

THE LIGHT BETWEEN STARS

SAMPLE

LIFE IN THE UNIVERSE

DALE E. MCCLENNING

Here's how it went.

"Wake up everyone, system-side coming up fast. Navs, you there?" I asked through the intercom as we came out of FTL.

"Yeah, I'm here," a woman said in a voice that sounded like someone who had just turned off their alarm. "Coffee, must have coffee."

You can hardly blame Kwila for sacking out. Space had been a huge disappointment. With all the stories, television shows, and movies that had been written, the expectations for space had been pretty high when we were finally able to travel between the stars in hours instead of decades. Huge ships, manned by crew, scientists, ambassadors, and the military of course, were commissioned for space exploration. Mankind was going to find amazing planets, new life forms, and other intelligent beings to share the cosmos with in friendship.

"The military?"

Don't worry, they got bored the quickest and stayed home. Who's asking that, anyway? I don't remember the voice. Oh well, the name must have slipped my mind.

"Okay, brain-juice ingested, I'm fine now," Kwila said after a minute. "Give me a couple to check things out."

So what did we find 'out there'? Nothing!

Since we were so far out, the information for the third system on our survey schedule was still general. The sun was yellow, a good first step, and there were six planets in orbit. Not that I expected to find anything of real interest. Once the ship displayed two rocks, two gas giants, and two ice balls, any hope that showed its head quickly disappeared back into the black hole it called home. The outer-most planet was busy traipsing around the other side of the system, but the other ice ball was close enough to be our first stop. The computer plotted the order for exploration without my even asking—5, 4, 2, 1, 3, 6.

"Nothing?"

That has to be a member of the crew, but I can't place who, which is strange, seeing how small the crew is. Was I speaking out loud and don't know it?

Of course, when I said 'nothing' I don't mean it in the 'absolutely nothing' sense, but in the sense of nothing that we couldn't find in our own solar system. Except another Earth, that is. Planets like the ones in this system, whose name I hadn't bothered to look up, were in abundance. What we didn't find after more than four hundred systems was anything that you could call life. Nothing from intelligent being down to bacteria had been found. No primordial ooze bubbling away with life-making building blocks, no exotic algae, nothing. It felt like the first person to walk into the desert had come back and told us that, yes, there was only sand out there.

I punched up the time schedule for the planets and was reviewing what the computer promised would allow the fastest information from the instrumentation when Kwila came over the comms again. "Hey, want to hear something unusual?"

"Yes! Tell me, please!" I'm sure I sounded desperate, but who cares, something of interest was a real treat.

"The fifth planet, the ice ball we will be going to first, and the fourth planet's orbit are in sync for about a quarter of their orbits. The fifth planet has an elliptical orbit exactly twice as long as the fourth planet so that during both of the semi-minor axes, the planets travel together, or mostly together, that is. It's almost like someone planned it that way."

"Wait!" I said, sitting straight up in my chair. "You're not saying someone changed one planet's orbit to coincide with another's?" My mind reeled. A race who could do that could do just about anything.

"No, of course not," Kwila said with a high-pitched emphasis. "Just

saying it's really unusual, that's all. Guess you see enough systems, you see just about everything."

"Guess so." I deflated. The amount of disappointment I felt surprised me. Then another thought came to mind. If Kwila was messing with me just to get a rise out of me, I would make her pay big time. "Send me the orbital projections."

The holographics confirmed what Kwila had reported. I increased the speed of the orbits to watch the planets spin around the sun. A few of the larger moons were included by now. I ordered the computer to include the calculated flight plan through the system and then made a decision.

"Ship, include some extra orbits around the fifth planet. I think we might want some extra time studying that one."

"As you wish," a voice replied. The ship had a friendly voice, but knowing that there wasn't a real person behind it canceled any comfort it might have given me.

"Kwila, I'm going to give you some extra time at our first stop."

"Do they grow coffee there?"

