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**PRELUDE**  
**AUGUST 3, 2207 :: 0800 HOURS GMT**  
**CHALLENGER ORBITAL SPACE STATION**  
**GEO-SYNCHRONOUS ORBIT**

“The stars, the stars,  
What distant things are they,  
Whose fires burn throughout the night.  
The stars, the stars,  
What wondrous things are they,  
Who guide our course, set our hearts alight.  
The stars, the stars,  
What puzzling things are they,  
Free of want, filled with life, beckoning us  
Through ebony seas to take flight.”

Antony Gregarin stands at the SheerGlass Dome of the space station and lets the whispered words escape from his lips with the true sound of reverence. It is not so much for the poem itself but for their subject. These stars that even now beckon to him from their ebony sea lighting the night.

“*Flight of the Revered*. Norman Grant. 2112.” The voice breaks the reverie and Gregarin turns at its familiar sound. “A poem obviously written by someone who loves those stars at least half as much as you.”

Gregarin smiles at his longtime friend and associate, Paul M’Tonga. A brilliant man who had also, long ago, dedicated his life to science specifically the science of Faster Than Light travel or FTL as their team called it. “Perhaps, perhaps half as much.” He nods to his friend who joins him at the dome edge for the view. Have they left yet Paul?”

The darker skinned man looks to his friend with a wry smile. “No, as a matter of fact, more have arrived.”

Gregarin shakes his head. “Damn, it was worth a hope.” He turns back to the stars and watches them. “You know, I remember as a child lying on the hillock behind my home just staring up into the night sky. All the while I would dream about someday going out there, way out there, beyond our Solar system, beyond perhaps even our Galaxy. Even now, I wonder still if it will always just be a dream.”

“Not anymore you shouldn’t.” M’Tonga turns to the man at his side. “Antony, because of you, the dream will come true, we will walk among the stars and in our lifetime; even ones far beyond our view. We will walk there because of your dream.”

Antony Gregarin smiles once more his face showing the barest signs of wrinkled skin, the smallest traces of age. “Will we? Will we really?” He looks back. “What if we won’t, what if we try...and...we aren’t welcome?” The smile fades. “What if we are wrong to even try, my friend?”

“Antony, we’ve known each other for over twenty years old friend. We’ve worked for this day most of our lives. You have to put to rest your old doubts. I know you have them; I know they weigh on you from time to time. But you know this is right; you know we are doing the right thing.”

“Are we?”

“Yes.” The other man’s face grows stern and steady, solid faith in the statement. “We know there is other life out there, we know that. For over two hundred years, at least, there have been scattered reports of contact with alien life forms. They know we are here Antony; they have made it clear they have been watching. They have an interest in us. They have already come to us and not always with our best intentions on their agenda, I might add. Its time we met them elsewhere than in our own backyard.”

“Then, the Herodotus incident...”

“An accident nothing more. We have to believe that Antony.” M’Tonga’s face darkens slightly. “Even if not its all the more reason for us to press forward.”

Gregarin nods, his face darkening itself. “I know Paul. If only things were not so complicated, eh tovarisch?”

“Things have always been complicated. You’re just going to help us better understand our place in the larger scheme.” He pats his friend on the back. He knows the doubts and fears that drives him, sometimes they drive them both and all those involved in the field. He knows they must ever be kept at bay.

“Its time.” He says gently after a few minutes of silence.

“You know, I’d still be just as happy to let you take the credit.”

“And me speak to those people? No thanks. I don’t owe you that much.” M’Tonga smiles and its returned by his colleague, the man who will open the stars to humanity and it is, in essence, such a simple smile.

They walk along the side corridors feeling the slight shifting of the spinning station that helps create a sense of gravity on board. They also feel the slight tug of the low-level magnetic field that is generated throughout the station. It gives them a slight additional sense of weight through magnetic-fibers woven throughout their uniforms and specifically their boots.

“Paul?”

“Yes?”

“What do you suppose we will find out there when we finally arrive?”

Paul M’Tonga thinks a moment then smiles broader. “Whatever we find I just hope to hell its not little green men.” Both men laugh slightly as they then enter a small lift. It carries them through the station running along magnetic lines and finally comes to rest just outside the upper hub of the vast station.

