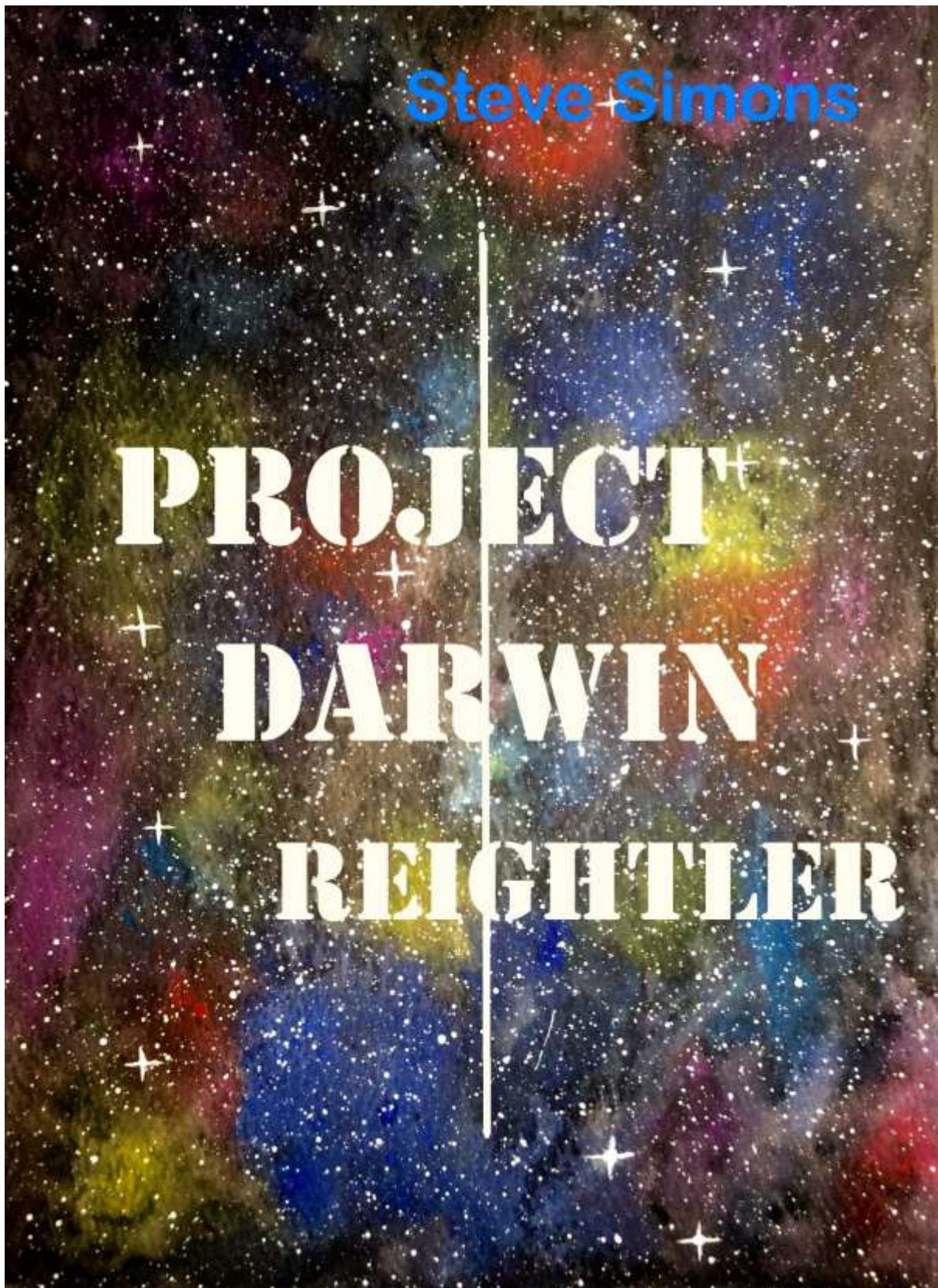


Project Darwin-Reightler



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Foreword

It is best to LEARN from the past, so you can make sure that you don't make the same mistakes again, but sometimes your hands are so tied that those around you will not let you follow this instinct to avoid mistakes.

Who kicks the hardest when things go wrong, them or you?

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Chapter 1 – The Trigger

Finally it had come. I did not think he would actually pull it off. What am I talking about? He still might not, looking at the security people, they do not seem to be too impressed with Jake's paperwork. Jake told me, that it was all sorted, before we set off. It sure does not seem very sorted to me now. This lot, did not seem to be expecting us at all.

A new person has just entered the glass inner office, this guy seems to have more coloured stripes and brass on his jacket, than all the others put together, probably the big wig of this place.

A lump rises in my throat, what if Jake is bluffing and he has not cleared anything at all, we could be in serious trouble.

To see the exterior of this base, you'd think that the only thing worth stealing here, are the security guard's weapons. Yet clearly the latest person in the glass room, holds a great deal of importance and power; so not your usual, out of the way, in the middle of nowhere, base commander. At least Jake seems to be right about the importance of what is kept here.

Oh no, here it comes; they all look up at the same time and they look straight at us. Their faces as devoid of any emotion, just like one of those manikins in a shop window. It all reminds me of my early days in the Royal Air Force. I had the same butterflies in the stomach then.

The man with the stripes and brass, strides out of the glass office, with clear purpose, heading straight towards us. I just hope his purpose won't end up with us being taken away by the military police or something worse.

When I think back to yesterday and Jake saying that we would be coming here, I was so excited about it; now I'm so worried, that I could throttle Jake, for even suggesting it.

I glance at Jake, sitting there in his uniform, looking like one of them, he doesn't seem to be in the least worried, he is either as cool as a cucumber, or is a darned good actor.

Jake stands.

My eyes shift back to the advancing stripes and brass. I quickly stand and almost fall over, in the effort to catch up with Jake. Stripes and Brass, still shows no emotion on his face. I just hope that my fear doesn't show. Although if it does, it may encourage stripes and brass to show some sort of emotion, even if it is anger, at least I'd have some idea what is coming.

The sudden movement of Stripes and Brass throwing up a salute, makes me involuntarily start to throw one up in return, then I remember that I'm no longer in the military service, let alone theirs. Stripes and Brass drops his arm and says, "At ease. Your paperwork is somewhat irregular; A telephone call would have been appreciated, but however, I recognise the importance of your mission."

To which Jake replies, "Actually Sir I did call yesterday and spoke to someone in your office who had promised to pass my message onto you, on your return."

"In that case, apologies are in order." says Stripes and Brass, then continues, "I have arranged an escort for you, should be here shortly."