"Highly doubtful," I replied with a small laugh.

"Then I will make our stop as fast as possible. Why waste one's time where there's no coffee?" Kwila was a real character at times.

The ironic thing about space travel is that the trip into the system takes as long or longer than the trip between stars. Unlike those old movies where people 'warp' right next to the planet, we make sure we are well outside of the system. I think whoever wrote those stories forgot that everything in a system moves. Besides having very little to no idea what is in a new system, do you know how much computing power it would take to keep track of the location of every planet, comet, asteroid, moon, satellite, etc. in every known system at any given time? It's much safer to stop outside the system and take your time getting in-system. If the system is well regulated and busy like Sol, you could get a lot closer, but those were the exception. Thus we waited again as we flew our way into the system.

Several hours later, Kwila's voice came over the comms again. "Here's another strange one for you. Check your models."

The number of 'strange' things were only up to two, but they were starting to worry me. This job was normally so routine that more than one strange thing could make me nervous, much less two of them. Strangeness got people hurt, dull and boring got you home in one piece. I came out here to get away from something, or more precisely someone, not run into more trouble.

"From who?" that voice asked again.

Let's worry about that later.

Looking at the model, I had the ship zoom in on the fifth planet. It

had no moons, which wasn't unknown, but it did have a ring. A ring wasn't unusual either, but no moons *and* a ring was. The ring also looked different from others I had seen.

"What am I looking at?" I said into the comms.

"If I had to guess," Kwila started, "which I don't, I would say that the planet originally had two moons and both now make up the ring we are looking at. See the two concentrations about sixty degrees from each other?"

"The planet tore up both moons?" That was Lucjan, our geologist. "Isn't that pretty rare?"

"As far out as the ring is, it's, like, unheard of." Trust Kwila to be dramatic.

"So," I joined in, "are you saying someone blew up the moons?"

"Well, I doubt someone blew them up. Then the remains wouldn't be in a ring, they'd be all over."

"They wouldn't have to blow it up," Lucjan added. "They would only have to crack it enough for the planet to do the rest. It would take time, of course, but you would eventually get a ring just like that. That assumes that the moons were solid to begin with."

"Crack a moon?" I said, emphasizing the last word. "How would you do that?"

"Precisely placed atomics is the only way I can think of. Some of the pieces would end up radioactive, but most would be safe." He said it so matter-of-factly, you could almost forget he was talking about blowing up moons.

"Wait a minute," I said, placing my head in my hands with my elbows on the armrests of the chair. "Are you seriously saying someone broke apart two moons? Why would you do that?"

"To make it easier to get to the minerals inside would be the most obvious reason," Lucjan replied.

That was too much for my brain. A survey ship, with nothing better to do, can be a place of wild speculation, but we had been talking about someone changing the orbit of a planet and cracking moons. In other words, we were talking about a civilization that could customize a solar system. The thought staggered my mind. Was that really possible? Humans were barely traveling the galaxy.

"People!" I think I was shouting. "Are we really talking about someone cracking moons to mine them?"

Conversation came to a halt for a few moments. Maybe I scared them. Either that or they were laughing with their comms off. When Lucjan came back on, he sounded calm.

"No, I'm just saying that the data would be consistent with that scenario."

I took a breath and slowly let it out. "Fine, let's just keep the wild

speculation to a minimum, okay?”

It was too early in the mission for me to be so stressed. Not having worked with any of the crew previously, I began to wonder if they were always like this. Had being in such a hurry to leave the station been a good idea? Bad things tend to happen when you rush. Thanks, Rogers, something else you screwed up for me.

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THE COWARD AND THE THIEF IN PARADISE

GARY GIROD

Recently, I've been feeling detached from my work until I feel like I'm leaving my body and watching myself from above. When I was a young child, I grew bored when I had nothing to do; now that I've turned fifteen, I get bored when what I do has no purpose. How many times did I march out with fifty other Cadets to landscape Paradise's four hundred acres of rolling green hills? I sat on the warm grass under the cloudless sun as I pulled out weeds and threw out any fallen leaves from the palm trees as I beautified every inch of land all the way up to the twenty-foot metal fence that separated Paradise from the two-lane highway.

