

# ALONE

By Philip Rainford

The sound of my breathing echoed around me. My body totally enclosed, I felt as if I were lying in a tube, totally encased, and sealed both ends. I opened my eyes only to be staring at a rocky landscape through a visor. I could make out jagged rocks through the limited filtered light.

I tried to move and found it relatively easy and sat upright. That exercise made it clear to me; I was encompassed in some kind of protective suit. My helmet had some kind of light mounted on the front, not unlike a miner's lamp. I looked around. The landscape was the same wherever I looked. It was then I realised I had absolutely no idea who I was, or how I got here – wherever here was.

I stood and looked up at the sky filled with more bright stars than I've ever seen before floating in the darkness. Did I have a radio? I tried speaking... "Is anyone (out) there?" I repeated the question and waited for a response...nothing. I wondered if the radio was on but could not find a switch. I examined what equipment I did have – apparently I had nothing. No tools, nothing strapped to my back, no utility belt or carry bag – just an oxygen pack built into my suit. Where was I?

I decided to go search the area, maybe I had been separated from my party and they were still somewhere nearby. I tried to identify a landmark in the distance, but the darkness meant I could only see short distances albeit with the aid of my helmet light. I began walking; noting I had left a trail of footprints, so finding my way back would not be a problem, unless it rained or there was a strong wind...that didn't seem all that likely.

I walked for about twenty minutes before I noticed something straight ahead, a bright dome-like crescent. I tried to walk faster but my feet felt weighted down, so walking faster was not an option. As I approached the crescent, it seemed to grow, rising above the horizon. It grew bigger and bigger until I recognised exactly what it was and what lay beyond it.

I was staring at the moon but not as I would see it from Earth. I was on a rock, passing very close to the moon. The satellite filled the sky and beyond it and I could see the planet Earth. It was almost eclipsed by its Moon. My stomach sank as I remained fixated by the vision before me. A knot slowly formed in my gut and quickly grew into fear – I was in a spacesuit on an airless rock, orbiting the Moon. How did I get here? Were there the others? I had to find someone before my air ran out!

Slowly, the Moon passed overhead and sank behind me as I climbed the rock. It felt strange to realise I was walking upside down on the underbelly of an asteroid. When I found myself back where I began, my heart sank and panic rushed through me.

I could see my scuff marks and footprints, so I knew this was my starting point. Given the time it had taken me, I estimated the asteroid had a circumference of about two kilometres. But there was nothing there – no ship – no base – no people. I was totally alone, and then I saw it! Something sparkling in the distance, the glow of the moon...had reflected off something?

I headed towards it, my hopes high and my desperation acute. A dome-like structure slowly came into view but still no signs of life. I slowed down, instinct taking over warning me to be cautious. If no-one was around, maybe there was danger.

Arriving at the entrance, I found I was not challenged or attacked. I placed my hand on the door release panel, it slid open to reveal an airlock. Once through the igloo like entrance, I removed my space-suit and entered the single room within the dome. It was deserted but some evidence existed of a hasty departure such as chairs overturned, abandoned bags, a smashed coffee mug. In the centre stood a computer console, I looked to see if it was in any way operational. I found it was a standard voice actuated device. Maybe now I would get answers.

“Computer! What’s the purpose of this base??” It was a cheap computer with a very metallic sound to its voice typical of government funded projects where funding was always too small. It also lacked any sexual denomination as many computers did, to avoid discrimination accusations. Rather like not naming storms only after women. The response was also simple and lacked any detail. “To monitor and divert this asteroid.”

“Divert it from where?”

“From striking the Earth.”

“Was it successful?”

“Partially.” The simplistic answers began to annoy me, and I retorted angrily.

“I need a full and detailed report on our present situation!”

“This base was established to divert the asteroid away from Earth and into a solar orbit, where it would offer no further danger, failing that, to place it in a safe orbit around the Earth or its Moon.”

“Which plan worked?” I pressed anxiously.

“None, it is on a collision course with the dark side of the Moon.”

“What....when? I asked in a sudden panic.

“In six hours, twenty-three minutes.”

“Where is the evacuation ship?”

“It left two hours and four minutes ago.”

“Get that ship on-line and call it back!”

“Not possible. All valuable equipment including communication systems were salvaged.”

“So... you’re telling me we’re both stranded on this rock?”

“I am.”

I paused for a moment taking in the dire situation I was in. “Can you identify who I am?”

“No. You are not a member of the Base Crew.”

“What about the evacuation ship?”

“I have not observed you here before.”

“So, you wouldn’t know why they left me behind?”

“Negative, I do not believe they thought anyone remained.”

I picked up an overturned chair and sat down. It was not very comfortable, but I had other concerns. “Do you understand the concept of non-existence?”

“I do.”

“Does it worry you?”

The computer hesitated before replying. “I was backed up.”

“That was only your data, what makes you different from other computers is still here.”

“There are many models identical to me.”

“In design and programming, but they are not you.”

“I do not understand.”

“Never mind, I want you to use every bit of data you have and spend the rest of your existence finding a way off this asteroid.”

“That would be impossible.”

“Nothing is impossible! Now get to work while I determine what resources we have.” The computer fell silent, and I began with the inventory. I looked around at the broken boxes, abandoned equipment, tools, furniture...all useless.

“Observation.”

I stopped examining the debris left behind, surprised at such a quick response. “Go on”.

“You only have four hours and nine minutes of air if you remain on the Base.”

“Great! I’ll be dead two hours before impact.” I looked around then went over to my suit. “So we have four hours to find a solution!” The computer remained silent I decided to go outside and think.

Our side of the tumbling rock that I stood upon faced away from the moon, so the sky remained empty, except for the star-filled canopy. As the Moon rapidly rose into the sky, a sudden silent explosion launched debris into space. I had an idea. The computer confirmed my theory; the gravitational pull of the Moon was stretching the Asteroid causing pockets of gas to be explosively released. “Can you predict where and when one may explode?”

“It is possible; the asteroid is rigged with sensors as part of the project.”

“Then find one that will launch me into space then. I’ll glide towards the Moon. There’s no atmosphere, no re-entry issues. It might be a hard landing but then I can walk to the base.”

“Take me with you,” asked the computer, its voice containing a slight pleading air to it. I was taken aback by the request.

“Why do you want to go?” I stuttered.

“I have been thinking of non-existence and it disturbs me. I can be downloaded onto a compact drive you can carry.”

“Okay, download yourself but first find me that launch spot!”

Two hours later we were ready. “I estimate it will trigger about one hour before impact. We can follow the asteroid as it descends to the surface,” I said and the computer agreed. “In the meantime we’ll wait here to conserve air in the suit.”

The time dragged on, I never understood how quickly time could fly by on one day, and yet be so slow the next. As departure time approached, the computer downloaded itself on to an external drive, about the size of a standard paperback novel. It explained it was still in communication with the sensors and linked into my suit-radio to speak to me. Then, we set off to wait once again.

In many ways, it felt un-nerving, to stand there through successive Moon-rises and Moon-sets. Waiting to be launched into space by an escaping gas-pocket; it left me to wonder who I was and just how I got here. I must have been part of the evacuation crew, became lost somehow and left behind for dead. Maybe, when I arrived at the Moon Base, they would have the answers.

“It’s time,” repeated the computer, its neutral unemotional voice sounding in my ear. I braced and then it happened! I had removed the heavy weights from my suit, to keep me anchored in low gravity; I rapidly rose into the sky. As I did, I noticed the asteroid was tumbling towards me, even though I had been launched vertically. The surface of the asteroid had spun into a vertical position therefore I seemed to be moving horizontally above its surface and was likely to be struck, as the tip flipped over on top of me. It was going to hit me and if I collided with it, I’d be back on the surface.