I catch movement out of the corner of my eye, as Jake turns to me and says, "Commander Hostien, may I introduce you to Daniel Grant, the Captain of our mission."

'Captain', I am still trying to get used to the title. I still think it would have been better to make me some sort of mission specialist. Especially as I never reached any real rank in the RAF, well at least not one worth bragging about; I feel a right fraud at taking the title of Captain.

The Commander holds out his hand and I shake it. He takes me by surprise as he asks, "Were you in the forces Captain Grant? Only I could not help, but notice you started to throw up a salute."

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I decide not to embarrass myself any further than to say, "Yes Commander, I was in the R.A.F."

"Ah the Royal Air Force, I have a lot of respect for you guys. Good to meet you. I hope your visit here lives up to your expectations, I will warn you it is quite old now and despite our best efforts, it is deteriorating quite a lot. Ah here is your escort. Enjoy your visit." The commander shakes my hand again and then throws up another salute to Jake and then another to me.

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So many doors and guards, you would think it was the crown jewels, or bars of gold at Fort Knox. Mind you, this sort of knowledge, is just as precious, even with Freedom of Information, they dare not let the people know that they have had this as long as they have.

Finally, here I am and I get to see it.

The last door looks no different to all the others, but as soon as it opens, I know that this has to be it. The amount of space the other side of the doorway, seems immense, totally at odds with everything I have seen to this point.

At first there are quite low levels of light, then flashes, almost like lightning.

Suddenly.... I can see it..... to the right.

We are invited by the guard to enter.

The first thing to strike me, apart from the brightness of the lighting, is how small it appears, in comparison to the vastness of the room, in which it is housed. To think it has been here just over 80 years. During that time, on and off, it has been surrounded and crawled over by technicians and scientists, exploring every centimetre of it.

"Well here it is, what do you think?" Jake asks.

"It seems a lot smaller than I expected."

"I know what you mean, it is the size of the room that does it. The last time I was here, it was surrounded by equipment and people galore darting about it." Jake replies.

"When was that?"

"About five years ago, when our project was kicked off." Jake's head scans the room, as if he were seeing the room as it was then.

Although smaller than I expected, it certainly lives up to my expectation of having the classic saucer shape, although I was not expecting to see so many things sticking out of it. Some I can recognise as being things like aerials, whilst others, I have no clue as to what purpose they could serve. As we walk up to it I can see that the exterior, whilst initially it seems to be quite smooth and shiny, the ravages of being taken apart and then being re-assembled so many times by the technicians and also damage due to the passing of time and natural deterioration, if you can call it natural, in the case of an alien craft.

As we get closer still, I can see to the left and to the rear of the craft, there is a slope leading up to the craft's interior. I set off in the opposite direction. Jake asks, "Don't you want to see the inside?"

"Yes, but I want to examine the outside first, it'll give me a better feel for the size of this thing." I look at Jake's face and it shows the surprise, that I had expected to see. I continue, "Already I have noted the lack of control surfaces."

"Good point" Jake replies, smiling, then continues, "They are there, but you just can't see them. The technology is so totally different to what we are used to. That was the problem, you see, for years it was like a caveman trying to make sense of a Light Emitting Diode torch, when all he'd encountered was natural light and fire. Then suddenly, our technology and knowledge caught up. It

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took us several return visits before, eventually the dime dropped and we started to understand what we were looking at and had some notion, finally, as to how it worked. Of course by the time we finally figured it out, the craft was too deteriorated, for us to try and fly it for real. We had to simulate it all, in computer models, then build our own replicas and test those out.”

“Yes, yes, I read the reports. I know about the failures and successes. I just cannot believe that we are actually here and I can touch the original for myself.”

Jake, having caught up with me now, stands before me and looks straight into my eyes. “You can imagine now how I felt when I first saw it, surrounded by all the technicians and scientists. The buzz was something, I can assure you. Seems more like a museum piece now, in this sterile environment.”

We walk on round the craft, noting each change in the body shape, Jake explains the appendages that he knows the purpose of. I marvel at the mechanism of the legs that hold this thing up. They look more organic, like the legs of a creature, than something that has been manufactured. They remind me of sculpture at an art exhibit, fashioned from metal, as if a replica of some alien creature. I muse, as I try to work out how the leg folded up into the obvious hole above, that must have been intended as the normal home of this device. My mind doing some image manipulation, as I work out which bit moved in what direction, also as I try to figure out how the whole thing is driven and powered. That was just the legs!

As we move further round I peer up into the odd shaped holes above me, some man made, others, through the ravages of time. I try to make out what lies above, beyond the opening, in some cases my task is easier, where there is an opening on the other side and the interior lighting shines through clearly illuminating what lies beyond. Other times, it is so dark and mysterious, like a faded and dusty painting, only revealing the bare minimum.

Soon we have completed the circuit and find ourselves standing beside the slope leading up into the belly of the craft. It is well lit inside and seems inviting, almost as if there were a neon sign, saying come on up, you are most welcome.

Jake waves me on.

Nervously, I step onto the slope, grabbing the ropes that hang loosely down the sides. Whilst not providing any real support, the ropes are somewhat reassuring, as if setting the boundaries and ensuring that I cannot fall off the ramp. My head rises into the craft itself and I am greeted by an open area to either side. It is as if I were stepping up onto the deck of an aircraft carrier. In front of me is a plain blank wall and to the right is an opening, leading to some sort of corridor. Immediately to my right is what looks like a large round vertical cylinder. As I rise up further, I can see on top of the cylinder are some strange symbols that form a circle, surrounding a sort opaque panel. As I look up I can see some sort of mechanism fastened to the ceiling and hanging down from it, is what seems to be a hook. So this probably acted like a crane and the chamber I am in was some sort of loading bay.

Jake has caught up with me and takes me somewhat by surprise as he says, “They found several containers in here, but were unable to make sense of their contents, although some seemed to be liquids, but despite chemical analysis, they were unable to figure out what the liquids were or what purpose they were intended for.”

I point to the cylinder. Jake simply replies, “Yeah you've probably already worked out controls for the slope, under craft weapons and the lifting gear above.”

“Weapons?”

“Yes, but they never found out what they were capable of or how they worked. Unfortunately by the time our guys got hold of them, the previous generations of technicians had all but destroyed them.” Jake shrugs, then points to the entrance to the right.

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I walk on through the gap and sure enough there is a corridor, it is quite dark, although there is some light at the end of the tunnel, so to speak.

