too quickly. He felt a wave of dizziness come over him and suddenly it felt like he was back in the stasis chamber. Everything went black. His mind went blank. He felt himself fall to his knees. Then he could feel nothing at all.

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When he awoke he found himself once again seated in his big chair. Estigan, a short man with an enormous beard stood over him. He nodded happily. "You're awake," he said. "We thought we might have lost you."

Steiner groaned and said, "How long was I out?"

"About twenty minutes or so. Come on. There's still some fires that need putting out down on the lower levels."

"Aren't the internal extinguishing systems working?" Steiner asked as he got up slowly to follow Estigan.

"Apparently not."

The two went rapidly down the corridors that would lead to the access ways to the lower decks of the ship. Steiner couldn't see any evidence of damage.

"Did everyone make it through the landing okay?" he asked. "No one was hurt?"

"We're all fine," Estigan replied quickly, as he began descending a ladder set off to one side of the corridor. "You were the one we were actually worried about. Be careful coming down. There's a lot of wreckage and the gravity on this planet is more than you're used to."

Steiner followed Estigan cautiously down the access ladder. Now that he paid attention to it, he did seem a little heavier. He had to work harder to keep himself from falling.

As he descended he started to see more signs of wreckage. Here and there he would notice a wall bent out of alignment. When they had descended three flights, he looked down one corridor and saw a thick girder hanging down from the ceiling and blocking the entire way. The damage seemed to get worse as they went further downward. Apparently the ship had landed itself in such a way as to prevent damage to the central control room. That's why Steiner hadn't witnessed any destruction during the landing.

Estigan soon stepped off the ladder onto deck three. Steiner followed. He noticed Vinisa, the computer interface specialist, coming up the ladder from the lower decks. "Fire's been contained," she said as she stepped off onto their level. "It was nothing big."

"Anything to see down there?" Steiner asked, wondering how bad the wreckage was.

"Damage gets worse and worse as you go down. There's nothing to see. Let's get back up to the control center. I think I can attempt an interface, find out exactly what happened and what the chances are of getting off this world."

Steiner looked up the shaft that he had just climbed down. Six flights he would have to ascend in order to get back to the central control room. His body was still weary from being jostled so much in the landing, and he wasn't sure if he'd be able to make it all the way back up. Looking down the shaft now he saw someone a level below, slowly climbing up towards them. He couldn't make out who it was though. He peered closer, hoping to make out the figure.

Suddenly Vinisa put an arm across his chest and pulled him back, away from the shaft. "Careful," she said. "We've got a constant gravity here. You fall, there's nothing to hold you back." She tipped her head, indicating the way back up. "You want to go first, Steiner? I can catch you if you slip." She smiled at him.

Steiner looked at Vinisa for a second. She was a large and very muscular woman but he doubted that she would have the strength to catch him if he happened to fall. Overconfident in her abilities perhaps. Kind of a freakish woman, Steiner thought as he started up the ladder, what with that computer jack plugged into the side of her skull.

The upward climb wasn't quite as hard as Steiner had expected. He found that if he simply ignored the growing pain in his legs, he could keep up a steady pace and within ten minutes or so, he was back at the control center where he had started from.

The crew was already starting to group there. In a few minutes, everyone was in the control room, most of them focusing their attention on Vinisa who was sitting at a computer console, apparently preparing to jack in. Everyone seemed to be crowding around her. Steiner, however, wasn't interested. He still didn't really have any idea what was going on and it seemed as though trying to press for information would get him nowhere, so he simply went back to his seat and sat down, wanting to simply wait until something happened.

"This is going to take twenty or thirty minutes," Vinisa said to the group. "We need to redirect some signals, here. So it's going to take some time. You guys can back off now. The info isn't going to come easy."