I remember when I was six, I was told to scavenge for weeds. I thought it was a game. Then every weekday for the next nine years, it had become part of a normal routine. I hadn't thought about the greater meaning behind it for a long time. Now I wonder: who is this for? My first suspicion was that it was for us Travelers. We were creating a perfect place here on Earth while whatever was beyond was disorder. I thought we were making this place beautiful so that the Lost would join us. Then I remembered that no Lost ever tried to get in, while I'd seen many Cadets try to get out.

Today was one of those days. I imagine he thought he wouldn't be seen as he was climbing a part of the fence that was obscured by a squat office building. Even if no one had seen him, it was impossible not to hear the chain-link rattle on a windless day. Heads turned one by one as the Cadets watched the man climb. It was hard to tell us apart from afar as we all wore white shirts and light green slacks. It was a while before I recognized the middle-aged man as Silas, a man who had curiously never achieved a rank in his decades of living on the compound. It was shocking seeing him scale the fence as rapidly as he did. He was old, bent over from decades of field work, and every time I had seen him, he was slow and morose. Now he climbed with animalistic fervor, until he reached the half-foot long spikes that lined the fence's rim. He reached behind him to the shears sticking out of his shirt.

I turned and looked at the Cadets around me. Nearly everyone had

returned to their work, with only a few children watching. I turned and pretended to pluck at a weed just as six Officers ran out. From the corner of my eye, I watched as Silas tried to use the shears to cut off the blades in front of him so he could descend to the other side. I heard the clack of metal on metal and knew it was hopeless. One of the Officers took out a taser and hit him square in the back. Silas stiffened and fell with a loud *thud*. Without pausing to see if he was still breathing, four of the Officers lifted him up and took him away, towards the Clinic, and I knew, living or dead, I would never see him again.

My mind tends to wander when I'm in an empty room, and none is as bare as the Realization Room with its faded eggshell walls and linoleum floors. Normally there's a table between the Specialist and I, but today there wasn't even that. Dr. Mayhew sat in his simple metal chair, opposite me, with a clipboard resting across his lap. He began as he always did.

"Good afternoon, Samantha. What wrongs have you committed against the Travelers this week?"

There had been times that I said I didn't do anything wrong, but no matter how often I protested, he would insist that I had violated some ethical code. Margaret had told me once that when she was a little girl in Catholic school, a nun explained to her, "God creates us with certain virtues, but we get to pick our sins. That's why it's so important to dwell on them." I imagine the Specialists were obsessed with sin for the same reason. Not that they believed in sin, or God.

"I didn't do as good a job landscaping as I should have."

"Were you distracted?" Dr. Mayhew asked.

I knew I had to say 'no.' I was supposed to blot out all subversives in my mind. If I mentioned his name, I would be harshly corrected. If I asked what happened to him, I might end up in the Clinic getting Treatment too.

"No, I just felt tired today. I've been feeling a little demotivated."

"You are not doubting the mission, are you?"

"No, I know it's true and we are going to make the universe better, but even though I know it in my head, it's as if my hands don't want to do the work."

Dr. Mayhew scribbled on the clipboard. "This will change once you have been properly realigned. This world and its parts are like an old machine, including the people. You will realign your mind through our training and the body will follow."

"Yes, of course," I agreed, and from the slight scrunching of his face, I knew he didn't appreciate any unnecessary speech. Dr. Mayhew was very controlling; even though he wasn't an Officer, he clearly thought

of himself as part of the chain of command. If anything, he thought he was above the Officers, since he trained us in the way of Enlightenment.

“Have you developed any abilities yet?”

“No,” I replied clearly.

“You cannot project astrally?”