The doors open and both men then step out onto a small stage that looks out to a vast chamber. Hundreds take note of the entrance: Press. Each has a small microphone wired into their collar and a small headset camera that follows their line of vision. They begin moving from the many tables dotted along the walls,

filled with finger foods, to their seats before the stage as they realize things are about to begin.

Antony Gregarin looks everywhere but at the closing throng of people who move toward the stage where he sits. He looks along the far walls, all SheerGlass, giving them a spectacular view. Around the chambers are hung dozens of flags all bearing the standard of the United Earth logo, still new enough to inspire many to stare at it for some time learning its lines and shape.

Above them a sheathe of water, filled with iron nitrate, hangs suspended, shimmering in the weightless air above. It reflects the light below giving the odd appearance of the chamber being underwater.

Finally the crowd settles and a silence descends.

Then at the back of the stage the curtains part and doors to a small, private chamber open. A single figure steps out of them and walks forward.

Gregarin recognizes him immediately and finds himself still catching his breath in this man's presence. The gathered throng leaps to their feet as the man's confident strides take him directly to the lit podium at the center of the stage. Gregarin looks at his friend as they both nearly stumble to their own feet. They had known he would be here yet still... to see him.

He is Muamar Al-Hadin, the first President of the United Earth. Every person here knows this man deserves the title more than any other who will ever bear it in the future. Why? Simply, he was instrumental in making it a reality. Al-Hadin had been the key figure that brought people to the tables of negotiation and promise. He had spearheaded the reforms and treaties that paved the way and he now stood first among all humanity striving for their own future.

This day was perhaps even more important to him and his dream than to Gregarin's. Because today, today humanity seemed one, finally, truly united.

Al-Hadin reaches the podium and begins gesturing with his hands to calm the continued applause from the standing ovation. Finally it begins to fade and he nods to the crowd who now begin to take their seats.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome. Welcome to the first day of a new age." His voice rings out over the speakers filled with strength, charisma and wisdom. Each person felt truly as if he spoke only for them. "I come before you today not as the President of the United Earth not even as a politician. No. I come before you today as a mere human. A human just like any, and indeed, all of you. I come with my own hopes and dreams, lifelong visions of a time when we as a whole would find our way to the cosmos.

"Perhaps today, more than any other, we truly stand united, one in common purpose, and common destiny. It was not too long ago that we formally united our world. But that unity was one on paper, one in theory. Today, we become one in heart. You see, today we embark on our next great journey and we do so not as myriad countries, or cultures. We do so not as men or women, black or white. We do so as human beings. We stand on the threshold of entering a community larger than any we have ever imagined, a community which will dwarf any lines of division that have ever marked us. So, now we must stand

together, one family of humankind, united. It is in this way that we should meet our destiny. So it is, that we stand proud this day, this day when we set finally into motion that which will open the stars to us and to our children.

“None of this would be possible without the tireless work of many people but above them all one shines.” The weathered face of the President then turns to Gregarin and nods. “Antony Gregarin.” He begins clapping and the sound spreads as another round of applause fills the chambers. Gregarin slowly stands and waves to the people gently as he moves forward at the President’s beckoning. “Dr. Antony Gregarin has spearheaded this project since before it was a project of United Earth. Today he will show us our road to the future. Doctor?” A strong hand extends and the nervous professor takes it in his and shakes, feeling the strength. With it comes his sense of confidence.

He looks out to the crowd that once more falls silent. “When I was a child I dreamed of one day walking among the stars.” The silence deepens. “I knew one day, no matter what, I would do just that. Ladies and Gentlemen, the dream begins to become reality today.” Gregarin gestures behind and above him.

High in the back wall a panel slides open and an extending arm reaches out from the shadows behind it bearing at its end a giant sphere of complex machinery. It moves out above the crowd who shift to get the best shot, moving around one another, gasping at the sight before them. There are whispers, cheers and hushed exaltations. Finally the arm stops. “I give you the TSP2200.” Gregarin feels his own heart race as he watches the device, in more ways, a child to him.

“The TSP2200 is, more properly, a TransSpatial Probe. It is a device that will enable us, within a mere ten years, to equip ships with faster than light travel. We will be able to move vast distances in the wink of an eye and transverse the stars, at last, the stars.” His words trail off as every face in the audience turns to him. “I am sure you would like to know how it works?” He laughs and smiles and the audience as one nods its assent. “It is quite simple really.