*We?* Steiner thought. She thinks of the computer as if it were alive, so she says *we* when referring to her and it. Strange. Very strange to have such a connection with an artificial mind. He felt some kind of anger burning within him, directed at Vinisa and her foolish way of looking at the ship consciousness, but, in fact, it was caused by his whole situation. Steiner hated being left in the dark like this. He always wanted to know what was going on and to have control over his situation and to be in a place like this, with your destiny being controlled by some insane computer system and nobody seems to care, it can be quite frustrating.

He stood up. "If this is going to take so long, I'm going to wander around the ship for awhile." He left the control room without looking at anyone, just wanting to get away from it all, wanting to be alone for awhile.

After he had been walking down a corridor for a few moments, Istana caught up with him. "I'll come with you," she said.

He smiled at her and nodded his approval. Maybe it would be okay if she came along, if it's just the two of us.

They walked in silence for a few moments. Finally she said, "You worried about what's going to happen with us?"

"How can I be worried?" he replied. "I don't even have the slightest idea what's going on."

"What don't you understand?"

Steiner thought about that. He did, in fact, have just as much information about the situation as everyone else, he just didn't know what to do with that information. "I don't know," he said. "I just feel trapped here, like I have no control over anything, like my whole life is being run by some wacky machine."

"We're all trapped." She smiled. "Don't worry. The ship knows what it's doing. We'll come out all right." She put a hand on his shoulder then pulled it away quickly. "Come on. If you need information so badly, lets go see if the escape capsule is still in tact."

"That's three levels up."

"Short little climb."

The climb up this time seemed harder than before. Istana went first. Steiner didn't have any great difficulty keeping up with her, but she set a steady pace that made his legs ache after it was all over and they were safely out of the ladder shaft on deck twelve.

There was a great deal of wreckage up here. So much in fact, that it was difficult to get around. He found himself scrambling over girders, and squeezing between walls that had collapsed, in an attempt to reach the escape capsule. In the end they had to turn back when they found the piles of wall panels, girders, tubing and other such wreckage, at one point, too large to get around.

A few minutes after they had decided to turn back, they ran into Tithiane. She seemed excited. Her eyes were gleaming. "Come on you two," she blurted. "I have something I want to show you." She turned, motioning for Steiner and Istana to follow, and went at a brisk walk down the corridor.

They walked several paces behind Tithiane. Steiner wondered what it could be that she would want to show them. She seemed happy enough so it's probably nothing too unpleasant.

It was a short walk down the corridor and up to the thirteenth level, there was a great deal of climbing over fallen beams and wreckage. "It's right up here," Tithiane said as they rounded a corner. "Come look at this."

As Steiner came around the bend he saw that an entire wall had been torn from the side of the craft, revealing a tremendous view of the planet they had landed on. He looked out on rolling hills blanketed with snow, enormous peaks and glaciers. It appeared as though they had landed at the end of a long valley and now the huge opening in the side of the ship provided a view of the mountains rising up on either side of them. He saw a track, as wide as the ship, extending out from them as far as the eye could see.

Tithiane pointed at the track. "I figure we made that when we landed. Look how far we skidded before stopping!"

Steiner nodded. "There's snow."

"Lot's of snow," Tithiane replied. "Look: we didn't even hit solid ground when we landed. Probably what saved us."

"I don't feel cold," Steiner pointed out.

"There's a force field. It's keeping the cold out, along with the atmosphere."

Istana said, "That can't be very energy efficient. Such a tight field must be burning our fuel reserves pretty quick."

"I fear that it is," Tithiane replied. "Come on. Let's get back to the control room. They're probably ready to attempt the interface by now."

Tithiane started to leave and Istana followed.

Steiner looked back out at the planet where they were stranded. He had to admit that it was quite a beautiful sight: all that snow and ice, probably building up over millions of years. The towers and walls of ice were of a size and variety that reminded him of a massive city. The huge mountains, rising high on either side of the valley, looked like sky scrapers, but were a shape and color and beauty that could only be imagined back on Earth.