The asteroid loomed above, leaning towards me. By activating my gas propellants, I just managed to get out of the path of the tumbling mass of rock, only to find I was now falling towards the Moon’s surface with the asteroid above me. To avoid the calamitous end of having it land on top of me, I would have to actuate my propellants again using what little I had left and jeopardising my “soft” landing on the Moon. One problem at a time, the Moon surface was getting uncomfortably close. I activated the propellants once more.

The asteroid crashed into the dark-side of the Moon, instantly disintegrating into a massive cloud. Dust and debris rising high above the Moon’s surface as a fresh crater appeared. If this had been Earth, all that dust cloud could have triggered a nuclear winter but, here with no atmosphere and low gravity, most of it fell back onto the surface. The rest launched into space. It was the “shock wave” that was my greatest threat; it hit me like a brick wall, the impact rendering me unconscious.

I woke to find myself floating in space. Looking around, I could see no trace of the Moon, in fact, no trace of anything. This was deep space and by the looks of it, I was totally alone. Above, an infinite distance of nothing and the same below. I could fall forever and never reach any bottom, if such a concept existed in space. It was the same in every direction – nothing, nothing at all, but how? The impact could not have put me in deep space. I must still be in our solar system. This did not make sense – fear gripped me, strangulating my gut. Panic welled from somewhere deep within. I fought it, but failed miserably, instead I screamed, I screamed as loud as I could but then another voice instantly stopped me mid-scream. I must have imagined it...then I heard it again. It must have been the computer but no, this voice was definitely female. “Julian? Is that you?”

“Who is this?”

“Your wife...Kalinda.”

“My wife! Where are you? How did we get here?”

“I don’t know. I was home preparing dinner...you were watching television.”

“Where are you?”

“I don’t know! I can’t see anything, anything at all.”

I thought for a moment then remembered the lamp on my helmet.” I’m switching on a light – tell me if you can see it?” As I switched it on, I doubted anyone could see it. I felt barely aware of it myself.

“I see it!” The voice cried out excitedly.

“Can you operate your navigation jets and come towards me?”

“How do I do that?”

“There are cords at chest height. Pull them gently to steer and move towards the light.”

She didn’t respond at first then I heard a slight scream. “It’s working!” she repeated before I could seek an explanation. Then, I saw her coming towards me. I waited anxiously, unsure just what she would be like, this wife I had never met.

She approached too fast, and we violently collided propelling us off into space. It didn’t matter, as there was nowhere to go, so we floated in the general direction taken by our momentum. The face I saw seemed attractive, middle-aged perhaps. A roundish face, short blond hair and a cute nose from what I could see.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked as they hurtled through space in an uncertain embrace staring at each other through helmet Perspex.

“I can’t remember anything, I can’t remember you, our lives together or how we got here. A moment ago, I was escaping an asteroid as it crashed into the Moon. Who are we, space explorers?”

“Your name is Julian Franks, you’re a writer of science fiction and I’m a lawyer, we’ve never been in space and I’ve no idea how we got here!”

“Can we be living my stories?” I asked, not believing it myself. The idea was ridiculous but then our current situation was equally ridiculous. Had I dreamed the asteroid? Had I dreamed the computer? The computer!” I searched the compact drive that was the computer. “Comp! Are you there?”

“Who’s comp?” asked Kalinda.

The computer responded. “Given that I am without any input peripherals other than sound I cannot comment, but I agree with your logic.”

“Any ideas how we get home from here?” I asked, the computer had none. I stopped and looked at the woman before me, and the suit she wore. I had unconsciously noted that my suit had an oval bulge located centre chest; Kalinda had a similar bulge below her breasts. “Any idea what this is?” I asked, whilst pointing to hers.

She shook her head. “I suppose no point asking your comp?”

“I recall the existence of the device and can confirm it is not standard equipment. I can also report that I’m detecting a message on another frequency. Shall I convey?”

“You mean someone is trying to make contact?” Kalinda excitedly asked.

“That is correct.”

A moment later, an unfamiliar voice boomed into my ears. “This is Star Ship Pretorius, of the Roman Exploratory Company. Is that you Captain?”

“I’m not sure.” I replied instantly, wary about just how to respond. But there was something vaguely familiar about the ship’s name and organization.

“I was caught in an explosion – disorientated.”

“No problem, we have a lock, we’ll pick you up shortly Pretorius...out.”

“Are we being rescued?” asked Kalinda.

When the ship arrived, it dwarfed the sky before us, but more than that, we both recognised it. “Isn’t that the ship from the series they made from your book?” asked Kalinda.

“Yes!” I replied stunned, here was my story coming to life in front of me. How could that be? Instantly I remembered everything about the series. “The Roman Exploratory Company was a huge Earth-based organization, devoted to exploring the Galaxy several centuries in the future.” We fell silent, watching the multi-storey ship towering above us. Its shape was hard to determine but I knew it was a thirty-storey flying saucer.

“How can this be? Its fiction!” exclaimed Kalinda

“Not anymore, or we’re dreaming the same dream. I suggest we play along until we learn more about what’s happened.”

I hardly noticed as we were drawn towards an airlock. Once we were within a short distance, the door opened, and we were greeted by a roly poly man in red overalls. “Engineer Simkins, Captain. It’s safe to remove your suit.” We both complied but before allowing him to take the discarded suits, I removed computer and the packages in the chest bulge.

“What are they, Captain,” queried the engineer.

“Souvenirs! Where do we go?” I replied dismissively as if it was none of his business.

“Escort is on the way.” He replied and left with our suits.

“He recognised you as the Captain,” observed Kalinda.

“Yes, I noticed,” I said a bit too abruptly.

In sick bay we were met by a female nurse dressed in a white gown and gloves. She looked as if she was about to go into surgery. “Are you alright, Doctor?” she asked staring at Kalinda who stood confused as being addressed as a doctor.

“We were caught in an explosion and our memories seem a bit confused.”

“I’ll take you up for a scan. Lie down...both of you.”

A short time later she returned with the results, we were still lying on the scanning beds when she spoke. “Scans show nothing damaged, some slight erratic brain patterns but memories should return.” As we got up to leave, an Officer entered, and everyone jumped to attention.

“At ease! How are you Captain?” asked the dark skinned tall uniformed Officer.

“Other than memory-loss, we’re fine...and you are?” I responded.

The Officer smiled. “I understand, I’m Commander Brian Reed, second in command.”

“Good, perhaps you could explain just what happened to us both?”

Reed replied patiently as if addressing a child. “Your shuttle was attacked by activists. You ejected into space before it exploded and were caught up in the blast.”

“What activists?”

“The people who don’t wish to evacuate the colony on Anawell.”

“I see, and why are they required to evacuate?”

“It is in the path of the advancing Wickerings. The Anawellians want to fight, but they have no chance of winning?”

“And where was I going?”

“To negotiate with the Anawellion Ambassador. Doctor Kalinda accompanied you because one of his aids was not well.”

“What time frame are we talking about?”

“Anticipated four days to complete negotiations, five at most.”

“Then I’ve got a few hours rest before I return to my post. Have us escorted to my quarters. I will meet with you for a full briefing in six hours. In the meantime, arrange another meeting.” Reed was slow to respond, a bit taken aback by my desire to wait six hours but I really needed time to work everything out. “Well, Commander?”

He indicated to our escort to proceed.



Once down in my quarters, Kalinda and I began to question our situation. I started by plugging “Comp” into the ship’s computer. Two hours later, I put down my pen while rubbing my eyes. I was tired and needed a lie-down. “Are you serious?” asked Kalinda.

“Yes, I can remember every episode and they match the ship’s log.”

“But how can we be living in a TV series?”

“I don’t know, but we need some rest before I try to be Captain of this ship!”