“No.”

“You cannot de-substantiate?”

“No.”

“You cannot turn thoughts into physical reality?”

“No.”

“You cannot interact with recently disembodied peoples of any kind?”

“No.”

He didn't seem annoyed by my lack of progress. I suspected that I gave all of the appropriate answers and that no one had developed extra-physical abilities; a forbidden thought, I knew. My mind flashed back to five months ago when, feeling frustrated, I asked him if he had been able to do any of these things. “Yes,” he had replied and I knew saying anything else would have been a cause for Treatment.

“Let us go through our exercises then.”

I stood up, grabbed the chair and placed it to my right before turning to the far wall. I closed my eyes and took four steps and placed my hands on the cold brick before turning and walking back. I turned again, counted the steps and touched the wall, over and over. I emptied my mind as I always did. No matter how empty my mind was, the wall was still real. He had told me that as soon as I had divorced my conscious being from my matter, I could de-substantiate. I wished that were true, but I didn't believe it anymore. Four steps, turn, touch. Four steps, turn, touch. Always the brick wall. I heard Dr. Mayhew scribbling. The sound echoed, so similar yet distinct from the sound of the fence rattling when Silas climbed it. Not that Silas existed anymore. His body still might, but he had been unpersoned.

Four steps and the wall. I kept doing the same routine at least a hundred times. For a moment, I wondered if Dr. Mayhew had forgotten about me as I walked back and forth. What could he possibly be thinking about? Was he writing anything down? Perhaps he was doodling. If I ever doodled, it would be at least a week of Corrections work, but I'm guessing no one checked the Specialists' notes.

A sudden coldness entered me as I imagined the Specialist watching me as I walked back and forth. Enlightened didn't celebrate birthdays, but we did recognize them. Since fourteen, I noticed boys stand just a little bit closer to me and men stand just a bit farther back. Both their eyes had changed when they looked at me. The boys had this glance,

almost imperceptible, like a puppy that wanted food, while the men had a more hollow look, like a starved wolf eyeing a rabbit. Was he eyeing me like that?

Four steps and the wall. Now I had done it at least two hundred times, more than I had ever done it. I was actually getting tired. My hands were going numb from touching the brick wall so many times and it was getting harder to lift my arms. I felt a sudden urge to leave the room, but I forced the thought down. Even if I could de-substantiate, even if I could leave the room, where would I go? The Education Center had locks on the inside, and all the windows had bars on them. Even if I got out of the Education Center, I was still in Paradise.

I kept marching, my muscles aching. Images and ideas tumbled like a kaleidoscope over each other and I was too tired to focus on one. I touched the wall and as I did, I saw Dr. Mayhew towering over me, his hands reaching for my waist. I opened my eyes and saw the wall for real and knew Dr. Mayhew was still seated behind me. I closed my eyes and forced myself to walk back.

“Stop.”

I opened my eyes.

“Why did you pause just now?”

“I thought I was slipping into the wall. Just for a second.”

Dr. Mayhew examined my face, peeling at my expression as he dissected me, searching for the truth. “Good,” he said flatly. “That is all for today.”

I was stunned. Normally, we would move on to astral projection and creation exercises. I wondered what time it was, though there were no clocks anywhere in Paradise except for the Officers’ watches. It was only after I had been escorted outside that I saw the sun descending over the horizon, painting the sky peach-red and I realized just how long I had been drilled. Shaking from exhaustion and apprehension, I retreated to the cafeteria.

The top bunks were the only ones that had a clear view of the miniature rectangular windows. No matter which angle one peered out, all that was visible were more buildings or the nearby hills. My window was different, as it was the only one that opened up to the night sky. I watched that darkness until my friend appeared, twinkling into existence. I called my friend Bellatrix, though I was sure it wasn’t the right star. It didn’t matter; Bellatrix was mine. As I watched that beautiful point of pure brilliant light, I knew that there were wonderful things outside Paradise, a blasphemous thought.