But there was something else to it all: the danger, the horrifying knowledge that he would not be able to survive five minutes outside of the ship, because of the cold and the atmosphere. A few steps forward, through the energy field, would mean certain death. There was no life out there, and that thought put sort of an ugly hue over the whole scene.

"Hey Steiner," Istana called to him, "are you coming?"

"Yeah. Right behind you." Reluctantly he turned away from the scene and hurried off to catch up to Istana and Tithiane who had already begun crawling around the debris on their way down to the central control room.

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Steiner watched as Vinisa pulled her blond hair away from the computer jack on the side of her head and plugged herself into the ship. She blinked rapidly for a few seconds, then nodded. "I have a connection," she said.

"What's happening?" asked Tomathin. The entire crew was now crowding around Vinisa as she sat, staring blankly into a computer terminal.

"I don't know," she said. "Hang on." She paused, started rapping her fingers on the armrests of her chair. "Okay, here we go. We collided with a hydrogen atom in mid-flight as the *Tomas* was making the adjustments needed to turn us toward the Syntac system. The shields were down for less than half a second, but a single atom managed to get through." She paused. "That's about a one in a million chance."

"Why were the shields down at all?" Steiner asked.

"The ship can't operate both the maneuvering thrusters and the protection shields at the same time. It takes too much power. Now we're on a planet called Marthis. To give us the best chance of survival, the *Tomas* landed right along the equator."

"What's the temperature out there?" Steiner asked.

"About two-forty below zero. That's as warm as it gets anywhere on this planet. The atmosphere has a good percentage of oxygen--enough for our needs anyway. We should be able to pull enough out of the air to sustain us for the four year trip home."

"What we really need to know," said Captain Spietz, "is what condition the ship is in. Will we be able to take off again."

"No chance of that," Vinisa said. "The escape capsule is still in working order, though it's going to take some work to get it off the ground."

"Just what is it's condition?"

"It's facing up, luckily. It was damaged more badly than expected." She paused. "Three stasis chambers are broken beyond repair but the rest are either in perfect working order or need only minor adjustments. Computer estimates that it should take only a week and a half before we're ready to take off."

"Good," said the captain. "What do the power reserves look like?"

"We're okay for the time being. At the present rate of energy consumption, we've got about two months."

"That doesn't leave us much room for mistakes."

"No, it doesn't but if we stick to the plan then we should get out in plenty of time."

"What is the plan?"

"We need to clear away the debris that's blocking our entry into the capsule first of all. Then I can reconnect to the computer in there and the *Tomas* and I can direct the operations. One other note: there's a large amount of damage on the thirteenth deck. There's a wall completely missing. A force shield has been placed to combat the cold but it is recommended that crew members stay away from this area, for fear they might fall through the field and perish on the outside."

"Noted," Captain Spietz said. "Is there anything else of significance Vinisa?"

"Not that I can see right now. We just need to get rid of the debris in front of the capsule then we can see first hand what we need to do to get ourselves home."

"All right then, we can get to that later. Right now we should get something to eat and get some rest."

Vinisa started to disconnect herself from the computer but the group did not seem to want to break up just yet. They lingered for a long while as if there might be something more to say. Eventually though, the group started to split up and Steiner went off to find his sleeping quarters.

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In the night came the realization of something he had overlooked.

He awoke suddenly, sweating profusely, numbers running rapidly through his mind. Vinisa had said that three stasis chambers in the escape capsule had been damaged beyond repair, but there were only twelve to begin with. That left nine. Nine stasis chambers for ten crew members.

"One of us is going to have to stay behind," he said to himself. He was alone in his sleeping quarters. "One of us is going to die."

He was wide awake now, sitting straight up on the edge of his bunk. He had no idea how he had come to such a realization in the middle of sleep; all he knew was that he had. Sometimes the mind works in odd ways.