“Today, we will launch a hundred of these probes from the berths of this station. They will be launched in every direction, carefully, and strategically mapped to send them out into a larger sphere. Next year on this same day, we will launch a hundred more and again the next year, for the next decade. A total of one thousand probes will eventually be launched.

“Each probe will emit a steady signal of a unique wavelength of radiant energy which will essentially form a bridge between it and this station, the central hub of the network. Next year the probes we launch will then lock onto this unique band of energy and then activate, utilizing a highly advanced energy sheath which will allow them to momentarily slip out of the physical universe into transversal space. They will essentially leap to the other end of this band of energy, the position of the first wave of probes and then reflect their leap out once more, going twice as far. They will then emit the same band of energy back to the original probes.

“The third wave will then be sent, activate and leap to the end of that chain, then reflect out and so on. In essence the probes will form a latticework of this energy spanning hundreds of light years. Once the lattice is sufficient in strength and consistency, we will then be able to make the next step.

“Ships, in a mere decade, will be built which will utilize the energy sheath technology to enter transverse space and be able to leap to any triangulated point within the sphere of the probes which by that time will reach to the very edges of our Galaxy. Distances that even today are unreachable within a millennia of travel will literally be right next door.”

“Professor Gregarin?” Comes a daring voice from the crowd.

“Yes?”

“Why wait ten years? Why not sooner?”

“The probes are automated and able to make the leaps without risk to any life. We want to wait until we are sure there are sufficient probes active in space and a latticework of sufficient consistency to ensure the safe leap of a manned ship. We wouldn’t want to strand someone out there with no way to return. The ten year plan will ensure that even with failed or destroyed probes we will be able to still transverse space in any direction.”

“How exactly does the energy-lattice work?”

“Well it’s a bit complicated. Suffice it to say we discovered certain wavelengths of energy that are able to pierce the normal space-time continuum; they are an energy variant of a cosmic super string in some ways. This energy, moving at the speed of light essentially pierces space to travel instantaneously to any other source of its own energy form. The probes emit this energy wavelength and construct a ‘sheathe’ of this energy around their hulls, as will our ships. When the energy reaches a certain threshold it opens a portal through space that allows anything within the sheathe to also be instantly teleported to its source.”

“Who will be on the first manned ship?”

Gregarin smiles. “Well I fully intend to be.” The crowd laughs with him. “But that of course will remain the choice of the team at the time, a time a little premature yet. Ask me again in 2217.” Another round of laughter moves through the chambers.

Paul M’Tonga then places his hand on Gregarin’s back and steps to the podium. “That’s all the time we have for questions right now. We will take more in a few minutes but we have one piece of this presentation that is on a very tight schedule. Ladies and Gentlemen, you will want to watch the area outside this station in the next few moments.”

Antony Gregarin turns with the hundreds of others and looks out the windows that surround them. He holds his breath and then sighs with relief a moment later.

There in the darkness of the ebony sea, a hundred points of light begin moving out from them. All around, in every direction, they drift then begin making their way.

Gregarin feels tears well from his eyes as he watches. They launch out into the depths flying through the vast emptiness into the even greater depths that beckon. “Good journey.” He whispers as he watches silently for long moments. He and indeed they all watch until the points of light fade away into the darkness that lies between the stars. “Make us proud.” Antony Gregarin whispers to his children, the children of his dream from childhood, the children of his own life’s labors, the children of the stars.

Then the questions come, one after another. But this time Antony Gregarin doesn’t care, this time he enjoys each one, each comment and silently in his head he begins counting down.

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Free of want, filled with life, beckoning us  
Through ebony seas to take flight.”

*“Flight of the Revered, Norman Grant, 2112.”*

Antony Gregarin turns to his lifelong friend Paul M’Tonga and nods.

“It’s been ten years since I heard you speak those words, standing here in this same spot looking out the SheerGlass Dome.” The black man comes and stands alongside his colleague. “I seem to recall you smiled then.”

“I had more to smile about. I was still a naïve idealist who dared to think dreams came true.”

“Antony-“

“Don’t Paul, don’t try to assure me with more platitudes or empty promises. We lived in a world bright with new hope. That hope has been pretty much extinguished since the assassination of Al-Hadin and the ensuing civil wars in the mid-east. We seem on the verge of fracturing the world once more back into its little cells of racial and cultural lines that will divide us forever.”