“Hello, Bellatrix,” I mouthed. The rest of the conversation could be

done silently as I recounted my day. It had become something like an exercise and far more meaningful than any work I did with Dr. Mayhew, not that I wanted to think about him. Bellatrix kept my secrets and didn't judge. I asked Bellatrix questions. If she twinkled, it meant 'yes' and if she didn't, well, I suppose it could mean she was thinking about it. Even if she didn't tell me everything, she never lied to me. She was pure, beautiful, free, and she was the only person that I could confide in ever since my mother had unpersoned herself.

I was four when I was told by a kneeling man in a doctor's white coat that she was being taken to the Clinic for Treatment. I don't remember if I asked when she would be back; it didn't matter, as he didn't answer. Since then, people watched me, suspiciously, as if whatever fault my mother had were in me. I had suspected it too. Growing up, not that I'm really grown up, but since I was four, I had this profound sense of solitude. Not loneliness. That means you're missing something that makes you whole, but I feel complete by myself. I've learned how to exist within my own mind and not need others. I think that makes people more afraid of me than anything else. It's as if they want me to lash out, or cry because I don't have friends or biological family. If I did break down, it would show them I'm normal. Sometimes I did cry, but I cried to Bellatrix because she understood, and when she twinkled rapidly, I knew she was crying with me.

The best part about Bellatrix is that she always stayed with me as long as I needed her. I would tell her about my day, and she would listen, only briefly interrupting, and then we would talk and I would ask her what she saw that day. Of course she sees everything, being up in the sky. She would tell me the most outrageous stories. Then I would tell her I was going to close my eyes, but Bellatrix would stay up to watch me sleep. I wasn't sure if I needed Bellatrix, but she was always there for me regardless, and that made her my best friend.

"Sam," a voice whispered as a hand grabbed my shoulder and shook me. I tore my gaze from Bellatrix and turned over, bringing me face-to-face with a hazel-haired girl my age.

"Ceci?" I whispered back to a girl we only ever called 'Cecilia' in front of Officers. She was so close to me I saw myself reflected in her eyes. "Can you not sleep?"

Suddenly, Ceci hoisted herself onto my bed and I slid back, giving her what little space the bunk afforded. We lay next to each other, half her face illuminated by the faint silver-grey glow of the stars. She stared at me without speaking and I tensed, wondering what she intended. A greater part of me enjoyed this tense silence. We were sharing a deeply personal moment, however awkward, without judgment or rules. I imagined she must have been savouring this moment of uncertainty.

"Can you not sleep?" she asked.

I instinctively frowned and then restrained myself from laughing. "Not like this," I quietly replied, as I felt the bed's edge dig into my hip, knowing I was dangerously close to slipping off and hitting the cold, hard floor.

"I meant because of Silas," Ceci said.

My smile, the first genuine one I wore in months, slipped from my face. "Did you know him?"

"Do you know anyone?" Ceci replied.

Another strange question, though this one was more puzzling than funny. I could tell she saw the confusion in my face; how could she not when she was so close? She didn't explain her meaning, but instead let me think it over, piecing together her words like a puzzle. I thought of all the people in Paradise and realized most were just ranks, with some half-familiar faces. Of those whose names I knew, I talked with very few. Of those I talked to, I mostly spoke what I had been taught to speak and the words were not my own. I thought about all the members of Paradise, wearing uniforms with no personal deviations, no makeup, our hair cut a certain length, even our fingernails examined for cleanliness and uniform maintenance.

Then I thought about myself. There were no mirrors in Paradise, or photographs. The Officers told us that if we saw our physical forms, then we would think of ourselves as physical beings rather than souls trapped within imperfect forms. If we ever imagined ourselves as physical objects, then our ability to attain Enlightenment and manipulate reality would vanish. When I was much younger, when Paradise was less strict, my mother used to comb my long hair until she could run her fingers through it. The last time she did that was eleven years ago. What did I look like then? I suppose it doesn't matter, I must look so different now. Do I look like her?