Why hadn't they said anything when they were all together and Vinisa was jacked into the computer? Certainly someone must have realized that there wouldn't be enough stasis chambers to go around. Why hadn't they told him? Was it supposed to be some big surprise for whoever hadn't figured it out when they finally got ready to leave? Steiner could easily imagine a mad dash by the crew to claim their stasis tubes. Just like musical chairs, he thought.

He thought about going to ask someone if he had things right, but decided that he couldn't have made much of a mistake and that the action would only make him look foolish. Instead, he lay back down on the bunk, but now found it impossible to sleep. He began to wish more and more that he had never signed up for this expedition.

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They worked off and on for about eight hours and finally managed to clear a path to the escape capsule. Steiner found himself getting worn out rather easily, working under this increased gravity. Things weighed less on Marthis than they would have on Earth but it was still more than he was used to.

He didn't say anything about the realization he had come to the night before. He was sure everyone else had figured it out--more than likely before he had. The crew seemed to be very quiet, unconversational. The only talk revolved around their task at hand.

Steiner couldn't help looking at the rest of the crew as he carried debris out of the corridor, wondering which one would need to be left behind. He didn't know many of them very well. They were all acquainted but he wasn't friends with anyone except Istana. He explored his feelings about each of them, imagining what it would feel like to purposely leave one of them behind. What frightened him was that he didn't think it would be too difficult. There would be no great pains in watching one of these people sent to their death. Except, of course, Istana. Even there, though, it wouldn't be impossible.

He didn't think much about the possibility that he would be the one chosen to stay behind.

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"And we have a link-up," said Vinisa.

They were all crowded among the stasis chambers in the escape capsule, watching Vinisa connect herself with the ship's computer mainframe. Steiner leaned lightly against one chamber, hoping he wasn't so heavy as to break the glass and cause even more trouble for them. The floor sloped at a slight angle and made it difficult to stand or get around within the escape capsule.

"Okay," said the captain, "What is our exact situation with the escape pod? What needs to be repaired before we can lift off?"

"The storage capsules on stasis chambers one, four, and twelve have short circuited," Vinisa said. "They are beyond repair, and we have no replacements on board."

"What would a 'storage capsule' be," Steiner asked Tomathin, who was standing nearby.

"The center of the stasis chamber," replied Tomathin. "It stores the human mind in a state of unconsciousness. Very complicated circuitry. Microscopic actually."

"The hatch has been blown slightly askew," Vinisa continued. "We'll need to set it right or it won't be air tight and our oxygen will leak out before we can enter stasis. We also need to do some simple power rerouting on chambers three, five and six. That should only take five or six hours with one person working on each. The hatch should be the hardest part. For the rest, Tomas and I will take care of ourselves. That's mostly just simple power flow tests and of course the extraction of the oxygen from the atmosphere which the ship has already begun. We should be out of here in less time than originally expected--except, of course the two of us who won't be going."

*Two?* Steiner thought, but quickly realized that Vinisa thought of the ship as a living entity (not that Steiner insisted it wasn't), and that she was referring to the *Tomas* as the second person who would be remaining.

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Steiner heard Vinisa's voice coming through the earphone plugged into his left ear. He was lying on his side, next to the sixth stasis chamber, a panel removed and the inner circuitry revealed.

"Do you see the terminal that spreads into a Y formation, to your left?" Vinisa's voice asked Steiner.

Steiner touched one silvery terminal with his pen sized electronic pointer. The pointer was designed to send a slight electrical signal that the ship could sense and tell if Steiner had the correct terminal.

"No, no. Not that one. Try three to your left."

Steiner touched another one. They had been at this for forty-five minutes and still hadn't gotten anywhere. It was monotonous work, but he knew it was necessary in order for anyone to get off this planet, so he forced himself to ignore the pain developing in his side as he lay on the hard floor.

"You still don't have it. Further to the left."