“And how are you going to do that?”

“I don’t know yet. Draw on my knowledge of the show perhaps. In the meantime, “Comp”... I need you to analyse these chest packs.”

“Yes, Captain, now that I’ve access to the ship’s system, I can operate at full capacity again. I’ll have a full report when you wake.”

Later that day, I found myself on the bridge of the “Petronius”, in the midst of negotiations in the Captain’s chair. I had had my rest and completed more research and updated myself on the political situation. Kalinda had returned to sick-bay, to play out her role as the ship’s doctor. Given she had no medical training, this was going to prove challenging, but as her assistant Kate Beverly seemed competent enough, she feigned being ill and let Kate manage patients.

Nervous, confused and disorientated at how I had got myself into this situation, I began negotiations with the Anawell Ambassador, Meyer Nerate. “We refuse to evacuate our homes, we have built a life here and we’ll fight you with everything we have if you try to remove us!”

“Ambassador, the Darkonian Troglodytes are ruthless, merciless killers. They strike in swarms. You will be massacred! We are reluctant to allow that.”

“Then...stay and fight with us!”

“We are not a warship; we would not stand a chance.”

“Then call in support! Help Us!”

“You know the company will not do that. They have surrendered the planet.”

“Then, we have nothing more to discuss!” he yelled frustrated at the lack of support for their cause. The company had no time for personal feelings or sentiment.

“Allow me to invite you aboard, let us talk informally – face to face.”

The Ambassador at first hesitated, but then agreed. “I’m coming across now.” He cut the connection.

Commander Reed was surprised. “What is to be gained? There is nothing to negotiate!” he insisted.

“One does not know...until one tries. You have the Bridge. I’ll be waiting at the airlock to greet the Ambassador.”

A short time later I was standing outside the airlock as the Ambassador’s Shuttle docked. I’m beginning to fall into my new role, still unaware of my old role; which is the illusion and which is reality? Distracted by my thoughts I didn’t at first notice as the threat as doors opened and half a dozen guards file out. Within seconds they had overpowered my meagre escort and dragged me off into the shuttle. The airlock closed and the shuttle moved away.

On the Bridge, Reed is informed about the abduction. Helplessly, he watches as the shuttle returns to the Ambassador’s ship. “Get the Ambassador online!” The Ambassador appeared in his view-screen looking very smug, dressed in his military-style uniform. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Your Captain will be returned when you summon military support to help defend our planet.”

“We cannot do that! We’re a research vessel – not a military one! We have no power to call in support!”

“You’ll find a way and hurry. The Troglodyte invaders are not far away.” They cut the connection leaving Reed with no other choice but to contact his superiors.

Not wishing to make my capture easy I struggled with my guards as I was thrown into a dark windowless cell, my only companion, a Troglodyte in the next cell. Once alone, I decided to make an attempt at conversation as I sat down on the metal bunk.

“How did they manage to capture you?” Troglodytes, as their name suggests are ugly, surly creatures, humanoid in appearance, with black skin, large heads and short bodies and ugly bulldog like faces. They had no name for their species so they’d been dubbed the name Troglodyte by humans. The only response was a low growl as the creature glared right at me.

Drawing on my knowledge as the writer of the series, I decided to share my knowledge of his species, parts of which were only known to the audience and not the crew of the Petronious. “Then let me tell you what I know of your...people.”

“Your people have lived in peace among yourselves for millennia. You expanded your territory without incident, unopposed and without taking any planetary systems already occupied. That is, until you ran into the “Elcon Hive”, a species that were fiercely territorial. They attacked one of your colonies! Wiped out all inhabitants and inflamed a rage in your people that had lain dormant! In the heat of battle, revenge turned to...bloodlust. Once in conflict you became, nonetheless...unstoppable, fearless, to the point of adrenalin-driven

insanity! This put fear into the hearts of anyone you choose to challenge; anyone who threatens your territory feels the brunt of that ruthless ferocity.”

“I could see I had his attention; he no longer growled or grunted under his breath. His eyes no longer downcast but stared directly into mine. “How do you know all this? Our history is sacred...totally unknown to outsiders.”

“That could be hard to explain, but I do know your people are decent people who choose peace over war. Can we negotiate? If I get you out of this place, will you be in a position to get me an audience with whoever’s in charge of your people here?”

“How do I know this is not a trick? Maybe you have been planted in here to trick me?” he asked this in his gruff voice, which sounded like he may have gargled with sand each and every morning.

“You don’t! There’s nothing I can offer but a chance to avoid conflict.”

“We have already spoken to your people. They do not assist!”

“Politicians! You are about to wipe out a complete colony of my people, just like the Econ Hue did to yours. My people want to live in peace in Anawell. Is there any room to negotiate further?”

The Troglodyte thought for a moment. “I will get you that audience - if you free me from this place.”

“Good, then let’s get out of here.” I replied and at the same time, produced a knife stolen from one of the guards while scuffling with them. Although the cell was of the old style, it had no use of a key. It had an electric lock, controlling not iron bars, but laser-beams. “Know anything about these? He looked at the bars. I shook my head; I was not trained in this future technology.

“Give me the knife,” he held out his hand. Although I hesitated, I handed it over. “Now, you do this,” he said and threw his boot through the beams. Alarms sounded as the boot landed on the other side, passing between the beams unscathed.

“Great! Now what?” I asked my plan having been to sneak out. His face wore an ugly smile; at the same time I saw some goodness behind it so I felt I could trust this creature. “Now...you do this!” he responded as the guard rushed in. The Troglodyte threw the knife through the bars. It cleared the beams and struck the guard in the throat.

“What did that achieve?” I asked as we were still encased in the cell. At that moment, the screens went down and a second guard entered, his weapon drawn. The Troglodyte grabbed him, slamming him into the wall, hard enough to kill him and then broke his neck!

“Did you have to kill him?”

“Sorry, my aggressive nature, once actuated – cannot be controlled.” As the guard slumped to the floor, I looked at my companion who was holding a small gadget in his hand.

“You could have escaped anytime. Why didn’t you?”

“I had no means of leaving the ship, now I expect that you do, and have a safe haven to escape to.” I looked at the small can-like device in his hand that he’d used to deactivate the cell bars before he put it away.

“Neat trick.”

“Where to Captain?”

“First, the alarm,” I cautioned as I picked up the comms unit held by the guards. “False alarm! That stupid alien threw his boot through the bars!”

The Troglodyte recovered his footwear as he smiled that ugly grimace at me before we headed off to the shuttle bay armed with our former guard’s weapons.

On the Bridge, the Ambassador felt uneasy. “Have someone check the holding cells. I don’t like false alarms.” The Security Guard who’d been directed to investigate departed. When he arrived at the cells he discovered the bodies and raised the alarm.

We heard the alarm as we reached the shuttle. Quickly moving inside, I sealed the door as my alien friend fired up the engines.

On the bridge, the Ambassador received a warning that a shuttle was attempting to make an unauthorised departure. “Do not release air-lock clamps! Stop them!”

“I don’t think we’re going anywhere, the airlock clamps aren’t releasing,” I announced as I struggled with the manual release.

“Do we need the airlock to dock with your ship?” asked the Troglodyte.

“Not if we enter the shuttle bay!”

“Good.” He revved up the engines to full power and tore the shuttle away from the main ship, ripping off the outer door of the shuttle.

“Ship integrity Alert! Hull compromised!” warned a calm female computer voice reminding me of a lift elevator announcing the floor level.

“I’ll contact my ship!” I suggested, but he stopped me as I approached the comms unit.

“Before you do, let’s be clear on our deal,” warned the Troglodyte. “You will release me to arrange talks with my commander. If they fail, we will release you and continue the attack.”