“Antony, all things take time-“

“Shut up Paul.” The small scientist turns with anger, his face reddening. “You have plied me for years, assuring my doubts, my fears. Always with promises I can find in greeting cards. I’m sick of it.”

The other man finds himself speechless for long moments. Then. “I’m sorry.”

Antony Gregarin shakes his head and reaches out a hand. “No Paul, I’m the one to blame. I need to apologize to you. You are not to blame for the state of things; I’m just afraid I can no longer be convinced of the way you see the world.”

Long moments of silence stand between them. Finally the older man bows his head. “I’m not sure I can either Antony.”

Gregarin turns surprised. “What do you mean?”

Paul M’Tonga smiles a brief moment then it fades. “Many was the time Antony, I worked hard to convince you, before your doubts awakened my own. In assuring you, I assured myself. Now, now I don’t know.”

“It was bad enough when we were unsure how the Galactic Community would welcome us. But now in these last few years as the militant opposition to the FTL Project has grown, my God, Paul, should we even be trying when our own people don’t want us to?”

“There has long been war in that part of the world Antony. People have always insisted on seeing things very differently and, unfortunately, much of that is drawn along the lines of where we came from.”

“Does that excuse it? Or justify it?”

“I don’t know. I remember how excited the world seemed to move into this new unity; the United Earth seemed like such a wonderful realization of generations of dreams.”

“While it was new and shiny and had the luxury of not dealing with any problems yet. It was, what do you say, the Honeymoon?”

“Yes. The honeymoon.”

“But then came the actual formation of the World Council, the Distribution and Equalization Act, the new currency implementation, the myriad other acts of the newborn government, that began making it not a dream, or a shiny new flag, but instead a group exercising authority that someone, somewhere was going to always disagree with.”

“Then Black Tuesday.”

“Yes, one angry woman, one disavowed belief, one hand weapon...”

“One man dead.”

“And chaos over the entire world as everyone tried pointing fingers and blame.”

“Who knows what would have happened had she not been found.”

Gregarin looks around them. “You know there are still many who believe that she was innocent.”

“Antony!”

“You said it yourself Paul: what if there was no one to conveniently blame, no isolated individual who was insane? We both know what would have happened: The United Government would have moved against the Separatists, the Mid-east would have blamed the West on grounds they were losing their wealth and power, the West would have blamed the Mid-east based on vocal opposition to the Council...”

“Yes, you’re right Antony, everyone would have blamed everyone else and we would have fractured then, that day. That doesn’t mean the UEIA planted a scapegoat.”

Silence once more.

Gregarin laughs slightly to himself. “All of which brings us here, by whatever path, we are here nonetheless. On the day when we are supposed to fulfill that dream he spoke of ten years ago, we hide within our metal walls watching our own world with more caution than we monitor the probes themselves. Paul, what are we becoming?”

As if in answer red lights begin flashing and a siren sounds through the corridors. Then the intercom: “All personnel report to stations, repeat, all personnel report to stations. This is not a drill. We have detected incoming from the surface. Repeat: this is not a drill. We are detecting incoming from the surface, possibly an attack.”

Even before the first words begin both men run for the bridge of the station; their hearts racing from fear and concern, their doubts are now real and possibly bearing down on them to destroy them.

Moments later Antony Gregarin and Paul M’Tonga’s lift reaches the bridge and they enter amidst carefully controlled confusion as readings and systems are being operated in a flurry of activity.

Commander Brent Peterson looks over at them with a curt nod. “Gentlemen, you may wish to head to your quarters.”

“What is wrong Commander?” Gregarin walks sternly out.

“According to our readings we have several hot targets moving at us from the surface. Initial readings are linking them as surface-to-space missiles but we can’t get confirmation; they appear to have some kind of cloaking mechanism.”

“In other words Commander, we’re being fired upon?”

“Yes Professor, we’re being fired upon.”

Gregarin steps back now overwhelmed with the idea. The sounds of reports coming in blur into white noise in his mind. The flashing lights of base stations become a glittering collage in his eyes as he stares ahead at the main view screen that now shows several lights burning through the air, fire trailing them from the heat of their departure, then fading into the depths of cold space.