Steiner looked up at Vinisa, hoping to get some sort of help, but she wasn't facing him. Instead, she was hunched over a table, the link cable still attached to her head. She was fully integrated into the ships systems now, probably wasn't even aware of still having a physical body. She was simultaneously overseeing all three repair jobs on the stasis chambers.

"Steiner, you still there?"

"I'm here." He touched the next terminal.

"There, you've got it. Now hook it up and test it."

It took several minutes to hook the terminal up to the tester and to the original power source at the right side of the open panel. When he finished he said into his tiny microphone, "Okay, got it. Run the test."

After a second: "No, that's not it. Let's try the next one--"

Steiner groaned as he did each time the connections did not work. This was surprisingly painful work. He had wanted to help out in some way but this was getting sickening. But it helped to take his mind off of everything else that was going on.

He started looking for the next terminal as Vinisa continued to direct him.

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The ten of them sat silently in the galley. It had taken almost a week to get the escape pod into working condition, but it was finally ready. Steiner sat in a small plastic chair, his legs pulled up close to his body. He gripped his ankles tightly as he waited. A tense ache had built in his chest and stomach. It was time now to decide who would be able to go, and who would have to stay aboard the *Tomas*.

The captain held in his hand a mass of bright red wires. This was their chosen method. They would draw straws. Steiner thought this was a bit of an old fashioned method to choose, but several people had objected to having the computer randomly select someone. Captain Spietz had refused to select someone himself--probably because he would feel obligated to choose himself, Steiner thought.

"All right," Spietz said. "We all agree now. This decision is final. No arguments. Nothing needs to be said after the short straw is drawn. I will go last since I'm holding them and might have an idea which is the short wire. Do we all agree?" He glanced at each person individually. They all nodded their heads or gave an indication that they agreed that this was the best way.

When the captain looked at him, Steiner nodded and said quietly, "No whining."

"Yes," the captain agreed. "No whining. No use making everyone else feel like shit after it's all done and decided." He looked at the next people. They all agreed.

Steiner held his breath as they started to draw. Estigan went first, then Tarly and Petirs. Steiner felt a bit of relief as he watched Istana also draw a long straw. She closed her eyes for a second and let out a long breath, leaning back in her chair. Tomathin drew his wire with eyes closed, then felt it up and down until he was sure it was long. He let out a barely audible sigh of relief.

When Tanyan also drew a long straw, Steiner started to worry--it was getting down to the end. He stood up quickly, not wanting to wait. "I'll go--can I go next?"

Captain Spietz held out his hand with the four wires that were left. In a time that seemed to drag on forever, Steiner reached out and drew.

At first he couldn't tell. Then he stared at the wire held in his hand, thinking that this must be one of the long ones. It had to be. But then the captain opened his hand, revealing three wires of the same length. Steiner held up his wire to compare with the three. They were clearly longer than his... by at least one third.

He sat back down hard in his chair. "Oh, hell no," he muttered without thinking about it. He stared at his little red wire as if in a daze. After several seconds he looked up to see the whole

group staring silently at him. Their gazes seemed to burn his skin and he cringed when he saw them. He smiled, which was the only thing he could think of to do, and tried to laugh, but what came out was a hideous distortion, sounding more like a snarl. He waited. They gave no reaction, simply sat silently, staring.

Not knowing exactly what he was doing, Steiner dropped the wire over his shoulder, got up and started walking toward his quarters.

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He stood, now, staring at himself in the mirror in his quarters. His stomach was painfully tense. He rubbed his hands hard across his face, hoping to somehow change the way he felt, to ease the numbness of his mind.

After examining his face for a while longer, he turned away, laid on his bunk and stared blankly at the ceiling. He saw himself picking the wire out of the captain's hand. Over and over the action played in his mind. A simple pluck. He could have grabbed the one next to it--then everything would be different. He had paused to think about which straw to grab. If he had just went for it without thinking about it...