I am making good progress, when suddenly I hear Jake say, "By all accounts, in the room to the left, the first intrepid explorers of this craft came across the last living alien. It managed to kill the first explorer before it was pinned down and disarmed. Apparently, the alien died a couple of days later. They couldn't get the weapon to fire again and although for years there were signs of an energy signature, the scientists and techies were not able to find out quite what it was, by the time we got hold of it, there were no traces, it was just a collection of decaying components."

"I wonder what the aliens looked like?"

Jake smiles, "Still classified I am afraid, even I don't know the answer to that one."

The room that Jake had mentioned, whilst quite dark, seems to be totally empty. No sign now of the 'last alien's stand'. I reach the bend in the corridor and it is light again. Before me are several choices, doors leading off to the left and the right and straight ahead a semi-circular tube leading up to the floor above. A ladder has been 'inserted' into the area and seems somewhat out of place, without it, there seems to be no way of getting to the floor above. Ignoring the doors to either side I head straight for the tube, half expecting Jake to call me back, so he can pass on some information about the other doorways. I am pleased that no such appeal comes from Jake.

I reach the tube area and examine the walls and floor for any signs that indicate how ascent and descent was achieved, but there are no such signs. The floor is perfectly level and there are no markings on the walls, apart from the anchor points that the technicians installed in order to secure the ladder.

I look straight up and am greeted by a wall looking identical to the one before me. I spin round and I see things like a seat and another circular console like the one at the entrance.

As I look back down, I see Jake is standing right in front of me. He says, "Want to pop -up and take a look around?"

I spin round again and carefully climb the ladder, ease myself up onto the floor above. As I gently turn round, I am surprised to see that it is all open plan. There are three more work stations like the one in front of me. They are not as tall as the one below and have opaque panels on top. Then along the walls are what look like boxes jutting out. They remind me of window flower beds.

Jake grunts as he finishes the climb and transfers himself onto the floor. "Yeah, mystified me also, if you are looking at the wall boxes, turns out they are beds. Apparently they were originally covered by some sort of material, but that disintegrated long ago, the scientists think that our atmosphere was the cause. You noticed it yet?"

"Noticed what?" I ask, taking a more detailed look around me. First scanning floor level, then higher up. It suddenly strikes me and I reply, "There is no window, no windows at all."

"You are good, it took me a lot longer."

"I suppose it's the pilot in me, you have to see where you are going, although you can fly on some sort of heads-up, you wouldn't want to do it all the time."

Jake nods and replies, "Yet apparently that is precisely what this lot did, strange isn't it?"

"I am just glad that in our version of this craft, we didn't follow the design to the letter."

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Chapter 2 – Old Friend, New Ally

It feels quite weird sat here in the waiting room of Virgin Galactic and knowing that the next person who walks through the door is highly likely to be another member of my crew. I have introduced myself to two strangers already, we did the standard spiel of “I am...”, “I have been recruited to do.....” and “I am interested in....”, break the ice thing, then ran out of things to talk about as we wait and wonder just who is going to be next through the door and what have they been brought onto the team to do.

I said to mission control ages ago, that it would be a good idea for the crew to meet up socially before we are going up to the ship. Did they listen? Well as you have gathered, obviously not. This is embarrassing to say the least. The crews of the Orion missions, the shuttles and before that Apollo, worked with each other for months, if not years before going on a mission. But hey, this is 2030, why should we do things the same way as they used to? It's even different, in the fact that the service that is taking us up, is basically a charter flight, hired specially for the job. Mission control hasn't even got their own craft to take us up, they have to hire one.

I will be really glad when Jake and Ches arrive, at least I will know them. I have flown several weightless adaptation flights with them, in preparation for this flight and for the mission as a whole. Ches even barfed up all over me, you can't get more acquainted than that. Well maybe you can, but you know what I mean, it makes you drop all pretence and artificial airs and graces. It is such a shame that Jake won't be coming up with us, he'd be a good person to have around. It would certainly put my nerves at ease. Chesney is alright, well better than alright, she's quite attractive actually, but not my type, a tad too loud and outspoken for my liking. She is a good laugh though and knows how to let down her hair.

Well as I live and breathe! I cannot believe it, through the door has just walked Parry, surely he is not coming with us? Perhaps he's part of this Virgin Galactic crew. Lewis Parry, was a flight engineer, the best that I had known, for sure. Wouldn't surprise me if this lot had snapped him up. Yet, he isn't in the usual Virgin uniform, perhaps it's his day off, or maybe he's just clocking off.

Lewis strolls straight over to me and in his distinctly yorkshire accent, says, “I couldn't believe it when letter said report to you, thought there couldn't be two Dan Grants.”

We shake hands and I ask, “So you're.... you're coming along too?”

“Why don't you want me along? I trained bloody 'ard on this new kit too.” Lewis replies.

I smile, “Delighted to have you on-board Lewis, you have just made my day.” I then remember the other two in the room and realise that my statement sounds as though I was really disappointed that they were in the crew. I turn to them and say, “This guy, more like reprobate..”

Lewis interrupts with, “Hey steady, I have reputation to maintain you know.”

“Sorry, this excuse for a human being, is that better?”

“Much.” nods Lewis.

“This is Lewis Parry, we worked together in the Royal Air Force, Lewis is one of the best flight engineers I know.”

“What? I have been demoted, you used to say, THE best.” Lewis protests.

“Lewis this is Mi-ing Chesterton, one of navigation team.” The petite lady with black hair, fair complexion, bright red lipstick and rather stylish, yet plain clothes, blushes to match her lipstick. Mi-ing nods at Lewis. Lewis smiles and nods back. I resume, “This is Chuck Hagel, chief of security.”

Lewis extends his hand towards Chuck and says, “Pleased to meet you Chuck, ex marines?”

Chuck's arm stays by his side as he suspiciously asks, “Why yeah, how d'you know?”

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“The tattoo, seen a few like it in my time. I did a mission a while back delivering some of your chaps and most had the same tattoo.” The two men shake hands, then Lewis asks, “How many more of us going up then?”

“Three, I think as there are supposed to be six, on this trip at least.” I reply.

The door opens and in walks a tall lady, short skirt, high heels and a designer tee shirt with some slogan on it that due to the text style I can't quite understand. She has long flowing blonde hair, her make-up is quite, what can I say, quite colourful and bold. She is carrying a rather fancy pink shiny bag that looks like it is stuffed to bursting. She looks up and asks, “Grant? I was told to ask for Grant.”

“And you would be?” I ask.

“Depends who is asking.” She laughs.

“Well in this case it is Captain Daniel Grant”

“Oh I thought Grant was your first name! Hi I'm Jasmine Wiesher, reporting for duty or whatever you guys say.”