Do you know anyone?

Know anyone? I don't even know what my own face looks like.

"We need to escape," Ceci stated.

"How?" I asked, partly to dissuade her. Escape was just a fantasy, something we had all imagined but never believed was possible. Only fools like Silas ever tried. No, not fools. Silas was the only one who ever achieved anything close to Enlightenment. His soul was beyond the fence, what I saw was his just his body trying to meet with it.

Ceci put a finger to her lips. She reached down into her pants, laid her hand between us and opened it.

"It's a master's keycard," she explained. "It can open any door, including the ones in the fence."

I stared at the thing in her hand, my blood pounding in my head. "Where did you get that?"

"I'm leaving tomorrow. Will you come with me?" Ceci dodged.

My eyes bored into hers as she gazed back with quiet determination. “What if we get caught?” I whispered with sudden terror.

“We’re already caught,” she replied stoically.

Tears streaked down my face. I thought of my mother and how she had tried to get us out, how she combed my hair and pretended like everything was normal that day, the last day I had ever known or been known by anyone.

“I can’t.”

Ceci’s face didn’t change, though her eyes betrayed disappointment. “Die here,” she whispered. She rolled off and marched back to her own bunk, leaving me paralyzed on the edge of my own bed.

AWAKENING

SIMON A. G. SPENCER

“Well, there’s definitely water here,” Michael observed, wiping a thick coating of snow from his helmet’s visor for the tenth time in as many minutes. “Chances of life seem pretty slim, though.”

He trudged over the white hilltop at an awkward pace, the boots of his thermal suit cracking through the upper crust and plunging him in down to his knees. Harsh winds whipped against him and rattled his helmet as they blanketed him with a fresh spray of snow. It took some effort to move against the elements like this, and he didn’t dare stumble; a fall could leave him buried in moments.

“The locals are probably scared of your ugly ass,” Abbey Carter suggested in his ear. She was back in the cozy confines of the lander, having lost (or won?) the coin flip to decide which of them would go out to explore the planet’s surface. But with the communicator, it was like she was at his side, constantly prodding at him.

“Again with my ass,” Michael replied, glancing over his suit vitals to check that nothing was in danger of freezing off. The thermal suit kept him alive, but not exactly warm. “You know, for something you hold in such contempt, you sure do talk about it a bunch.”

“I do not!” It was hard to tell whether Carter was offended or amused.

He peered down the icy slope, the pure white snow curving into a large valley below. The sunlight was choked behind a thick screen of clouds, but there was still enough light for Michael to appreciate the breathtaking view; the windswept hills all around, the towering glaciers in the distance. Beautiful, but barren by all appearances.

“You do, though,” he continued, carefully descending a short way down the slope. “I swear you bring it up at least three times a day. If I didn’t know you, I’d almost think you wanted it.”

“No one wants any part of you, Adams,” Carter replied acidly.

He grinned to himself; Carter’s barbs had lost their sting awhile ago. “I feel like I’ve stepped back in time, like I might run into a woolly mammoth at any moment.”

“Big, hairy, and dumb—you’d fit in perfectly.”

“Keep the burns coming, Abbey, they keep me warmer than these thermals ever could.”

His next step was met with less resistance than before, and he only

just caught himself from slipping and tumbling down the hill. That probably would've been a death sentence, as once he went down, climbing back up would become an ordeal.

"Abbey, unless this place thaws into a tropical paradise in the summer, I think we can safely file it under 'uninhabitable'. Trying to settle here would be suicide."

"Figured as much," Carter grumbled. "Guess we'll stick with the plan of slogging on to Kyril. Why'd I even bother coming down here?"

Michael turned back carefully and began to climb up the hill. "Oh, come on. I know we're both happy to be off the *St. Brenden* for a couple of days."