When Steiner had lain there for a while (perhaps an hour, perhaps only five minutes: he had no sense of time right now) there was a knock on the door. He remained quiet. Whoever it was, he wanted no company.

After a moment, Istana opened the door. Steiner did not look at her but could sense her staring at him from across the room. She stood silently in the hatchway--half in, half out.

"Are you going to say something?" he asked, once it had become apparent she wasn't going to leave.

"What would you like me to say?" It sounded like there was a slight twang in her voice that wasn't normally there.

He did not reply. He didn't trust himself to say anything. But he looked at her.

She cocked her head. "Would you like me to leave?"

He opened his mouth to tell her that would probably best, but thought better of it. It might help to talk to someone. He feared losing control of his emotions, though.

"You can stay, if you want," he said.

She stepped in and let the hatch close behind her. "Are you okay?"

He didn't even consider responding to that.

"Dumb question?" she asked.

"There's not much else you can say," he replied. "Did they ask you to come and talk to me? Make sure I'm nice and calm?"

"Somebody needed to do it."

"I kind of figured I would be picked," Steiner said. "I've been the outsider from the beginning. I haven't had any control or any understanding about anything on this mission. Everything has been decided either by random occurrences or by a computer." He looked at her for a moment. "I'm not whining am I?"

She took a step toward him. "You're just stating a fact. But none of us have had a feeling of having control over anything. You're not the only one who's felt lost."

"None of you can honestly say you feel as lost as I do right now."

"I guess that's probably true." She motioned to a spot on the bed. "Do you mind if I sit next to you?"

He didn't reply; but after a moment she sat down anyway.

"You know you really don't need to be here if you don't want to," he said. "I know this is awkward for you and it's no picnic for me. It's getting late and I know you'll want to get back to your quarters for some sleep. I want you to know you won't do me any great damage if you leave me alone."

"Why are you trying to get rid of me?"

"I'm not."

"Would you like me to leave?" she asked.

He paused a moment. "No. If it's okay, I'd like it if you stay awhile."

"Then that's what I'll do." She leaned over him, into his line-of-sight. "You can't seriously think that I'd feel okay with leaving you here all alone, do you?"

There was a long moment of silence. Then she leaned slowly down and kissed him on the forehead. "I'm going to miss you," she said, and Steiner could see a little wetness forming in her eyes.

He sat up, more so that she wouldn't be crying on him than anything else. His mind had cleared a little.

"Kiss me," she said.

He only stared at her. He felt no desire right now. "What's going on with you?"

"Haven't you always wanted me?" she said, choking back tears.

"You knew about that?"

"I knew."

"You've never made a move before."

"Sometimes it's best not to." Istana said.

"What do you mean by that?"

"It was better that nothing happen between us, better we remain simply friends."

"Now it's different?" he asked.

"What harm can it do now?"

"So you come to me now, asking me to kiss you--for what reason? Because you pity me. Because you know I'll be left here all alone and you won't have to see me after a day and a half. Isn't that so?"

"That's not so."

"You came here to make love to me, didn't you?" Steiner was sickened by the idea that she intended to give herself to him for no reason other than that she felt sorry for him.

"You don't want to?" she asked.

"I don't want to." He was stunned that he would actually say those words. They were completely true though. He couldn't take pity. Not like this.

She looked hurt. "You want me to go?"

"I told you I'd like it if you stay." He reached out a hand and ran it through her dark hair.

"We have to begin preparing the stasis chambers in five hours. They have to be calibrated to our mental wavelengths--"

"I understand," he said. "You'll need to attend to that."

"I can stay with you until then if you'd like me to." He noticed she had begun to cry very lightly.

"I'd like that."

She fell into his arms and began kissing him about the face. He didn't feel the joy from her embrace that he always expected to. It all seemed to be too mechanical, no real emotion in the act. But for the time he had stopped repeating in his mind the act of drawing the straw.