“No problem, I get that a lot. Hello Jasmine, I believe you are our Doctor?”

“Medic, I prefer medic, although technically you are correct I am a qualified Doctor.” Jasmine smiles, a friendly smile rather than a triumphant one.

It is my turn to blush and I can see Lewis is finding it highly amusing. Trying to recover my dignity I say, “I hope you have brought some sensible shoes with you.”

“You sound like my father. Of course I have, they are in the bag, these are just my walking out shoes.”

I resist any temptation to reply, I know it will get me into further bother. Instead I remark, “Alright then, just one more person to come.”

Just then the steward re-emerges, appearing at the desk and asks if we are all here. I tell him that there is just one more person to arrive, when the door swings wide open with a bang against the back stop and in walks Chesney, dressed in tight jeans and a tea shirt with a slogan that I wish I hadn't read, it was just too rude and suggestive and typical of Chesney's take me or leave me alone attitude.

“Hi everyone I'm Chesney Walsh.”

I launch into the formal introductions and before I have finished, in walks Jake with some guy dressed so smart and with a peak cap, that it reminds me of the RAF.

Jake nods at me in acknowledgement, I recognising that he's about to speak, finish what I was saying, then nod back to Jake, he smiles and says, “Hi everyone, this is Captain Morris, he will be taking you up to the ship.”

“Shame he isn't going to fly us up too.” says Chesney.

Jake replies, “Well I guess it is your lucky day Miss, because Captain Morris is going to fly the Virgin Galactic vessel Star Reacher up to our ship The Darwin-Reightler”

Captain Morris shows no emotion, but continues to smile at the assembled group. Whilst Chesney asks, “Why didn't we get a ship named something exciting like Star Reacher?”

I didn't think it could be possible, but Captain Morris's smile becomes ever wider. Jake feeling he has to defend our craft, explains, “Ours was named after the famous explorer and scientist, Charles Darwin and Kurtis Reightler, who discovered the drive that powers our ship.”

I wonder what I have got myself into.

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Chapter 3 – All Aboard

It seemed strange, docking with our new craft, our nose pointing straight up into space and our tail end pointing to the earth. It had to be this way, so that the wings of the Star Reacher did not touch the Darwin-Reightler, or the DRC as I have now fondly grown to know her as. It was the project team that first started referring to the craft as DRC, I saw the initials on drawings and other documents, so DRC has now stuck in my brain.

I am totally disoriented at first as I enter the DRC, for it appears as if I have entered sideways, there being no floor to step onto. Although being weightless, it shouldn't really matter.

When I get my bearings sorted, I notice that the interior of the DRC is pretty much how the artist's impression portrayed it. In front of me is a strip of walkway, which is a dark grey, to distinguish it from the walls either side of it. The walkway runs right the way up and down the craft, every so often the walkway is interrupted by a doorway. As I look down I can see it is mirrored by a similar walkway on the opposite wall. The green and blue patterned walls are very attractive and actually look a lot better than they did on the artists drawing.

Once I have figured out where the handrails are, I find I can pull myself round. So that now I am facing the same way as Chesney who had left the Virgin craft just before I did. There floating in front of us, are two of the crew, already aboard.

One of guys pulls himself towards me and extends a hand, "Hi Captain, welcome aboard, I'm Zander, Zander Erdington."

I extend my hand and Zander gives it a firm shake, luckily I am still holding onto the rail with the other, otherwise I would have shot across the corridor, into an uncontrollable spin.

"Daniel, call me Daniel, I am still trying to get used to the title. Nice to meet you at last, I know we met over web conference, but it's not the same as meeting face to face. This is Chesney Walsh, Navigation."

"Hi, welcome aboard, at last we will have someone who knows how to steer this thing." replies Zander.

Chesney, seems somewhat subdued as she says her hellos.

Zander points towards the other crew member, who is just behind him, "This is Carson Machin, Security, he was keen to come down and meet up with you folks. Hey that sounds bad I know, makes it sound like the others didn't want to. It's just that they are all still busy getting ready for the big push, we're just installing the final bits of kit and it's all hands..."

"No problem, it was good of you two to come down to meet us, I was not expecting a greeting party anyway." Nice to meet you Carson, I have your boss with us, Chuck Hagel."

"Heck yes, I saw Chuck only last week."

With that, the familiar voice of Chuck is heard just behind me, as he says, "Hi again Carson, how you been enjoying it up here?"

"Hi ya Chuck, yeah it's been great working with Zander and crew. Feels like a home from home here now."

Chuck grinning from ear to ear asks, "How's Brooke settling in?"

"You know Brooke, never happier than..." the latter part said in unison between Chuck and Carson, "...when there is something to complain about."

"Yep, that sounds like Brooke. What is it this time?" Chuck asks.

"Just space sickness."

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Zander, having decided that enough time has been spent on the catch up says, "Well folks if you would like to follow us we will show you to your cabins and you can get settled in." Zander turns to me and says, "I suppose you know your way around this beauty with your eyes shut by now Daniel."

"I suppose I do really, but only by way of the plans, and having seen the framework during construction. I am looking forward to seeing if it matches up to the artists renditions."

"The entrance lock is pretty close to the drawings, eh?" Zander asks.

"Yes remarkably."

"Well prepare to be amazed, the rest doesn't. The panel makers went a little wild with their creativity, but in a good way I assure you. I'll get this lot settled and perhaps we can meet up in Rec three a little later?"

"That reminds me what time are you operating on up here?"

"Don't worry your c-pack will have automatically updated, when you came aboard."

I grab the glasses out of my pocket, put them on and sure enough the time display at the bottom right of the display had leapt forward by a couple of hours at least. "How to shorten someone's day without them noticing."

"Oh darn it I forgot to put mine on, that isn't a punishable is it Dan?" Chesney asks.

I smile as I reply, "It would be if you reported for duty without your c-pack". Then as I glance back up the corridor towards the airlock, I am reminded by the three people who have emerged from the Star Reacher, that when it comes to duty, I am negligent. "Oh I have not introduced you to Ming Chesterton, also Navigation, Jasmin Weisher our medic and Lewis, of course you know."

The handshakes take place, then Zander says, "If it is OK with you, we were planning on having a proper meet and greet, so that all the crew can get to meet up and chat. We were thinking that Rec one at twenty hundred would be a suitable time, thought we could combine a meal slot at the same time, although for some it will be evening meal and for others breakfast."

"You have shifts already in place, I am impressed. Yes that sounds good to me, I will wander off and leave you to the settling in and might get a chance to do some meeting and greeting of my own as I check this beauty out."