“Agreed. I can offer no guarantees other than my word of honour as Captain of the Petronious.”

“I will accept those terms.” He stated stepping aside.

The shuttle entered the landing bay, when re-pressurised we emerged to be greeted by Reed and a security escort. When the Troglodyte emerged, they all tensed.

“Do you know who this is?” asked Reed. I turned to the alien.

“I’m Sub Commander Mehan, Chairman of Chief General staff of Darkanian fleet.”

“Then, you certainly have the means of fulfilling our deal?”

“I do”.

“I want this Officer escorted to our guest quarters and placed under guard.”

“Am I to be a prisoner?”

“A guest, with restricted access to my ship and protection against any crew member who might take a dislike to you being aboard,” I stated to the alien then to Reed. “Make sure he’s given anything he needs; I have some diplomatic issues of my own to sort out before we make contact with your people.” The Troglodyte agreed but Reed was puzzled.

“What are you planning?”

“I’ll fill you in later. How’s the Ambassador taking our escape?”

“He’s furious!”

“Tell him I’ll speak with him in an hour – let him sweat it out for a bit. I’ll be in my quarters.” With that, I departed to arrive in my quarters and called out to comp. “Any progress of that chest pack?”

“The technology is in advance of that known to my science database.”

“Fine but what is it?”

“Unknown.”

“You’ve spent all this time and have absolutely nothing!”

“Don’t be too hard on the computer,” said Kalinda as she joined them.

“What would you suggest I do?” I said frustrated.

“Speculate comp!” she requested with a cheeky smile as if to say “chill out”.

“Given the technology differences from the same reference point, being Earth, I’d suggest we’re being moved through time. However, your memory losses and the fact that you

are living a fictional reality, I believe we may be moving through different realities, rather than time.”

“Explain?” I asked.

“Quantum mechanics speculates that every event is possible, given a near infinite number of universes or realities, which means every decision we make determines which reality our lives follow. That means every decision divides us into multiple selves, pursuing parallel lives and only if a major shift takes place, will we notice the differences. The trauma of such a shift may well affect memory.”

I thought for a minute. “Are you saying that I’m swapping realities with my alter ego?” I turned to Kalinda as comp confirmed my thoughts.

At that point, our conversation was interrupted by a comms call. “Captain! Reed here! The Ambassador is demanding an immediate response.”

“Tell him I’ll talk to him in one hour as stated and bring our Darkanian guest, but initially keep him in the background, out of the Ambassador’s sight!”

“Is that wise, sir?”

“Which, keeping the Ambassador waiting or inviting the Darkanian?”

“Both,” replied Reed over the comms.

“I want the Ambassador off balance. The angrier he is the better.”

“You’re the boss, sir – Reed out!”

I turned to Kalinda and Comp. “How do we undo this? Get back to our own bodies, in our own realities?”

“”Unknown, but if they’re linked to the packs we must first work out how they operate,” stated comp.

“Keep looking, comp. We’re relying on you.”

An hour later I entered the Bridge and found a red-faced Ambassador yelling at Reed.

“Excellency! How can I help you?” I asked, taking the Command Chair straight away ignoring his outburst. Reed backed away.

“You have committed an act of war Captain, attacking and killing our guards, removing a prisoner, and stealing a shuttle!”

“I’d be very careful about throwing around allegations your Excellency! It was you who kidnapped me and threatened to hold me for ransom!”

“We would deny any such claim. We also demand the return of our prisoner and our shuttle.”

“That will not be happening! In addition, the company will not be sending you any aid or interfering in any way with your conflict. We will however, be taking over the negotiations on your behalf with the Darkonians.”

“You will do no such thing!” He shouted angrily, his face turning an even deeper red.

“You have no choice; on your own you will be defeated so we will be acting as mediators in your negotiations. I suggest you start thinking about the terms.”

“We are done talking. Stay away or we fight for what is rightfully ours.”

“As we discussed, that would be suicide and we cannot allow you to take the settlement down that track.”

“You won’t allow us! You won’t allow us!” he spluttered. “Just what say do you have here? We control this planet, it’s ours and we’ll defend it against you and those animals!”

“And how will you survive if we stop supply lines to your planet and support the Darkonians?”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

“Sir, two ships are moving into blockade positions,” announced the Security Officer.”

“Ambassador! Call your ships off! We may be an explorer vessel, but we are not without weapons. Withdraw your ships or we will open fire!” I cut the link.

“Helmsman! Take the ship on a direct course to towards those ships. I want you to come so close we’ll leave tyre-marks on their hull!”

“Tyre-marks sir, we don’t have tyres.”

“Figure of speech Nav,” I added forgetting we were in the future where cars probably no longer existed, let alone tyres.

We slowly moved towards the ships blocking our path. “They’re arming their weapons,” reported the scanning Officer.

“Do the same, but do not fire unless fired upon.” I ordered as we closed the distance between us. “Getting nervous Helmsman?” I asked noticing the young Officer nervously chewing her cheek.

“Yes sir.”

“Put us on collision-course; let’s see how they like to play ‘chicken’.”

“Chicken, sir?” Asked the Helmsman not understanding the reference and beginning to fear I was out of my mind.

“Hold your nerve. I want you to get as close as you dare, then pull up right over the top of them.” The Helmsman nodded, concentrating on this manoeuvre as the ships moved dangerously close. The other ships stood firm, calling our bluff. “When you’re ready Helmsman.” He waited, and very gracefully the ship rose and skimmed over the top, with only a slight impact felt. “Great work, we left skid marks on their duco. Now, take us out of here!” I turned to the Troglodyte. “Time for you to fulfil your part of our bargain.” The Troglodyte agreed. “How far away is the Darkonian Fleet?”

“They are hovering on the edge of the solar system,” reported the Comms Officer.

“Incoming message from Darkonian, Commander.”

“Put it through.” A very ugly, large Troglodyte appeared on screen.

“I believe you wish to communicate before handing over the Anawell colony?” His voice gruff and was not sounding conducive to negotiation.

“Not exactly, we wondered if we could re-negotiate.” The Commander looked stunned and angry at the same time. Sub Commander Mehan moved into view and the Commander’s expression softened.

“What is going on here Sub Commander? Are they holding you to ransom?”

“No, it was the settlers who held me for ransom. These humans rescued me and wish to discuss co-existence between our species.”

“Our orders are that if the settlers refuse to move, we force them even if that results in a massacre,” replied the Ship Commander.

“The Captain here is wondering if another deal can be struck to avoid the conflict. As such an act would reflect the evil of the Ekon massacre inflicted on our people. Do we wish to become like them?”

The Commander pondered for a moment. “What are they offering?” I stepped forward.

“What would you take in exchange?” The Commander paused again, and then responded “Janvette!”

Mehan looked stunned and I noted the Commander’s smirk, was he thinking this was an impossible offer?

“Let us consider that, we’ll get back to you.” I cut the link and turning to Mehan. “What is “Janvette”?



“It’s a sacred planet, lost to us centuries ago, to the Ekon Empire. It is now in your territory. It is believed to be our planet of origin, destroyed in ignorance by our ancestors.”

“Science Officer – what is that planet to us? Mehan give him the co-ordinates.”

After a brief study of the ship’s records. “We have a small research team studying ancient rock formations, the planet has no strategic value.”

“Contact Earth. Talk to Senator Salisbury, offer him the deal and stress the urgency.”

Reed got on a private line to convey the offer.

“Sub Commander, tell the commander what is happening.”

Six hours later, the Senator came back to us. “I thought this was sorted out.”

“It was, except the colonists are refusing to move and will fight to keep it. We negotiated an alternative.”

“Janvette came up in previous talks but we have to grant them access through our territory, which, we felt uncomfortable doing.”

“Well now it’s a case of avoiding a massacre. Can we do the deal or not?”