"Yeah, but I'm still stuck with you," Carter replied wryly.

"I'm sure there are worse fates, probably." From the top of the hill, he could see the hexagonal shape of the lander, already half-buried in the snow. The residual heat from its thrusters kept it from being lost entirely, and the air shimmered and swayed around it. It was rather small, with the larger vehicles stored away on the *St. Brenden* for more dire situations that might come up in the next few centuries. The interior was spacious enough to fit two people, but not comfortably. He could only imagine how Carter would feel if she was here with someone she *didn't* like. "I'm just happy for a chance to stretch my legs one last time before they put us in cryo."

"Do you think that's likely?" Carter's tone had turned serious.

"It's gonna happen sooner or later," Michael answered as he slid down the opposite slope. "*Brenden* won't have much need for us until we find another planet to scope out, so give it a month or two and they'll put us in storage."

"Please don't call it that. It makes me sound like a piece of hardware."

That was exactly what he'd been thinking of, but he didn't tell her that. "I'm going to take a few snow samples. If the water's clean enough, maybe we can take some with us."

"Sounds good, but make it quick. Instruments are predicting an even bigger storm on the way, so you'd best get your ass back here soon."

"There you go again! It's like an obsession with you. You know, I have other good features. My natural charm, my perfect smile, impeccable fashion sense."

Michael could almost hear Carter rolling her eyes. "Oh please, Adams. It'll be a cold day in Hell before I ever have any interest in you."

Michael smiled to himself. This planet wasn't quite Hell, but it was pretty cold.

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Jason Carter-Adams liked to whistle while he worked, a habit that

meant he often worked alone. It wasn't that any of his fellow engineers were opposed to the idea of whistling, but Jason had a particularly loud and piercing whistle that often distracted them from their important and precise work. Jason didn't mind; solitude suited him fine, his high whistles mixing with the low hum of the *St. Brenden's* engines to create a powerful, soul-stirring music that only he seemed able to hear.

He strolled between the rows of engines, six in all, each the size of a large house—not that he had ever seen a proper house. Each of them had its own distinct sound, differences in pitch and rhythm that gave each a unique personality. Engine 2, for example, was like a temperamental teenage girl, high and whiny and prone to act up. Or Engine 4, low and rumbly, like a large man whose sheer size exuded authority. And then there was Engine 5, of a medium pitch but always doing its job, putting Jason in mind of his grandmother Abigail.

He'd only met her three times between her regular stops in cryosleep, twice while he was a child and once again about a year back. Her time in cryo had left her youthful, not at all suited for the moniker of 'grandma', but she'd always been affectionate towards him and the rest of the family during those times when she wasn't tucked away in storage. Most of the rest of the Carter-Adams clan were engineers, meaning they were always in need and never placed into cryosleep. It made it difficult to form any sort of bond with family members like Abigail, but she'd done her best to leave a strong impression with the limited time she had. Not like her husband, who Jason had never met in all his twenty-two years.

Both of his grandparents on his father's side were surveyors, highly-valued experts who were tasked with determining whether a planet was suitable for habitation. With the distances between planets being so large, it was deemed more efficient to put them in cryosleep instead of training a new generation of surveyors who might live their entire lives without ever seeing another world. Along with some of the senior ship staff and a handful of particularly brilliant scientists, they were the only surviving members of the crew who had ever set foot on Earth, if such a place had ever existed.

The *Brenden's* database had plenty of recordings and documentation on nearly every aspect of the homeworld they were said to have left behind roughly a century ago, but it was all second-hand information. The teachers who had taught him about forests and oceans, tectonic plates and weather patterns, not to mention fake-sounding nations like America and Zimbabwe, had never seen any of those things themselves. They were just repeating what their elders had taught them, or reciting from the database. None of them had ever swam in an ocean, and the only trees they'd ever seen were the genetically-engineered ones spread around the ship. How could they be so sure that anything they said was

true? There may have never been an Earth—it might simply be a myth to give the crew a sense of history, a sweet lie, just as he suspected Kyril was.