“My God...” He whispers. M’Tonga joins him, standing alongside, his own mind whirling with concerns. “We’re going to die Paul.”

“Not if I have a say in it.” Peterson shouts out. “Defense screens on full, engage kinetic screens, maximum, engage deflection fields, maximum.”

“Aye sir.”

Gregarin’s mind pauses long enough in its rush to remember. The deflection fields were standard to protect any space vehicle from the dangers of natural space debris. The Kinetic Screens were installed less than a year ago when the first terrorist-separatists threats were made to the station.

“Sir, we have a problem.”

“What?” The Commander turns. The two scientists also hear the urgency and turn to listen.

“The missiles are now close enough for physical readings; they seem larger than standard and their velocity is dropping to bring them below threshold.”

Gregarin turns back. Threshold. The screens acted to deflect any fast moving object headed directly at the station, not a docking vehicle or other object traveling slowly, with methodical purpose. They would not stop anything below the threshold speed.

Peterson turns as well and steps forward. “Exterior cameras, lock-on.”

“Aye.”

One does, to one of the missile shapes, that fires retros more like a craft, slows and begins turning.

“It’s not just slowing...”

“Where is this?” Peterson snaps.

“Section 24E, subsection D.”

Peterson turns back and his face whitens. “Goddamn, it’s not just slowing...it’s docking.”

Gregarin snaps to the side in surprise.

Then a portal opens on the side of the small craft and a metal tube projects out, bullet like.

The station rocks. “Report!” Peterson screams.

“Sir, we’ve just lost seals on Docking Bays 1,7, 9, 12, 14, 15 and 17.”

“Hell, those are camouflaged Strike Ships.” Peterson presses the intercom on his command chair. “All personnel, stand ready, we have been boarded by hostiles, repeat, we have been boarded by hostiles. Prepare for direct confrontation!”

“Sir, we’re getting reports of firefights starting, they’re firing on personnel Commander.”

“Weapons reading?”

Gregarin begins shaking his head.

“Bio-pulse.”

“My God.”

Bio-pulse weapons. Gregarin’s mind takes it in. Weapons designed to kill, not damage anything inorganic. They could be fired at even a thin sheet of glass and not break it but fired at a man, it tore a hole right through him.

“My God, the Ship.” Gregarin turns and runs for the lift.

“GREGARIN!” Peterson yells. “Stay here! We’ll protect you!”

But the words are unheard. Gregarin slams the lift controls up to the upper hub. The bays were all near the bottom of the station, near the engine room, defense screen systems and other core systems. They had concentrated their boarding efforts there.

The upper reaches of the station, where the final step in the FTL Project waited, was still safe. He feels the lift climb, to quickly begin reaching the top floors then he feels a rumbling. Something in his mind screams and before he realizes what he is doing he hits the floor button for the floor he comes to. The doors slide open and he steps out, just as the lift behind him then plummets. He feels a weighing down on him and he quickly unzips, pulls off his outer clothing and sheds his boots. He stumbles to the wall catching himself as he feels the cloth rip down from him. He stands trembling in his t-shirt and sweat pants and socked feet. "The Mag-generators." Of course, it was a well-orchestrated attack. They had moved straight for the magnetic generators that operated within the station and amplified their output. Normally the generators operated at low levels, creating an overall magnetic field that helped create gravity in the station by effecting the boots and uniforms of the personnel. However, in case of emergency, the output could be amplified to help maintain the hull integrity of the station. Gregarin then felt another rumble rip through the station. No doubt the lifts. In that emergency the lifts were to be sent to the core of the station and there locked down and all personnel were to shed their magnetic uniforms to prevent injury. Now, without warning, the lifts had been yanked back to the core of the station and there sealed off the central line with their explosive arrival. Worse, anyone still in their uniforms would be pinned like flies to the floors and walls of the magnetized station effectively disabling the entire crew in one fell swoop.

Gregarin catches his breath then begins running to a nearby access tunnel. He knew this station. He had spent most of the last fifteen years of his life on it.

He reaches it and climbs in. He began feeling the slightly disorienting effects of the magnetic fields, especially closed in like this. But he fights them off and continues his climb up the ladders of the tunnel.

He reaches the upper bay, slips through a venting system and then out and he is there, facing it.