"OK Captain." says Zander and throws up a salute.

"Hey no need for that, we're not in the military. Catch you in about an hour, in Rec three, did you say?"

"Yes Captain." I am pleased to see that Zander issues no salute this time. I pull myself against the tide of people in the corridor, back towards the air lock.

"Don't worry Captain your baggage will be taken care of." Says Carson.

"Oh I just wanted to thank Captain Morris and Harry, er, the co-pilot, for a safe journey up here." As I say that, I can see Captain Morris and Harry inside the Star Reacher, they are getting the baggage out of the holding compartment at the back. I step inside, they both look up, quite startled to see someone coming back into the craft.

Captain Morris says, "Caught us hard at work."

I thank them both for the journey up and Captain Morris says, "Our pleasure. Wonderful craft you have here Captain, any chance of a quick look around? I did not dare to ask last time we came up, they seemed too busy to disturb them."

"No problem, I can take you for a quick tour, would you like to come along Harry?"

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Harry puts down the last two cases and looks across, "Sorry I was not paying attention, what was that?"

"Would you like a tour of our craft?"

"Well if it is no trouble sir, I would love to see it."

I help them carry the bags out to the corridor, we deposit them, well more like, let them float around. The crew have all disappeared now, so the corridor is ours. I suspect Zander has taken the crew up the corridor so I point in the opposite direction, "Let's go this way. We are now on the Engineering deck." Just then we pass a sign that says '2 Eng' and I point to it. "This deck also houses our medical facility and storage."

The corridor bends to the right and we pass a doorway marked 'E>6' and Captain Morris asks, "Oh is that engineering?"

"No it is one of our escape pods, we have them dotted around the craft at random intervals. That way if a whole segment of the craft is damaged, we have plenty of other pods to count on."

"Clever idea. Someone has put in a great deal of thought into the design of this craft."

"I have been told that it was a massive design team, with a lot of creative ideas being thrown around amongst the groups."

"It shows."

The corridor swings back to the left and we resume the gentle right hand swing again, with a door way ahead to the left, as we approach the door we can see that it is simply marked '2H'.

Harry comments, "I see no expense has been spared in labelling up the doors."

"Oh yes, that is the hospital unit. The labelling quite amused me, apparently it saves having signs in multiple languages, yet all of our crew can read English. There is a more detailed floor plan on the comms system, that authorised visitors and crew can access on their c-packs."

"See Pax, what is that?" Harry asks.

I point to the device on my belt. "C-Pack, this is our communications and control interface device. We use them to do nearly everything aboard this craft."

"How can you do all that on such a small screen?" Harry asks.

"That is the clever part, the display is built into these glasses, they provide us with a 3-D heads up display."

Captain Morris rather excitedly says, "Oh yes I have heard of those. They are interactive aren't they?"

"Yes you are right, no need for touch screen, buttons or anything else really. The display is adaptive, so if you need the sort of control that a joystick used to give, the display will react accordingly, giving you a 3-D interaction, whereas if you simply want to turn down the volume, you get a flat slider."

Harry says, "Clever stuff, we have something similar in our craft, the system knows relative position of your hand, but the feedback screen whilst 3-D is flat and it is difficult to really imagine you are interacting with it."

"Yes I know the system, I used it in the earlier simulators for this craft, but it was deemed as not being portable enough for our purposes. Although we have specific work areas, in theory I can fly this craft from anywhere within it, I don't even need to be on the bridge."

"That is a case of welcome to the future, it revolutionises our job."

"It certainly does and means I have more time to deal with the people and decision making

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aspects of my job. In fact it frees up time for all the crew, with the exception of Engineering I suppose, as that is still pretty much hands on.”

“You could almost have a large lounge and all work from there?” Harry asks.

“True, apparently it was a psychological thing. It was thought that we would perform best if we have specific work stations. Although there will be times and situations when we all come together and work in one room, if the need arises. It is all about fluid teams, but also having comfort zones. A bit complicated for the likes of me to fully understand it all.”

“Sounds it.” Mutters Captain Morris, “Sorry no offence meant to you, just I sympathise, I would have the same difficulty getting my head round it all.”

“No offence taken, I can assure you. Shall we move on?”

“Yes.” replies Captain Morris.

We walk on round, the right hand bend becomes somewhat more pronounced. Then we encounter a corridor leading off to the left, I pause for a bit as I explain, “Storage area and some of the accommodation, we will cut through here, if we had carried on down the corridor we would only have encountered a door marked '2E'.”

“Engineering?” volunteers Harry.

“Spot on. There is also some more storage. Shall we?” I point down the corridor to the right. We push on and half way down the corridor we encounter our first stairway. We stop and look up, the airlock above, is closed. “We keep these closed, just in case there is a breach in any part of the craft. It leads to the next deck.”

We carry on down the corridor and encounter another bay similar to the previous stairway, this time without a ladder on the wall, just an arrow pointing downwards and another sealed hatch. “Right shall we go down?”

Without waiting for a reply I open the hatch and lift it. The circular hole exposes the ladder leading to the deck below. “Would you like to go down first, then I can seal the hatch?”

The corridor on this deck heads off in a completely different direction.

Captain Morris says, “This is confusing.” He points up and down the new corridor, indicating the change in direction.

“Yes it is, apparently adds to the security of the structure to not have the corridors running in the same direction and directly above each other.”

“Wow they have thought this thing through really thoroughly.”

“Yes, I just hope there are no parallels between this craft and the Titanic, the one that was described as, unsinkable.”

After a short silence, Captain Morris laughs and says “That would be embarrassing, if this went down, so to speak, on its maiden voyage.”

“It would at that.”

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Chapter 4 – Best Made Plans

The tour completed, we have returned to the airlock that we first entered the DRC through. The airlock is now closed, but we are reassured from the view through the porthole, that the Star Reacher, is still awaiting the return of its crew. The corridor is clear of cases now.

Captain Morris stops as he reaches the airlock door, “Well I must say I am really impressed with your craft captain. I have to say I really like those circular control stations on the bridge. I cannot say that I would be entirely comfortable controlling a craft from such an unconventional set-up, but I suppose it is all the years of conventional flight.”

I reply, “Yes I think it will take a fair bit of getting used to it myself. You cannot beat the reassurance of a conventional cockpit. Still new challenges, new ways of working, I suppose.”

We say our goodbyes and I am thanked for the tour, Harry and Captain Morris step inside their craft and seal the airlock. I glance at the clock in the corner of my eye and realise that I am already late for my meeting with Zander. I am torn between waiting here and watching the Virgin craft depart or darting off for the meeting.