Engine 3 was making an odd noise, and Jason moved over to the screen beside it to check the system read-outs. Everything was green, but the overall output had waned since his last check. They'd been leaning on Engine 3 pretty heavily over the last few months, and maybe the old girl needed a break. He made a mental note to suggest powering her down and doing a tune-up soon, though it was unlikely the higher-ups would listen. Shutting down 3 would reduce their overall thrust capacity and delay their supposed arrival on Kyril by months. They'd probably wait until the engine room was in flames before they shut it down, and even then, they might try and take their chances.

Jason let out a heavy sigh and gritted his teeth in frustration. Kyril had loomed over them all since before he was born, stories of its possibilities on the tongues of every adult. The supposed perfect planet, a potential mirror to Earth that might support human beings. Why they needed a second Earth was a bit vague, with multiple entries in the database citing what seemed to be contradictory reasons. How could the Earth be overpopulated while major nations also suffered from declining birthrates? It made no sense to him, and the database was filled with stuff like that.

But Kyril was supposed to be a fresh start, not just another colony like the ones the database claimed dotted Earth's solar system, but a full-blown new civilization to be established. They would thrive there, apparently, the natural environment familiar enough to support their biology. Sounded too good to be true, like an eternal paradise. On bad days, Jason would suspect that they had no actual set destination, that they were on an endless voyage to nowhere. It was all a lie, he'd think, something to make them feel like they were actually making some kind of progress. These negative thoughts never lasted more than a day, but he knew a few other crew members who were more adamant on the subject.

He ran his eyes over Engine 3, taking in its immense cylindrical design. How long would it run for? Even with the best maintenance, parts would wear out from use and need to be replaced. Just last month, he'd had to redo some of the outer panelling because the radiation shielding had decayed after close to a hundred years. If it kept going like that, eventually everything would have to be replaced, and then would it still be the same engine?

The question left Jason feeling gloomy, although he couldn't quite determine the reason why. Most of the original crew of the *St. Brenden* had died by now, leaving their offspring to carry on the voyage; could they still be considered the same crew? Was this even their voyage to

make?

He shook his head and moved towards the far end of the engine. He got into a philosophical mood when he worked alone, but it was rarely conducive to his job. He needed to focus. Maybe he wouldn't have to turn off the engine after all, if he could determine the source of the problem. If the output was being affected, then it might be a hitch in the fusion core. He went to the panel at the far end, its surface decorated with bright yellow warning symbols which he hardly noticed. He'd worked with this machine for five years now, and had learned to judge the dangers it presented for himself. He took a pair of goggles from a hook beside the panel and slipped them on, then opened the hatch and peered through the viewing window into the fusion chamber.

The goggles dimmed the worst of the light, but it was still quite bright. Jason squinted through it, searching for any damage to the mechanisms that kept the reactor going. Nothing seemed amiss to his eyes, but he noticed for the first time how the metal pieces shimmered in the radiation's glow. Jason wasn't one to care for pretty things, but the sight was quite captivating. He leaned in closer, pressing his hands against the side of the engine to keep his balance.

An unwanted thought came to him as he watched the dazzling display: he wouldn't live to see Kyril. His father and sister, who both spoke of the promised world with a sort of awe, would be long gone before they reached it. His few friends, and the countless people he interacted with on a daily basis; they would all be dust when the *St. Brenden* finally unloaded its crew. The only people alive right now who would see it were those in cryosleep—his grandparents and the others deemed worthy of settling a new civilization. It seemed deeply unfair, to build up his hopes for something he would never see.

He touched a hand to the glass as the light of the reactor seemed to change, colourful swirling patterns forming before his eyes. It was the most stunning thing he had ever seen. Could some shitty planet really match this? Doubtful.

I could die right now and I wouldn't be the least bit disappointed, he thought, putting some weight on the glass.