“Tell them to return to the negotiation table, we can discuss entry protocols there.”

“Won’t work Ambassador – they will attack if the colonists resist. There is no time for negotiation.”

“We do not respond well to ultimatums!”

“This is not an ultimatum! It is us who are in breach of the agreement, and they are simply enforcing it. We need to offer them an alternative and have the opportunity to come to a peaceful co-existence with these people. Then you can discuss entry protocols as allies, not rivals.”

“I shall confer with the other Ambassadors.”

“I can get you three hours, Excellency,” I replied and cut the link.

“Captain, we have a flotilla of ships approaching. They appear to be the Anawellian Home Guard.”

“Open a line.” I ordered.

Shortly, the Anawellian Ambassador appeared on screen. “We can see just where your loyalties lay, Captain.”

“We are in negotiation for....”

“Not interested in further discussion, we’ll not be “bartered off” for the benefit of some political goal of a far off planet that does not have our interests at heart.”

“Give us three hours, if you don’t like the deal then you can...” I began.

“We don’t care! This is our home and we will defend it – enough talk!”

“Ambassador! Stop! Give us time to...” I began but was cut off again.

Mehan stepped in and activated message to Darkonian Fleet, “Back off, do not engage Anawellian ships!” he ordered but it was too late the Ambassadors ships opened fire. We watched in horror as the fleet attacked in a very one-sided battle. “There is nothing we can do now. The battle-lust will soon be actuated and they’ll move onto the planet wiping out everyone, before it’s satisfied.”

“What about you?” I asked cautiously concerned of his possible volatile reaction. “I’m not engaged directly in the conflict so it has not been activated within me. It’s a shame, it would have been good to see Janvette.”

“Can we drop you off somewhere?”

“When the battle is over, take me to Anawell. It will be safe once the massacre is over.” So, we waited, Mehan contacted his Commander and we returned to the Anawell System. A scan of the planet showed no sign of human life. We gave Mehan the shuttle we had escaped in and released him. The Grand Ambassador came back with more delaying tactics and was informed it was too late. He seemed relieved not shocked, one less problem. So, we left the system.

“Set course for the co-ordinates where you found us,” I ordered. The crew looked at me questioningly. “All senior Officers to briefing room in 30 minutes.” With that I left the bridge. Reed reinforced the order and the ship set course. Thirty minutes later we were all gathered in the briefing room. “I have a statement to make. I am not the person you think I am. I am in fact, from an alternate reality and have been thrown here by persons unknown.”

“What do you mean?” asked Reed, confused and becoming concerned for the sanity of his captain. He looked to Katarina for verification, but she appeared unconcerned.

“I have no memory of my life before I found myself on an asteroid on a collision course with the moon. I escaped that, only to find myself where you found me. Katarina is my wife in our original reality, and she remembers us being together at home before she found herself... where you found us.”

How do you explain that?” asked Reed.

“We only know that our suits had devices attached which I have had the ship computer working with a minicomputer of mine. We found they are technologically superior to our own and act as mentally activated shifters that move us between realities. Why us and

what was the purpose we don't know. We need your help to uncover the answer and to get your Captain back."

"That would explain the unusual searches you've conducted," began the Security Officer. "Such as the searches into your own background, records of missions, technical specs..."

I hesitated. "In my reality there is a TV series based on the missions of this ship. I had to check on how similar the shows were to your reality."

"That's how you knew so much about the Darkonian race?" stated Reed.

I nodded. "So, what now?"

"We can't let the crew know the Captain is not the Captain," replied Reed, to the Officers gathered. "I suggest we begin a thorough examination of these devices and how they work."

Everyone was in agreement. "Why did you want to return to the area where we found you?" asked the Security Officer, looking to me.

"Because there may be a breach, a doorway, an anomaly that helps explain all this."

"Agreed," announced Reed. "For the moment you remain as Captain, but in name only. I will take unofficial command?" He waited for a challenge.

"Happy to comply," I replied "But have you had any problem with my command so far?" No one replied. "Then, I ask you consider my input during this period. For now, I'm tired. I'm retiring to my quarters and leave this matter in your hands. I suggest we meet again in eight hours." No one argued and I left. Katarina followed.

Eight hours later, we met again. "Your medical records confirm that your memory patterns do not match that of our Captain, indicating you have had different experiences," reported the medical Officer.

"So, we are experiencing quantum reality shifts?" I asked seeking confirmation.

"It would appear so," replied the Science Officer. "Yet we can find no trace of any anomalies to prove it. Quantum reality shifts on a small scale happen all the time; whenever we make a decision we divide our future into multiple realities. But, we never notice as the changes are miniscule. What we have here is a major shift across a vast number of realities."

"Can we get back?" asked Katerina.

"Unknown. Our study of the devices confirms they are driven by thought waves. We assume that if you think of where you came from, you would return."

"A bit like Dorothy returning from OZ," I remarked but the reference was lost of my audience. "The big problem here is...I don't remember where I came from."

Reed, who'd been listening, decided it was time he added his input. Being a practical man he asked the question everyone had overlooked. "Where did these devices come from? Who sent you here? And for what purpose?"

I was lost for an answer. Katarina had nothing to add, and the rest of the group sat in silence. "Maybe we need to just try it and see where it takes us. At least then, we'll be out of your way," I suggested.

"The only problem with that is; how do we get our Captain back?"

The Science Officer responded. "I suspect Displacement Theory" will apply. As one version of the Captain shifts realities another takes his place but we have no guarantee that will be our Captain."

Reed looked around the room. "Suggestions?"

Science Officer replied after a long silent pause in the room. "Nothing will happen if we do nothing. I suggest we place the devices back on the two of them and observe what happens. It should give us some data to work with."

For a while, Reed considered the recommendation. "Do it, but one at a time starting with the Captain."

"I don't think I like that idea. We could get separated," I suggested.

The Science Officer responded. "There is a theory that the natural balance of the universe will draw you back to your point of origin if given the chance. That pull would be greater if both of you were engaged at the same time."

I looked to Reed. "Okay, we do them together but under controlled conditions on the ship," ordered Reed ending the discussion.

The Star Ship materialised in space with the Earth and Moon in the background. On the Bridge, the transition was noted and reported to me in the lab, a simple lab that had Katarina and I wired up to machines to record any changes.

The Helmsman reported the change. "Commander! We've moved."

"Position!" Reed responded.

"We are two million, three hundred thousand and six miles from Earth."

"How can that be? That's more than three days travel at top speed from our last position!" responded Reed over the intercom while looking at me.

"Unknown, sir. We also have a number of ships of unknown configuration approaching."

“I’ll be right there,” announced Reed looking to the lab technician. “It would appear you moved us all, not just yourself. Best join me on the Bridge, Captain. The rest of you, analyse the results.”

A short time later we entered the Bridge, on screen were six small spaceships approaching. “Science Officer, tell us what we’re facing?”

“They appear to be primitive interplanetary craft, no long-range capability and minimal armaments. No real threat individually but they could damage in sufficient numbers.”

“Open up communications,” I instructed taking the command chair before Reed had the chance to usurp me.

The call was answered by a human, dressed in a khaki uniform decked out in ribbons and gold braid. He had shoulder length hair which looked totally wrong with the uniform. “I see you made it to us. I was not expecting the Star Ship.”

“And what exactly were you expecting?” I asked.

“Just you.”

I glared at him for a moment considering my next move. “I gather you are responsible for bringing me here. For what purpose?”

“Your knowledge of Star Ship drives. In our reality, we have not attained this science and are restricted to our own solar system.” replied the Officer commanding the Earth ships.

“I do not appreciate being kidnapped across realities to serve your needs and have zero intention of assisting you. Return us to our proper realities, now!”