Conveniently a member of our crew is coming down the corridor. I introduce myself and she responds, “Yes I know Captain, I am Brooke Cooper, I know every face and name on this craft, it is my duty to know them, I am security. Are you lost or in trouble?”

“Er.... no, neither really, it is just that I have to be in a meeting, but I also need to ensure that this craft gets away safely.”

“No problem sir, part of my duties, I will monitor the departure. If there are any issues, can I call you sir?”

“Er.... yes, yes of course.” I know that being ex-military I should be used to this sort of response, but I find it somewhat strange. Perhaps I have become too informal over the period since I left the military, almost like a rebellion on my part. “Thank you Brooke for your assistance, I had best...”

“Fine sir.” Brooke salutes me and I automatically throw one up in return. Good job I was still holding onto the guide rail.

I turn and head off in the direction of the nearest airlock that will take me up to deck 3.

As I pull myself rapidly down the corridor, doing the hand over hand motion, gripping and releasing the guide rail that runs down the side, I think two things: firstly how ridiculous this method of travel must look; and secondly, I recall the earlier conversation that Chuck and.... what was his name? Oh yes Carson, were having about Brooke. Their description of Brooke being someone who always complained, did not fit the encounter that I just had.

Being used to not encountering anyone, it comes as a complete shock, when I reach the airlock leading to deck 4. I am about to start turning the wheel to unlock the hatch, when I feel the hatch being lifted. I am not quite sure what I should do, hold on or let go. I opt to let go. The hatch opens and there is suddenly a scream, a woman's scream. There above me is a face with long black hair sticking out in all directions either side. The face staring down at me and..... screaming. She stops as suddenly as she started and says, “Bloody hell what are you trying to do to me, give me a heart attack or something. If this is your idea of a joke it isn't.”

The accent quite strong, but from where alludes me for a moment, probably the shock of being screamed at. Then suddenly it dawns on me, the accent, it is Australian.

The face slips from view and starts to re-appear, as whoever it is, stands up, she resumes, “Sorry mate but you didn't half give me a fright there. Never expected anyone to be waiting, which is a bit stupid really, after all, what are these things for, but to get from one level to the next. I didn't

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mean to scream at you like that. Here do you want to come up, while I get my breath back?"

"Er, yes alright, thanks. I didn't mean to scare you like that, just as much of a shock for me. I can assure you."

"Yeah but at least you didn't scream your head off, I'm so sorry, what you must think of me. Oh I'm Kayla, Kayla Hollis. She holds out a hand.

I climb up and gently shake her hand, "Pleased to meet you, well at least I am now, that I have recovered from the shock of being screamed at. I am Daniel Grant."

"Oh my gawd, not THE Captain, Daniel Grant? I am, I am so sorry."

"Not a problem, it was shock. We will all get used to such encounters as time passes. Anyway, sorry, but I have to dash, late for a meeting. Perhaps we can have a chat later and make up for this brief scary encounter."

Kayla nods, she still looks quite embarrassed. She steps to one side to let me pass. I smile and also nod. I feel guilty about having to retreat like this. My C-Pack beeps, I see the flashing button, reach out and stab it. Text flies in from the right, stops and hovers in front of me, the three lines read: "Zander: @ rec3, ready when u r, no rush tho if you are busy."

Kayla says, "Quickest way to Rec3 is that way." and points up the corridor.

"How did you read that?" I ask.

"Oh sorry, learned to read backwards as a kid."

"But these screens, they are pretty dim from the other side."

"Got good eyesight, I can see quite well in low light levels. Spent a lot of time in the bush as a kid."

"Useful skill. I'll have to remember to have you around if we have to operate on low power at any time."

Kayla smiles and disappears down the airlock. Whilst I set off in the direction that Kayla had indicated. It doesn't take me very long to reach the next airlock. I am just hoping that I do not have another encounter like the last.

I need not have worried, as there is no-one around. The journey to Rec 3 takes no time at all. Especially, as I basically floated myself all the way, grabbing the rails every so often and launching myself off again at speed. It was the most fun I have had in ages, took me back to being a child and messing about on the trampoline at after school club.

Rec 3 is a smallish room, quite comfortably furnished. Looking very much like an executive departure lounge at an airport. With the same sort of soft comforting lighting. In one corner there are a collection of chairs grouped around a large screen, then the rest of the room is taken up with a dispensing station and four comfortable chairs, grouped in pairs. Zander is sat in one of these. He looks up and smiles as I enter the room. There is someone else in the room, she is departing by the looks of things, I recognise her face, short curly black hair and brown eyes, but for the life of me, I cannot put a name to her. I feel somewhat surprised at how tall she is, it is almost as if I had some sort of preconceived idea as to her height, but I equally cannot remember why.

She says, "Oh hello Captain, I am Amiria."

"Hello, Am.. Ameer-ee, sorry. Captain seems so formal, I am Daniel, Daniel Grant."

"That's OK Daniel, everyone has trouble with my name."

"It is such a nice name, where does it come from?"

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“New Zealand, so my Mother tells me, she came from there, but until recently I have spent most of my life in Aus. Dad was an Aussie.”

“Was?” I ask.

“Yeah, died about three years back. It was him that got me into the Biology research.”

“Oh yes, I remember now, you are our Biologist.”

“That’s right, I also specialised in materials science, couldn’t quite make up my mind which was to be the love of my life, so to speak, so I followed both. Good job really, as I’m sure it was the decider to take me on this mission.”

“That certainly is a strange combination.” I reply.

“I am fascinated by the structures and the effect these have on properties of the end product. Sorry there I go again getting too enthusiastic.”

“Nothing wrong with being fired up by your specialism.”

“Must dart off now.... catch you latter at this meet and greet thing.” She pauses, then looks back over towards Zander. The look somewhat puzzling. Next moment Amiria launches herself off towards the door.

I turn my attention back to Zander, still smiling at me, I say “So how has it been? Sorry I had to leave you to set things up here, just too many last minute meetings earth side. Months to plan these things and they go and throw up a raft of last minute meetings.”

“No problem Captain, it has kept me out of mischief. I was getting a bit bored waiting for the off anyway.” Zander indicates that I sit beside him.

It seems strange in the weightlessness to have chairs, when you can just float around. I suppose it is intended to make us feel more comfortable and at home. I guide myself down into the chair. The Velcro on the sides of my suit can be heard to engage with the pads of the chair. At least I can relax and not worry about drifting off.