"The Revered." He whispers. There before him it stands, a sleek sentinel of the space-ways, the embodiment of a dream. He finds he cannot help himself but to pause there on the edge of the launch platform to stare once more at this magnificent creation. It hardly seems his design but something planted within him by the gods.

Silver and gray it sparkles in the starlight with its new finish. Its main core edged by sleek wings projecting out at various angles, all designed to catch the energies emitted and to channel them both around the ship and out into space to disperse behind it. It stands, cross between a plane and a sailing ship of olden days, with its glimmering metallic sails. He could picture the ship itself in space, rainbows of color dancing around it from its energy sheathe.

Then another rumble shakes him from his momentary reverie and he gets up. Before he moves though, another's movement begs him pause once more. He sees another figure move from an adjoining corridor. When he sees the figure is unaccompanied he feels something he has never felt.

There, in shadows, he sees something he believes a threat. Antony Gregarin has never been a physical man. He has usually run from most confrontations of that nature, but in that moment, something, a fire, sweeps through him, something that consumes fear and self-concern in a rush of protective rage. He runs from his spot straight at the moving figure.

The figure becomes aware, a moment too late, of his attacker and half turns, just as he is tackled. Both figures lifting into the half weightless air, now controlled only by the station's movements, then thudding into the ground ten feet away.

The figure struggles, reaching up, grasping and pushing. "How the hell did you get up here so- Professor?"

Gregarin stops as he is addressed and looks down. Broken from his attempts to strike the face, he now looks at it and in a moment recognizes it. "David? David Hu-Yang? Is that you?"

"Yes, Professor, what are you doing?"

Gregarin attempts to get up, extricating himself from his former opponent. "My apologies, I saw only someone moving toward the Revered and assumed...well, I assumed you were one of the terrorists. I thought all our people would be disabled by the generators."

"I was lucky, I was actually in the shower when they hit. They took the generators before I could get dressed. When I couldn't lift my uniform off the floor where it fell, I slipped into non-regs and headed here."

"I see." Gregarin extends a hand and helps the man up. "Then, again, I apologize."

"Its alright Professor. To be honest though, I'm pretty open to suggestions right now regarding what we do next."

"I don't know." Gregarin looks around him along the walls of the vast bay designed specifically to house the Revered. There were several consoles, all designed to be emergency controls, but none for the magnetic generators. There was no way of shutting them off and without those off the majority of the crew would be helpless, spending precious time struggling to get out of clothes pinning them to the surfaces of the station, while the armed terrorists made their way through the ship.

"We probably only have another few minutes until they get here."

"Da. They would have been already had they not taken out the central core line and lifts."

"I don't understand why are they trying to take the station? Why not destroy it outright?"

"Who knows, obviously they want to save the technology, probably to twist it to their own ends. Its not the tech they opposed but our entrance into space."

“I guess it would make an ideal military weapon.”

Gregarin turns to the pilot.

“Just a thought Professor, you implied it yourself. Trust me, not my intention.”

Gregarin nods and looks once more back to the ship. “Our entrance into space...” His mind begins racing. There was only one thing to do. “We have to launch.”

“What?” Hu-Yang looks at the older man. “You’ve got to be kidding—”

“It would defeat their purpose David. They are here to stop us. We cannot stop them from reaching here, but—” Gregarin moves to one of the consoles and triggers blast doors to slide into place and lock, “in the time we have before they arrive, and get through those, we can launch the Revered.”

“And abandon everyone?”

“They are either dead or prisoners anyway. We have no weapons, no way of fighting back. Neither of us is trained in that anyway. This is what we are trained for.” He points to the sleek ship sitting unaffected by the growing tensions.

“Professor—”

“David, we need to do this. We accomplish this, we take away their very reason for the attack. Then we let the UEMC arrive and pick up the pieces.”

“But Professor, think about what you’re saying. We can’t both fit in that ship and we can’t launch it from in here without one of us being outside when the bay opens and the engines hit peak. No one could survive that.”

“I know.” Gregarin snaps. “Get into the ship David, you’re her pilot. I’m simply an old man whose vision is done, one way or the other, so today is as good as any.” He flashes a brief smile then moves to another console. “Beginning launch prep.”

“Professor—”

“GO!”