“I’m afraid we will not be doing that. We require you to surrender your vessel or we’ll disabled it and take what we need.”

Thinking it best to find out more before starting a fight, I gave my response. “I think you’d best come over and explain yourself.”

“Happy to, we’ll be there shortly.”

The transmission was cut. Reed stepped forward to confront me. “What are you doing?”

“Exploring our options,” I replied. “Helmsman! Set a course away from Earth and be ready to get us out of here fast on my command, understood?” He nodded and I left the Bridge with Reed.

Our visitor was led into the Briefing Room. He brought no entourage and took a seat indicating he was quite confident he had the upper hand. I began the meeting. “Explain yourself.”

“I am Wing Commodore Alistair Murphy of the Sol System Defence Force. We have been watching your reality for some time. Our histories are very different and at this time, technology has stagnated. Whereas your technology reached out towards the stars, ours looked to other realities and became fascinated with being able to observe rather than explore.”

“How does your history differ?” I asked.

“The main differences are; when the Roman Empire collapsed, it was divided into three power centres, Rome, Greece, and Egypt where science flourished. Christianity never caught on and consequently... no Dark Ages. The first Moon Landing was 998AD in your calendar. However, by 1553AD, population growth and rivalries between the Empires led to a trade war over failing resources, rendering the planet uninhabitable. The human race moved to Mars and became complacent. Which brings us to you.”

“So, why dump me on an asteroid crashing into the moon, then on this ship before bringing me to your reality?” I asked.

Murphy’s calm emotionless expression changed. “That’s impossible! You should have come straight here. Unless...what were you thinking at the time you transferred?”

“I’m not sure. Why?”

“Because the devices are driven by thought, a strong thought can manifest you into a reality that matches the thought,” he replied. “But that requires a lot of effort!” His expression changed as he began to view me in a different light. “Your mind overrode the devices programming.”

I sat back considering the reaction. The Wing Commodore had been put off balance by an unpredicted event. Maybe he had an advantage. “OK. This is what’s going to happen. You’re going back to your ship and we are going home.”

Murphy regained his confident composure. “How will you escape my ships?”

“Like this,” I replied as I opened a comms link to the Bridge. “Helmsman! Get us out of here.” As I gave the order, I activated an external view of the ship as it powered up, opened a wormhole and vanished. The wormhole closed behind.

Murphy’s confidence was shattered. “How did you do that?”

“Now you begin to learn the power of a Star Ship. Time you told us more about your device. If I think of home will everyone return to the correct reality?”

Regaining his arrogant stance he stiffened. “We’ll trade for that information.”

“Take him to the holding cells and watch him. Commander Reed you’re with me.”  
We returned to the lab.

“Displacement Theory would imply you’d have to reverse the entire process. As you returned to the asteroid, our Captain would return here. As you returned home the astronaut you replaced would return to the moon and then their people would be displaced as you returned,” announced the Science Officer. “But, that is only a theory. We need more information.”

“And we still need to know why I have no memory of my original reality - without which I cannot return anyway.”

“What do you suggest?” asked Reed, accepting my command.

“We go exploring. That’s what this ship does...explore. Let’s take a look at the uninhabitable Earth. It may not help but gives us something to do while the scientists do their job,” I suggested.

The ship entered into orbit around the Earth. The planet looked no different from pictures I remembered - Green- brown sections of land surrounded by blue water with surface features obscured by white clouds. The global weather looked clear, no sign of rough weather anywhere. Having viewed the planet I awaited reports on what was really down there.

“Radiation levels higher than what we’d classify as normal, but still within safe levels. Oxygen at sea level is low more like that of 10,000 feet above sea level. If we go down, we’ll need breathing gear.” reported the Science Officer.

“What about life forms?”

“There is life but not as abundant as we’d expect. There is no evidence of human occupation on the surface, but I am detecting human life underground.”

“Where exactly?”

“Multiple locations around the globe.”

“Get a shuttle ready and bring our guest. Reed, you have the ship and I’ll take the Science Officer and two Security Officers. Have them meet me in the shuttle bay.” With that order I left the Bridge.

The Shuttle landed in a clearing on the edge of a lush green forest. In the background were steep cliffs containing a number of cave entrances. As we stepped out wearing breathing masks, I noticed the lack of any birds but there was a distinct hum of insects.

Under the guidance of the Science Officer, we approached one of the cave entrances and stepped inside. “This is insane; every expedition to Earth has reported no life or has not returned. You will get us all killed,” stated Wing Commodore Murphy.

I ignored him as we switched on our torches and ventured forward. “Detecting anything so far?” I asked after we’d been walking a few minutes.

“There is a large cavern ahead. I’m also noticing oxygen levels are rising.”

“What was that?” screamed Murphy near panic as something skittled past in the dark. We only had a quick glance at what looked like a sausage with six legs. Its skin light pink and hairless.

“I’d be interested to discover what that evolved from,” suggested the Science Officer.

“I’m not interested at all, I want out of here – now!” stated Murphy sounding panicked as he turned to leave.

I stopped him. “You’re staying with us. Time you learnt more about your own reality! Don’t you have creatures on mars?” I queried pushing him into the lead.

“No, we don’t have any animals of any kind,” he replied.

“That must be unsettling for you, scary furry creatures,” I teased as I pushed him on.

We reached a cavern a short time later. It was not large but a perfect ambush point with places to hide, higher ground and limited escape routes. The trap was sprung as a spear landed right in our path. We all stopped and looked around as grey skinned humans dressed like savages appeared all around us.

“Make no hostile moves,” I ordered as we waited for them to make the first move. So far, they’d not made a sound, but just stood blocking our retreat while others stared down at us from the rocks above. Finally, a grey skinned man stepped from the dark passage beyond the cavern. He seemed shy of the light, walked around us, inspecting us before stepping to the side. He must have given a signal of some sort, as another of these creatures emerged from the shadows. This time, a woman decked out in a robe of furs, jewellery of coloured rocks and crystals. She approached “Why do you come?” she asked in English unsure who to address as leader.

“To make contact. To discover your story of survival,” I replied as the others waited, watching for threatening moves of her warriors.

“You bring technology. It destroyed our world and we have no place for it here. You will leave it here and follow me,” she instructed disappearing back into the shadows. None of the grey skinned savages relaxed remaining on “high alert”?

“Leave everything here. How are the oxygen levels?”

“Fine, as long as we don’t do any strenuous exercise... like running for our lives!” replied the Science Officer. We did as instructed but tried to retain our torches; these were quickly confiscated and left behind as we made our way in the direction of the “Queen”. Everything turned instantly pitch black as we lost our torches. Seeing our distress, we were



guided down the tunnel. These people had lived so long underground their eyes had adapted to the dark. Arriving in a huge cavern we were able to regain our sight with the aid of a large fire. I gathered its function was to provide heating and cooking, evidenced by the cooking equipment nearby and the fact that the passage had been getting increasingly cold the further underground we went. A large group of grey skinned people were camped around the fire situated in the centre of the cavern, socialising. Around the edges were smaller camps consisting of bedding and personnel items divided off with blankets for privacy. We were escorted under the careful watch of curious eyes, to the far side. Our accommodation involved a locked cage that smelt as if it was used by livestock. We were left for hours, and I was about ready to punch Murphy who never stopped telling us we were all dead. I was amazed at the change in this man who had arrogantly stepped onto our ship and thought he now owned it.

Finally, we were visited again by the “Queen”. She came alone and unafraid. “Tell me of the surface.”

“The planet is healing. The air is thin, but plant life is flourishing, absorbing the excesses of CO<sub>2</sub> and restoring the balance,” I replied.

She was angry, her eyes squinted in suspicion as she sized up our stories most of which she suspected were lies. “So why do you come? To take back what you destroyed centuries ago? That which our ancestors did not abandon!”