“As you observed, we have the shifts up and running, the crew seem to have settled in quite quickly, mind you there has been plenty to keep them occupied. When we got on-board we had a similar meet and greet to the one we are having today. Then half of the crew went to bed, seemed strange but enabled us to start as we meant to continue.”

I have that strange feeling as if my power as Captain has been stripped from me, and that Zander has taken my place, but I know it is ridiculous, so I suppress it. “Excellent work Zander, nice to come aboard a well organised craft, we certainly picked the right man as second in command.”

“My pleasure sir.”

“Its Daniel, Zander, no need for formalities. So what is our flight ready status?”

“Just tidying up now. I must say it was a bit ridiculous that both navigators came up with you, it would have made more sense to have one with us. Luckily we had no issues, but it would have given one of them a chance to practice with the kit before departure.”

“Yes struck me as rather strange that both came up with my contingent. Apparently it was something to do with a delayed training programme. I don’t think you’ll have much to worry about though, as Ches assured me that she and Mi-ing had plenty of practice on the kit earth side.”

“Ches eh? I see your no formalities rule has already kicked in.”

Stupid though it is, I can feel myself blushing, “Well when you have been barfed on...”

“What?” Zander looks as puzzled as his voice sounds.

“Chesney, was sick all over me in the training flights.”

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“Nice.”

“Not really. It kind of breaks down barriers and formality.”

“I should imagine it does.” Zander raises an eyebrow.

“Behave, not like that, I can assure you.”

“Yes our Chesney struck me as an.... an acquired taste.”

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Chapter 5 – Recreation 1

Rec 1 whilst not enormous is a reasonably large room and well kitted out with various pieces of Gym equipment dotted around on the walls. As I glance around and do a quick headcount, I find that all but one are accounted for. As Lewis moves to one side I see a guy I have not seen before he has very short light brown hair a long thin serious looking face, he's taller than Lewis and still wearing uniform, must be Machin, what is his first name, it will come to me in a minute, Carson Machin. So who is missing?

“Did you want to make a speech Daniel?” Zander asks.

“Well not a speech as such, just a few words of welcome yes, but there's someone missing.”

“Zane, Zane Ashton, probably on the bridge, that's where I saw him last. I'll give him a call.”

It seems quite weird as Zander flicks his eyes to the right as if looking for an invisible someone, then he suddenly reaches out and starts tapping the air. I had not really noticed anyone doing this before, yet I have been doing it on and off for a few months now, but with the heads up glasses display it seems quite natural from the user's viewpoint, as if they are tapping a real keyboard. To the casual observer it appears quite strange.

I can see Chuck heading towards me, with Brooke and Carson in tow. Carson looks rather strange as he walks in a controlled way towards us. It is one thing pulling yourself along the corridors, but trying to walk across an open space is something else, especially if you are not used to it. Brooke and Carson seem much more in control. As the group reaches us, I nearly burst out laughing as Brooke and Carson had slowed up, but Chuck carried on at the same speed, despite the fact that his legs had stopped moving. Brooke and Carson have to reach out and somehow gain control of Chuck, before he ploughs into us.

Thankfully they are successful, however Newton's Law comes to mind, that one about equal and opposite forces; as the three of them end up spinning off to the left. So much to learn and adapt to.

Zander gains my attention again as he says, “Zane is on his way Sir... er...Daniel.”

Just then the door opens and the man who enters is rather tall, thin with wiry brown hair, sticking out in all directions like a cartoon character. He seems to have a rather nervous look on his face, possibly because he knows he is the last person to arrive.

Zander whispers, “OK ready for the off.”

“OK folks.” I pause to let the crowd take in that it is me speaking, “For those who have not met me I am Daniel Grant.” There's silence and all faces upon me, many appear quite bewildered as to what significance my announcement is.

Zander whispers, “The title would be appropriate now sir.”

Hating this moment, but knowing Zander is correct, “I am the Captain of this mission and ... er... craft. We, er... first officer Zander and I, thought this would be a good opportunity for us to get to know each other before we set off on our...journey. I would just like to thank the crew who have been up here as first wave, preparing the craft for us, for their diligence and hard work. I am assured by Zander that you have already settled well to life aboard the DRC. I hope you will forgive us newbies as we struggle to get used to the layout of the craft and occasionally get lost.

I have just been told by control that our departure will still be taking place in two days' time as scheduled, this will enable us to get fully used to living aboard the DRC and to complete the final tests before we depart. I would like to wish you all the very best of luck with this mission and look forward to working with you all on what should be the most exciting exploration of mankind since the very early orbital launches that took place back in the 50s.

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Please make best use of this opportunity to mingle with your fellow crew members.”

I hear the familiar voice of Chesney as she comments, “Hey Dan shame you can’t break out the bottles on champers.”

I turn and reply, “Can you imagine the damage that would do in zero-G?”

Chesney, cheeky grin replies, “It can be pretty devastating on earth if you have enough.”

“Please excuse me Chesney, I should mingle, I haven’t met half the crew as yet.”

Zander leads me around like some sort of dignitary and introduces me to a familiar face, it is Kayla Hollis. She still looks somewhat embarrassed. I say, “We kind of met on the stairs.”

“On the what?” Zander asks.

“I frightened the living daylights out of Kayla as we were both trying to get through the same between decks airlock. Sorry about that scare, hope you have recovered now.”

“Yes thanks Capn.”

“Remind me, what is your specialism?”

“Oh just a humble technician Capn.”

“Daniel please, there’s nothing humble about a technician.” I suddenly realise that I have issued an insult, I laugh, “I didn’t mean that as an insult, but you know what I mean. We are going to need your ingenuity and craft ability.”

“Yes Daniel I get the drift. So what’s your specialism?”

I catch the smile on Zander’s face, the sort of get out of that one smile.

“Good question Kayla, I’m an ex-RAF pilot and squadron leader.”

Cheeky grin from Kayla, “So nothing of use for this mission?”

I laugh “Touché Kayla.”

“Thought you’d enjoy that one Daniel.”

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Chapter 6 – Hidden Problems?

After two months of travelling at speeds unknown to mankind before now, we have long left the solar system behind, the journey taking us quite close to Jupiter and its rings. Although travelling at considerable speed we were able to make some quite interesting observations and take many readings, mainly as practice before the real thing out there. We beamed the information gathered back to Earth and apparently caused quite a deal of excitement as we had spotted things previously unnoticed. It gave us a great deal of confidence in the equipment and our skill levels.

Mercury was far less exciting, it was a considerable distance from our flight path and the fact that it is so cold and inactive didn't make it very interesting, so apart from some improved mapping images, we gained little extra information.