David Hu-Yang pauses another moment then turns and goes. He activates the cockpit access and climbs in then begins strapping himself in.

“David can you hear me?” a small speaker crackles into life.

“Yes, though there’s distortion—”

“The growing magnetic field effects. It will only increase as long as they are operating at maximum capacity, another reason to hurry.”

“I’m bringing systems online now.”

“Activating emergency launch systems, rerouting power to Emergency consoles.”

“Prep systems online, activating Lattice Net.”

“Confirming activation.”

“Professor—” The voice comes over the intercom with trembling.

“What?”

“Something’s wrong, the detection grid isn’t picking up anything.”

“What? That’s impossible, the entire lattice would have to fail for that—”

“But that’s what I’m getting.”

“Try to reboot it.”

“Re-booting.”

Gregarin continues to dance his fingers over the console, setting timers and settings for the bay to open in three minutes.

Then the thunder starts.

He pauses a mere moment as he hears it.

There, to his left, one bay door now has the beat of thunder behind it. “They’re at the blast doors David.”

“Reboot complete...” It is a long pause. “Professor, the grid is offline, there’s no doubt, something’s wrong.”

“IMPOSSIBLE!”

“Professor, it’s reading dead across the board.”

“One thousand probes did not go offline Mr. Hu-Yang.”

“Maybe they deactivated them from the station’s bridge.”

“Not possible, that can’t be done, the TSP are independent units, there is no master access shut down.”

“Well, I’ll be damned if I’m launching this ship into the middle of nowhere.”

Once more Gregarin’s mind fires, he feels something suddenly erupt in the darkest parts of his mind. He accesses the main timers, cuts the time in half for the bay to open to the void of space. He then hits the intercom once more as the thunder grows. “I’m coming up to check.” Gregarin then runs across the vast bay as Hu-Yang triggers the cockpit access, opening the SheerGlass.

“See for yourself Professor.” He climbs up, shifting back.

Gregarin slips into the cockpit, though having to stand due to the other’s presence and bends low to check the board.

The Lattice Detection Grid shows nothing. The screen that should show the energy curve and point modulation readings is instead dark. “I guess you’re right.” Gregarin stands up and turns. “I guess this is it.”

“What’s it Professor?”

Gregarin moves as if to speak then shoves out with all his strength and it surprises him. He strikes Hu-Yang square in the chest catching him unaware and he falls backward and topples from the ship, slamming into the metal deck below. Gregarin spins, drops into the command seat and keys the seal code. The canopy lowers quickly even as the downed pilot regains his footing and desperately clammers up. “Come on...” Gregarin grabs the canopy lip and pulls, trying to speed the process.

Gloved fingers start reaching in from outside but the final gap is reached and closes off the space as Hu-Yang decides better and pulls his arm out before it would be broken under the pneumatic pump of the canopy.

“Professor! What the hell are you doing?”

Gregarin starts initiating the engine systems. “I’m launching the Revered.”

Hu-Yang's face turns into a look of incredible desperation and panic. "Professor, I'll die out here."

"And if you're telling me the truth, I'll die in here, so, sorry, but it's the only chance I can think of."

"What do you mean IF I'm telling you the truth? Why the hell would I lie? Why would I not launch if I could? Save my own skin in the process?" He pounds in vain on the canopy designed to withstand the depths of space.

"Couple things that struck me David. I had time to almost reach the upper levels of this station from the time the attack began until the generators cut in." Gregarin talks, but looks at the system boards in front of him, bringing online the systems in the final seconds he knows before the bay doors open. "That's an awful long time for you to get out of the shower and still not be dressed."

"What?"

"That plus, the Lattice Network, even if fully disabled, would still show a degrading trace curve of the energies; meaning, it being completely dark could only mean the detection grid has been sabotaged. You're the only other one up here."

The ranting grows quiet.

Gregarin looks up and sees Hu-Yang gone. He turns and sees him racing for the console. "I locked them David. I'm sorry, truly I am sorry, but I believe you're a Separatist, that you are a saboteur. I have no choice."

Hu-Yang spins in mid-stride. "Is this so important to you Gregarin? So important that it's worth a man's life?" He screams.

Gregarin looks out for a long moment as he feels the engines surge with growing power. "I'm- Yes, I'm afraid it is."