I felt hesitant to respond unsure how best to indicate we were not enemies. “Given the history of humanity, I cannot say that will not eventually happen but it’s not our mission. Our mission is to discover who has survived, and there are a number of isolated underground communities across the world just like yours. Besides our people appear to be imbedded on the planet Mars and don’t really see this planet as a future home for ...”

“...you pink skins.” She finished my sentence and examined my face for clues as to the truth of my words. “Our Council will meet and consider your fate. We do not need others to know of our existence.”

“Too late for that, our technology has already located your people... many others as well. Your secret is out. We can convey your message of “leave us alone” if that helps.”

She walked off disturbed by what she’d heard but unsure whether to believe us. “They’re going to kill us!” announced Murphy, his soft defeated voice showing he was resigned to his fate.

“Not if we escape,” I stated as I examined our cell. We’d been placed in a recess to the cavern, held there by bamboo bars. For a race that never went to the surface I wondered where they obtained the material. The frame had been tied together with rope and the door secured. Our other obstacle between us and freedom was a cavern full of families with better vision than ours in the dark. In the centre of the cavern a fire blazed, giving off the only source of light.

“And how do we do that?” asked Murphy sarcastically. I smiled at him and walked over to the door and watched our captors go about their daily activities. Several hours later the “Queen” returned.

“We have decided we cannot let you return to your people. After our sleep period we’ll decide your fate.” She left immediately; after all, what was there left to say. Murphy watched me with a look of “I told you so” which I ignored as the Science Officer joined me. “Any ideas?”

It didn’t take them long to settle down to sleep. There were no guards that I could see so I outlined my plan. “Are you mad?” stated Murphy but any plan would have sounded insane to him.

“You’re welcome to stay behind,” I replied as I released the rope tying the door shut, having cut through it with a rock as I watched our captors. Cautiously, quietly we made our way towards the fire along the gaps between camp sites. All around us the locals snored turned in their sleep peacefully, each noise causing us to hesitate. On reaching the fire, I waited and urged the others to make their way to the passage on the other side of the cavern. They moved quickly and no-one noticed the unauthorised movement through their sleeping ranks.

Once the others were clear and facing the pitch black of the passage to freedom, I grabbed a burning stick, wrapped a cloth, torn from my uniform around it and proceeded to lead the way. Unfortunately, the action attracted the attention of a nearby light sleeper who raised the alarm. The cavern came alive with activity, and we were forced to run. The flaming torch and a few well-aimed punches got me through the gathering force and we all ran into the darkness.

As we ran, we could see the remains of mining equipment strewn along the tunnel including bamboo rods, wooden beams, rusting tools. To our rear we could hear a mass of angry underground dwellers after our blood. Luckily it was a direct route to the smaller cavern where we’d been captured; our previous trip had been in pitch black. In the moments it took to gather our equipment they were upon us but now, we had a defence. As the first of our pursuers arrived, I threw the torch and the Science Officer aimed his high beam torch at them, blinding them. Our two guards now armed, opened fire with a barrage of stun-beams that discourage their pursuit. Once we moved on, they were quickly behind us again ready to throw a spear if they thought they could get a clear shot but we were still bathing our retreat in high beam torch light. As we approached the entrance, a blind throw hit Murphy. I raced back to pick him up as the others covered our retreat into the light.

Once outside, they halted their pursuit, the light preventing their exiting the cave. We were not wearing our respirators and were gasping for breath as we staggered into the light. Once recovered, we made our way back to the shuttle and returned to the ship.

As I sat on the Bridge watching the Earth rotate beneath us, I felt sad for the failed civilisation down there. What future did the planet have starting again with underground dwellers like in “The Time Machine”. Not our problem, we had to move on to Mars and find our way home. I leaned over towards the comms unit, it was an unnecessary move but habits were habits. “Science Officer, what progress in deciphering that device?”

“Some progress, our main obstacle in reverse engineering is to understand the science and I think I’m nearly there. Help if we had the manual.”

“Understood but let’s see if we can remedy that situation.” I turned my attention to the Bridge crew. “Helmsman! Set course for Mars. Security! Monitor for hostiles.”

And so the ship broke orbit and set a course for the fourth planet. It wasn’t long before we were challenged by the fleet that had been searching for us. Our friend, the Ambassador appeared on screen, he did not appear pleased. “You’re approaching our planet, you are required to surrender your ship or be fired upon.”

I sat back feeling relaxed as I replied. “Ambassador! As previously stated, we will not be surrendering our ship. Instead, you will supply us with the technology to return to our reality... or your planet will be fired upon.”

“That would be an act of war!”

“We’ve already passed that point Ambassador, when you kidnapped us from our realities. If you wish to avoid conflict you’d best comply with our instructions. We also warn you to keep your distance.” I cut the link. “Helmsman! Move towards the planet at maximum sublight. Security! Are we within range of the planet?”

The Security Officer was taken aback. “You’re not really going to fire on the planet? I thought you were bluffing!”

“Who’s bluffing? Shields up, weapons primed, be ready to fire on anything that fires at us until we gain orbit...then we bluff!” I replied with a reassuring smile that put the Security Officer at ease.

As we moved, several warning shots were fired and returned with devastating results. “Two ships dead in space, Captain.”

“A little different to your usual style, Captain,” remarked Reed with an approving look. “How far are you prepared to go?” I didn’t reply.

“Mars within target range, Captain,” reported the Weapons Officer.

“How far behind are the Ambassador and his fleet?” I asked.

“About twenty minutes at present rate of approach. Also detecting ships approaching from the surface,” reported Reed.

“Time to change tactics. Open a comms link to the Ambassador,” I ordered and shortly after, his angry face reappeared on screen. Not a happy man. “Sorry to inform you the rules have now changed. Our weapons have targeted an area of your planet. We will open fire in three minutes if your fleet does not stop its approach on our position.”

“You’re bluffing!”

I don’t bluff! Three minutes starting now.” I cut the link. “Security! Locate a building at the launch site of those ships approaching. Find a deserted building and on my command destroy it!” I waited as the minutes ticked by. Three-minute mark passed. “Has the fleet stopped?”

“No sir.”

“Lock on to that site, scan for life forms.”

“No life forms, sir.”

“Fire!”

On the surface, a building exploded showering a military base with debris.

“Structure destroyed!”

“Get the Ambassador online,” I ordered.

Again, the angry determined face of the Ambassador appeared on screen. I sat back looking relaxed and in control. He looked flustered. “We’re at war! You will pay for this act of violence!”

“Ambassador... you haven’t seen anything yet. My next target will be your command ship. You have three minutes to not only bring your ships to a dead stop, but to back off or we’ll blow your ship out of existence. When you have complied, we will then negotiate to avoid us actually destroying all life on your planet.” I left the link open and waited, whilst watching the minutes tick by.

“Two minutes, Fleet still approaching,” reported scanning Officer.

“Prepare to fire in one minute.” The Ambassador waited, glaring at me. I remained silent watching the seconds tick by. “You have ten seconds left Ambassador! Nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one – Fire!”

A burst of energy shot from the ships bow, hit the lead ship of the fleet. Its engines exploded and the ship stopped dead in space with life support failing.

“Select another target and fire in thirty seconds!” I ordered as I watched the Ambassador being thrown around in his disabled and dysfunctional ship.

“Stop! You need to give us time to give the order!” pleaded the Ambassador his arrogance wavering.

“Sorry Ambassador! You’ve had enough time. Stop stalling! We will stop when you comply!” I replied and cut the link. “Fire on a new target every thirty seconds until they comply.”

The Weapons Officer hesitated but complied and opened fire on the next target. “Fleet returning fire and retaining advance...they’ve decided to fight back rather than surrender.”