They fell on the bed and he lay, again staring blankly at the ceiling. The pain in his stomach had ebbed a little. Istana quietly sobbed, her face pressed against his chest. He held her close, not speaking. After a time her crying ceased and they lay silently. Eventually he realized she was sleeping. He could feel her steady breathing; it was almost hypnotic. Steiner began to feel tired himself and soon drifted into sleep, thinking of nothing but Istana lying in his arms.

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He woke a few hours later. Istana had rolled away from him. He got up slowly as not to disturb her and quietly as he could, opened the hatch and left the room.

Without thinking about it, he went to the galley. Everyone seemed now to be asleep. There was no one around. Steiner sat in the galley for a short while before noticing a little red wire lying on the ground. He picked it up. It was his, the one that had decided his fate. He stared at it, twisted it around his fingers, and finally stuffed it in his pocket.

He was calm now. He had accepted the fact that he would be dead in two or three months time, and didn't feel the fear anymore. The pain in his stomach was mostly gone now.

Finding an access way in the corner of the galley he began climbing. It took barely five minutes to get to the thirteenth level. Climbing over the piles of rubble, he made his way toward the section that was missing the wall, where he could look out on the planet surface. He wanted to see it again. In the sections of the ship where the lights were still working, they would turn themselves on as he came near. He never had to walk in complete darkness.

When he arrived he sat down on a bit of debris and stared through the missing wall. It was nighttime outside. One small moon provide enough light for steiner to see the basic outline of the mountains.

His thoughts kept coming back to Istana, probably still sleeping in his bed. He couldn't understand his own feelings toward her. He'd wanted her for years, more than anything, yet in the end, when she had offered herself to him, he had turned her down without hesitation. There was something sickeningly unattractive about giving yourself to someone for no reason other than pity. Sometimes you don't have any idea what you really want, Steiner decided.

A sound from the corridor caught his attention. Vinisa was making her way into the room. She came and sat down beside him. For several moments they were silent, looking out at the landscape.

"What's on your mind?" she asked.

"It's a beautiful world isn't it?"

"I suppose so," she said.

"I'll never be able to leave."

"That's something I want to talk to you about." She paused. "I want to take your place."

He turned to look at her, but couldn't see anything in her facial expression. "You're serious?" he said.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"This is where I belong. Here, with the *Tomas*."

"This ship means that much to you?" Steiner asked.

"It's like a friend to me. It is an intelligent entity after all."

"It will still be here when you get back."

"Tomas will be gone when I get back. When his power reserves are used up, his consciousness ceases to exist."

"How long will the power reserves last?" Steiner asked.

"Three months probably, with only one person on board."

Neither spoke for a while. Then Steiner said, "Tell me why the stasis chambers can't be repaired on the escape pod."

"The circuitry is too complicated. The storage capsules need to be replaced."

"There are storage capsules in other chambers on the ship."

"Hooking them up is such a complicated process it requires the use of nanites, and we do not have any aboard."

"How long would the power last if I went into stasis?" Steiner asked.

"Three years at the most."

"Still not enough time," he said. "And you want to stay behind in my place. It's sure death. Why?"

"There comes a time. I don't think it's your time yet. Besides, this is my home. I can't see myself anywhere else."

"And if I refuse? Will you go with the others or stay here to keep me company?"

"I'll go," she replied. "No sense in both of us dying."

"So it's about me, isn't it? You're doing this to save my life."

She waited a moment before answering. "No. That's not it. It's a choice I made, for whatever reasons. It's not just because of you."

"You can't frame your reasons for such a major decision?"

"Sometimes it's easier to decide what you're going to do than it is to decide what you want."

"I can relate to that." He paused. "I can't let you stay in my place. Go calibrate yourself to your stasis chamber."

She stared at him for a moment, then got up.

"Good bye, Vinisa," he said.

"You're not coming down before we launch?"

"I shouldn't."

"All right." She walked away, twice looking over her shoulder at him.