On cue the Bay doors open and explosive de-compression sweeps through the Bay. Hu-Yang tries to run once more but stops, falls, then is swept up, grasping at his throat, his eyes bulging from the incoming vacuum as his tongue begins swelling.

Gregarin engages the side engines and feels the clamps release as the Revered takes its flight at long last. It hovers on the bay and begins slowly moving out.

He primes the Energy Sheathe and punches in the planned coordinate codes to the navigation matrix. "Let's hope you didn't have time to actually sabotage anything else. I'm already flying blind."

The Revered then moves out of the bay and Gregarin looks up once more before he knows his focus will have to be on flying. He watches in horror as Hu-Yang's body bloats and then explodes in space.

Gregarin bites his lip. He notes that the blood is not red.

He then turns his attention to the flight board and navigates out. He sees the fires bleeding off interior oxygen from the station as it whirls in its eternal dance behind him. He handles the controls with ease. He had, after all designed them.

The Revered moves out of range of the station. He sees the strike ships; two of them begin to break off from the station.

“They anticipated me.” They were coming for him; he knew this. But they would never reach him. Dead or alive, they would not reach him.

The Revered moved out of orbit into true space. He then bent his head for a silent moment. “God, if you exist, please, I beg you, let me be among the stars.” Then Antony Gregarin made the most powerful decision of his five and half decade life: he pressed the Sheath Activator.

He then leans back and watches the flash of light at the front nacelle. It grows washing back over him taking on rainbow hues that dance over the canopy. Then in a moment, space before him peels away into a rainbow collage of light that swirls in a miasma of brilliance before his blinded eyes.

Long moments, seeming an eternity to Gregarin, pass. The motion of the ship stops, the rumble within it stops and Gregarin feels the light on his closed eyelids lower in intensity.

A beep from the console registers that the jump has been made. Antony Gregarin is afraid to open his eyes. He is afraid of what he will see, or perhaps, more accurately what he will not see.

Then, slowly, at last, he does open the lids that block his view. His eyes water, he rubs them anxiously, then slowly lowers his hands and looks out.

“My God.” He whispers.

It is not the new starscape that brings this whisper from him. He knows in a moment these stars are not the ones he saw from his own world, not at the angle he now is.

No, instead it is the vast vision that hovers directly before him. It seems made of pure crystal, filled with light, bolts of lightning seeming to run through it, intensely bright spheres at the ends of the longest projections.

Then he sees to either side other sights that make him tremble somewhat. They are more recognizable. They are ships. Not human. They are huge, shaped different than anything he had ever seen, and they are gathered. Over a dozen float in the vastness, each unique, each...alien, to him and to each other.

His intercom beeps.

He slowly, hesitantly reaches out, touches the switch, and then pulls his hand back and just stares out before him.

Long moments pass.

“Welcome.” The word is distorted, almost as if sung underwater.

Long moments pass once more as Gregarin finds himself unable to speak.

“Are you well? Were you injured? Please respond.” The distortions seem to clear somewhat.

“I-I’m fine.”

“Forgiveness, we thought perhaps you could not respond.”

Gregarin finds his awe broken somewhat by the misspoken word.

“What are you doing here? Who are you?”

Longer moments filled with static and buzzing.

“We are your ... Reception Committee.”

“What?”

“We are of the Xyverni. We are among the most ancient of life in this sector of space, the Elder of this sector. As has been the tradition of the space faring community, we watched your world, knew it stood upon the brink of entering the vaster community beyond it, and we waited and prepared.”

“Prepared what?”

“To greet you in welcoming.”

“What does this mean? Just to greet us?” Gregarin found his heart racing; his sweat ran from his brow.

“Yes.”

“That seems like such a small thing to do. Why would it require so many ships?”

“This is not a small thing.”

“Saying hello?” Gregarin half laughs, amazed he can still speak, driven near to madness as the repercussions of the day seem to finally threaten to overwhelm him.

“This is the first moment, for your species, the first moment here, among the stars.”

Gregarin listened and took a deep breath.

“This is the moment.”

“What moment?”

“When you, your world, and all of us beyond your world shall change forever. All because of this moment, right now.”

Gregarin breathed deeply and closed his eyes a moment. He then found a smile spreading on his lips.

The Xyverni, whoever they were, were right. This was that moment. Nothing would ever be the same again.

## The End