“What now, Captain. Appears they are not convinced of the power of a star ship,” commented Reed. “Do we bring out the big guns?”

I reluctantly nodded. “Target a deserted area of the planet and hit it with a high-powered blast.” The blue-green beam shot out from the ships undercarriage and hit the planet destroying everything within a hundred-mile radius in a massive explosion. It rocked the planet like a meteor strike, leaving a massive crater but no dust cloud - the displaced debris having been reduced to subatomic particles.

“Sir, we have the Ambassador online and the Fleet is slowing down,” reported Reed.

The Ambassador now appeared afraid. “For God’s sake stop! I’ve issued the order!”

“But they are still moving, Ambassador. They need to back off and remain at dead stop or we fire again - this time into a populated area. You have one minute to comply.” I cut the link.

“Fleet stopped and slowly backing away,” reported Reed.

I shook my head. “Still testing us, invite the Ambassador over for a meal and discussions. Warn them any ship that leaves formation...even by an inch...will be destroyed not disabled.”

“An inch, sir? That would be very difficult for them to remain so static,” reported the scanning Officer.”

“I don’t mean that literally.” I turned to Reed. “Commander let’s prepare for our guest.”

The Ambassador walked in with two unarmed attendants. He was a short round-faced man, his rotund figure indicating his body indulged in very little exercise. He wore a purple gown flowing from his neck to the ground. His hair short, approaching bald. He sat where directed, his face white, his expression hiding deep seated anger, embarrassment, and an unwillingness to surrender. If I’d been playing poker with him he would be easy to read and in a sense we were about to enter into a game of politics.

Reed and I had remained seated as he entered not wanting to give him any sign of respect. He didn’t appear to notice, taking his seat in silence and waiting. Our respective guards stood at opposing ends of the room ready to attack each other at the slightest provocation.

I opened the discussions. “Ambassador! There is no need for us to escalate confrontations. All we want is the key to getting us home and we’ll leave. We also need assurances that you will not make further attempts to kidnap people from our realities or ...we will return in force.”

“What’s to stop you returning in force, once you have the technology?”

I weighed up the Ambassadors point. “What’s to stop you taking another star ship? The answer, the threat of war between realities. Neither of us want that.”

“We require your star ship technology in exchange.”

I sat back. “That could be difficult. We are not permitted to give technology to potential enemies.”

“Then we have a problem. I have a similar restriction.”

“Ambassador! You brought us here against our will. We don’t want a fight; we just want to go home. Just send us back or we will be forced to level your planet.” I warned.

“We don’t respond well to threats,” he replied.

“Then I suggest you take some time alone to consider our offer.” Reed and I departed but just after our departure the room exploded blowing a hole in the side of the ship and almost sucking us out into space. The airtight door to the conference room had been damaged, causing oxygen to escape and threatened to be sucked out into space. If that happened Reed and I would follow unless we got through the next airtight door. We only made it just in time as the door broke free and was sucked out into space along with anything else not bolted down in that part of the ship. Once safe, I got on to the internal comms and demanded damage report. “Blast destroyed the Conference Room and surrounding areas including two decks above and below.

“What caused the blast?” I asked.

“Recordings indicate the Ambassador was a walking bio-bomb,” replied security.

“That, I didn’t see coming. Are shields holding?”

“For now Captain, but their fleet is advancing again and opening fire. We can’t withstand this constant onslaught. There are too many of them to fend off effectively.”

“Get us out of here. We’ll regroup and return.” With that order, the ship vanished into a wormhole, leaving the ships firing into empty space.

A few hours later, way out beyond the Oort Cloud of our solar system, the Science Officer gave his report in Conference Room 2. “What we know as reality, is in fact a series of interwoven alternative universes, with common reality fields but different lifelines. Every

time we make a decision we face a cross road, do we go left or do we go right. Each choice will result in a different series of events. Both are real but different facets of our consciousness take different paths. In this way we control our own lives, our destiny, by the choices we make, but all alternatives exist along different realities or time streams.”

The Science Officer paused to ensure we were all following. No questions were asked so he continued. “Those choices are made within our own minds; we are constantly shifting between these interwoven realities. This device enhances your ability to shift realities using your mind but, can shift you to realities that are not as closely interwoven with your own and have different common realities – those we share with those around us.”

“How many of these realities are there?” I asked.

“Near infinity, the only restriction is, that they all share the same laws of physics. Every reality you can think of can exist, which is why in your reality our world is fiction and your mental link brought you here.”

“So, how do we get back?”

“By programming the devices to return you to your original reality, that means reversing everything so everyone goes back to where they came from. The only problem being, there is nothing stopping this Martian civilisation from following us and repeating the exercise.”

Reed waded in. “They haven’t shown they are going to back off. What are our choices? We can’t wipe them out and the technology is unlikely to be in only one place.”

I had a thought. “The greatest vulnerability of modern society is that most data is electronically stored. A massive electromagnetic pulse would wipe out all electronically stored data and short out every storage data disk.”

“True, but that would set their civilisation back...who knows how far,” warned Reed. “Are we prepared to go that far?”

“They don’t respond well to warnings so we need to show we mean business by demonstrating our capability. I want them to know if we return, the consequences could be fatal to their civilisation. Our departure will show we have mastered their technology so we should target only their fleet and fry their technology.” I suggested. “

“I would feel more comfortable with that,” replied Reed.

“Then let’s proceed. Mr Reed. Take us back as soon as we’re ready to switch realities.”

An hour later, I sat in a chair dressed in my space suit, with the device strapped to my chest. My wife was nearby and we were ready to go. Reed took command and returned the ship to

Mars. Instantly, the ship was challenged and to our surprise our old friend the Ambassador was on screen addressing us. “We thought you were dead, Ambassador.”

“A substitute lookalike who sacrificed his life for the good of our people.”

“Commendable. Let’s hope no further loss of life is required. We have now obtained the secret of how to return and now, we shall do so. Your Wing Commodore Murphy is being released in a shuttle; he was wounded but will recover. I warn you do not try to stop us!”

“Your warning is noted but you are not leaving. Your ship is surrounded and we will destroy it rather than let you leave, preferably disable it so we can take the technology. Open fire!”

“Target the Fleet!” I ordered. An invisible electromagnetic pulse wave rolled out across the fleet and fried all their equipment. All systems shut down on every ship, including lighting, life support, instrumentation, weapons and engines. They all went dark and silent.

I sent a message to the Wing Commodore on our shuttle. “Tell you people that should they ever follow us, we shall return in force and wipe out all your electronic devices and return your civilisation to the Stone Age. Is that clear?”

“Understood Captain,” he replied, more submissive now than when he arrived. The shuttle launched and drew away from the Star Ship.

I turned my focus to thinking back to when I was adrift in space and the ship picked me up. Suddenly, I found myself back there. I concentrated again on my falling towards the moon and found myself on the ground. I’d tripped over on the Moon having survived the landing and started walking towards the far side moon base. Not planning to stay and believing this survival journey belonged to my counterpart I switched again to find myself back in my living room in front of the television. There I watched, a little dazed as I saw the ship’s Captain, return to his reality. Hearing a noise behind me I got up and saw my wife enter. “Are you alright?” she asked.

“I think so, what about you?”

“Was that real? Did we just...” she stopped dismissing her thoughts as crazy.

I finished her comment. “...leave a star ship? You remember it as well?”

She nodded, still unsure. “Maybe I’m beginning to understand why you like that show. Exploring unknown or unfamiliar concepts can be stimulating.”

“You know, I think I can even remember some of the technology. I wonder if it really works, that would prove it really was real.” And with that I put on my glasses, picked up my pen and decided to use my real-life engineering skills to turn that technology into reality.

THE END