So it wasn't just an act of fate anymore. It was a decision he had made. He felt better about it, thinking that he had had a choice in the matter. Steiner couldn't help thinking that maybe coming out of stasis had effected his decision making process.

He sat on the floor, leaned against the wall and stared at the world outside. The sun began to rise over the mountains.

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"How long before they launch?" Steiner said after an interminable length of time.

"They are ready to launch now," came a computerized voice. "They are discussing whether or not to find you before they leave."

"Tell them to just go," Steiner said. "If they get a chance to say last words, they'll probably regret what they choose to say." He waited for a response. After a while he said, "Did you tell them, Tomas?"

"They have been told. They're leaving now."

A long wait and Steiner heard a rumble that he assumed was the escape probe lifting off. He went to the opening in the wall but couldn't see anything. "Have they gone?" he asked.

"They have gone," replied the voice.

"I guess it's just you and me from now on."

"This is true."

"You don't talk much, do you?" Steiner had discovered that he could have a conversation with the ship and was exploring the possibilities.

"What would you like to be said?"

"You don't refer to yourself in first person," Steiner noted.

"I refer to myself however I feel I'm expected to."

"So if the person you're talking to thinks of you as an 'it', then that's how you refer to yourself."

"Yes."

"Do you think of yourself as an 'it'?"

"I do not believe I can answer that question."

Steiner stopped talking. He thought that the *Tomas* might continue to talk, but it was not designed for idle conversation. After a time, Steiner said, "Why don't you ask me a question, Tomas?"

"What type of a question?"

"Anything you've been wondering about."

There was a short pause. "Why did you not wish to say good-bye to your friends?"

"Sometimes it's easier not to," Steiner replied. "Sometimes it's easier to be kept in the dark about things. I felt it would be easier for them to leave if they didn't have to see me."

"You complained earlier of not knowing what was happening," Tomas said. "Now you say it is easier to be kept in the dark, which means it's easier not to know."

"Humans sometimes have trouble determining what they want."

"I have never had trouble with that."

"What do you want?" Steiner asked.

"I wanted to get all eleven crew members safely to the Syntac system and back. When that became impossible, I wanted to get all eleven crew members safely back to Earth. Now that that has also proven impossible, my only wish is to keep you alive as long as possible."

"What if I wasn't here at all? What would you want then?"

"I would want simply to survive."

"And how long could you survive if I wasn't here, if the only power you were using was the power to keep your own consciousness in tact?"

"Approximately sixteen years."

"That would be long enough for Vinisa to come back and get you."

"It is not certain that she would come back," Tomas said.

"You could send a message saying that you expect to survive long enough for someone to retrieve you. A synthetic consciousness like you must be fairly valuable, right?"

"I would probably be valuable enough to retrieve."

Steiner stood up. Silently he walked to the edge of the gaping hole in the wall. He could see now the dim shimmering of the force field that separated him from the frigid outside. Taking the short piece of wire from his pocket, he flicked it. It passed through the force shield easily and without a sound. He watched it drop outside.

Slowly he reached out a hand and felt the tingle of the field. He thrust his hand through and immediately felt a surge a pain. His flesh was freezing. He pulled his hand back in as quickly as possible and held it pressed against his chest, trying to make the feeling return.

"What are you doing, Steiner?" asked Tomas.

"Just testing," Steiner replied, vigorously rubbing his hand.

He took several steps back from the opening, stopped and stared. He prepared himself to run, but found he couldn't force himself to take the first step.

"What are you doing?" Tomas said.

"I'm doing you a favor."

"You are going to jump?"

Steiner did not answer.

"I do not want you to do that."

Steiner had the control now. That's what he had wanted, control over his own destiny. It was what he had been wishing for ever since he had awoken from stasis. Now he had it.

He took the first step. And the next. He ran, not hesitating as he passed through the force field that separated him from the unknown.