We did some observations of quite a few galaxies and star clusters as we crossed the corridor of space on our way to our first destination. This confirmed our status as explorers, having reached places that no man had visited before, except by way of our probes. This far exceeded the thrill of receiving pictures and data from a probe, the feeling that we could almost reach out and touch the stars.

Ches and Mi-ing were proving their worth now not only by steering the DRC out of trouble now and then when some debris headed our way, but also in the detailed calculations that they had performed in order to come to the conclusion that we were eight days away from our first target, they had declared eight days, four hours and twenty seven minutes at present speed. Mi-ing had even speculated that we may have to reduce our speed at two points of the journey if long range observations were correct as there appeared to be two asteroid fields in the way. She qualified this by saying that on our present heading it was impossible to tell how thick and dense the fields were, but offered the option of changing our course slightly in order to improve our view in precisely three days.

I was well impressed by Ches and Mi-ing's presentation and commend them for their work. Mi-ing asked for a meeting in private a couple of hours after Ches went off shift. I book Rec 3 and arrange for Zane Ashton to stand in for Mi-ing. A quick training session and assurance that Zane can call me if any problems arise and Zane is delighted to have the chance to take the controls.

Mi-ing looks rather nervous as we walk across to the Rec room. Re-assuring, the display by the door shows "Sorry Reserved - D Grant, Rec 2 is free". As we approach the door automatically opens, having recognised my c-pack ID. As I pass through the door it slides back in place and clicks, the panel beside it displays "LOCKED". I indicate that Mi-ing take a seat. I wait for her to sit, then select a chair beside hers.

"OK Mi-ing, how can help you?"

Mi-ing looks rather embarrassed, not knowing how to start. I ask, "Is there something troubling you, don't worry, this conversation is confidential."

Mi-ing looking a bit more confident, starts, "It difficult as I do not want to be..... what you say?Telling tales, but it important that you know." She stops dead, as if I know what she is going to say next.

"OK rest assured I am highly unlikely to view what you have to say as telling tales, it is obviously something that is worrying you and if it concerns you then it is highly likely it should be a concern of mine. Just launch yourself into what you would like to tell me, it's just you and me talking, no need to pull any punches, I am used to straight talking."

"Thank you Daniel, I much appreciate your assurances, mean a lot as I have much doubt as to whether I should even be saying what I feel I should. Oh that sound all wrong, but you know what I mean?"

"Yes I do, let me judge whether it is something that should be discussed or not, trust me, I

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would rather know what is troubling you.”

“You know the presentation that we do on how long to reach destination one?”

“Yes it was excellent.”

“I feel disloyal in saying that it concerns me that it was all my work, I say that not to claim credit, but from concern that in crisis Miss Walsh will not be able to... er what phrase?... Yes... to come up with goods. When I try to work with Miss Walsh on project to estimate arrival, she not have clue where to start. Don't get me wrong, she knows controls and very accurate in guiding craft, but on calculations she leave it all to me, she not.... Not... er...contribution to method. At first I think she being lazy not want to do, but when problem come up she not idea as to how to solve. I even try to involve by splitting task but she have excuse as to why she cannot do. Daniel I seriously doubt she have knowledge that she should have for this mission. I feel it unfair you not know, otherwise in crisis you could expect depend but will not be able to. I assure you there noer....jealousy or hate on my part, I think Miss Walsh great fun person, I admire that she so get on well, me, I wall flower, fade into background, she great, want to involve.”

“I see the problem here, thank you Mi-ing I admire your courage in speaking to me about this. You are correct it is important that I know if there are any problems like this, otherwise there could be real problems should a crisis arise. Leave it with me, I will investigate the matter and rest assured I view this as concern for a colleague and the whole crew's welfare, rather than telling tales. Is everything else alright?”

“Oh yes and thank you Daniel, Miss Walsh and I get along just fine, it was just that one concern, as I say she very good navigator when it comes to controlling and steering craft, just I don't think she can do whole things asked of navigator.”

“Yes I understand. OK leave it with me, let's get back on duty then.”

I instruct my C-Pack to release the room, then send a text message to Zander and request that our hand over meeting be held in Rec 3.

The rest of our shift passes without event. Zane even stays with us and we pass the time exchanging jokes then discussing gas cloud formations.

My C-Pack beeps to indicate I have a message, it is from Zander and confirms that he is on his way for our hand-over meeting.

I wait until the appointed time, say my farewells and wish Mi-ing and Zane a good rest. Then head over to Rec 3. Again the door open as I approach.

Zander is already seated and smiles as I enter. He exclaims, “Very civil handover Dan, do you want a drink?”

“Thanks, could do with a tea with and with.” The latter something Lewis came up with as a bit of a joke, referring to milk and sweetener.

Zander soon returns with the pouch of tea, instinctively I attempt to take a suck, Zander exclaims, “I'd wait a bit if I was you Dan, it's probably too hot!”

“Good point, I completely forgot, still trying to get used to a world without cups.”

“Yes it does take a while to get used to it all. What did you want to see me about, conscious that you must be tired and hungry.”

“It's Mi-ing, well actually Ches, I'm not making a good job of this am I?”

Zander smiles, “It's late, well for you it is. Just start at the beginning Dan. Perhaps better still an Executive summary?”

“Ok that's a good idea, Mi-ing suspects that Ches is not as, how can I say this? She is not as

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competent in the navigational skills as we were lead to believe.”

“Are you sure this isn’t a jealousy or personality thing Dan?”

“Well it could be, on the other hand if it is true it could be a serious threat to our mission, that’s why I thought you could test things out a she’s on this shift with you. That way we could assess the situation properly and put all doubt behind us and if handled sensitively no one will get hurt.”

“Mmm that’s some ask Dan, but as it’s you, what did you have in mind?”

“Well Mi-ing reckons that when it came to calculating how long it will take us to get to our first target destination, Ches had no input into the calculations, it seemed to Mi-ing as if Ches didn’t have a clue how to start the calculations, yet we all know that in terms of the practical navigational skills she has been ace, steering us through meteor showers and the like. So I wondered if you suddenly requested that Ches calculate how long it would add to our journey time if we deviated off course and visit this planet here, as it has interesting weather systems that we could gain useful information from. You could say that although it wasn’t originally in our brief that you and I thought it may be worth taking a look, but we need to know what the mission cost would be in terms of the time such a deviation would take.”

“Hey that’s not bad Dan, it may be worth us actually doing it.”

“Don’t get too carried away Zander, it’s actually a worthless rock and of no interest at all, the folks gave it a distance run down earlier.”

“Wow you even had me buying the story.”

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Chapter 7 –