

# Unnamed Journal



**Far out, man.**  
Issue 10

# UNNAMED JOURNAL

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**Publisher** Thomas M. Fitz

**Editor-in-Chief** Alfred Underhill

## ART

**Cover** Kyrin Krause

**Concept Design** Despondency & Whiskey

HOW TO TELL US  
HOW AMAZING WE ARE

[theunnamedjournal@gmail.com](mailto:theunnamedjournal@gmail.com)

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# FROM THE EDITOR

**W**e have created yet another issue for your perusal and reading pleasure. Our writers seem to be following more themes, recently. This month's themes appear to be space, space aliens, and questions of a somewhat existential nature. Hopefully this isn't just some elaborate maneuver by our staff for higher salaries because that's just not happening. Then again, maybe that's why some of these stories feature existential themes? Perhaps they're just sick of pickled herring; I know I am.

At any rate, on to the stories...

This month we have a short story by yours truly called, *The Tribe*. It's a story that posits the cultural and psychological effects of contact with a more technologically advanced species. This month also brings us the three concluding chapters of *Void* by Andrew Patrick. His tale of one man trying to survive an shape-changing alien onslaught from within his own ship reaches a climatic (and fitting) ending.

We hope you enjoy!

*Alfred Underhill*  
**Editor-in-Chief**

# THE TRIBE

*By Alfred Underhill*

In those early days it was pure chaos. Our instruments detected an anomaly millions of light years away. This first sign just looked like bad data, but it kept happening at closer and closer intervals in space-time. Astronomers, engineers, physicists: none had seen anything quite like the phenomenon. No one knew exactly how long it would be before whatever it was arrived, but the general consensus was "soon".

The distortion moved toward our planet and stopped just beyond the moon. We were able to get a detailed look at it with the telescopes we already had in place. Just beyond our own moon was another slightly smaller satellite. It didn't revolve or rotate, it just stuck in space as if it had always been there. None doubted that its appearance was the act of a higher intelligence.

Several days after the alien moon appeared, its emissaries came to every major city around the world. They were just suddenly amongst the populace, transmitted by unknown means. Within hours of their arrival, dialog between these outsiders and the leaders of the world's nations was established. Communication was facilitated by the outsider's technology, which has since helped remove previously existing barriers between cultures on this planet. The visitors called themselves *tyuschika*, which means "the tribe" or "the family". Despite this watershed moment for the human race, the nations of Earth were unprepared for confirmation of extraterrestrial life and the broader cosmic history that was imparted by them.

Those who first encountered the Tribe were jarred by the experience. In spite of a nearly identical physiology, the barriers to initial communication and accord were largely cultural. There were virtually no shared values between either population; no common idioms or turns of phrase. Humanity learned that the visitors view the universe through a far different lens than our forebears did. The Tribe imparted knowledge that was both intellectually fascinating and existentially crushing. Their history is something humanity still fumbles to achieve.

The *tyuschika* had long since mastered genetic manipulation by the time they began their planet seeding projects. Likewise, they had already terraformed their own planet extensively prior to expanding to others. Their techniques were applied autonomously, remotely. Once a planet was molded into a suitable habitat, the *tyuschika* arrived to finish the process and colonize the planet. With the exception of Earth, they arrived quickly.

The people of Earth learned that they, like the other humanoid races of the cosmos, were the result of a planet seeding project initiated over a billion years ago, millions of light years away. It was a project carried out by early *tyuschika* on a planet beyond our technologies' abilities to detect. We learned that, in short, the

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genesis of human life on Earth had been a mistake; the result of an improperly calibrated probe veering off course into deep space. Human life developed without intervention, which is why the *tyuschika* view the humans of Earth as an oddity. However condescending, these outsiders continue to be a great source of scientific and technological knowledge as well as a source of revenue through tourism.

Even though large-scale advancements have been affected by the arrival of the *tyuschika*, few humans have opted to travel to their planetary systems. The cultural, psychological, and technological gaps between the terran and alien populations are commonly cited. Most of those who make the journey do so in an official diplomatic capacity. The few that have returned, often spend considerable time reintegrating into life on earth. Some complain of being caught between worlds, but none so far have opted to return to living amongst our distant relatives.

Despite the ability for both humans and *tyuschika* to produce offspring via commingling, few hybrids have been born. Children who have resulted from such unions almost always seek a life with their alien parent. Living amongst the Tribe, new transplants often seek out the genetic and technological augmentations that make them *tyuschika*. To the Tribe's credit, these changed humans receive full acceptance: there have been no reports of modified humans suffering from discrimination.

On the whole, most humans still regard the Tribe with apprehension. Their technological prowess far exceeds that of humanity. Experts from multiple disciplines concur that were it not for a kind of patronizing curiosity, these visitors may have simply opted to destroy the human race, enslave it, or assimilate it involuntarily. Some speculate that the terran population is a scientific curio for the *tyuschika*: something to be studied and observed, but otherwise left alone. It is unknown whether or not such speculation is accurate.

The *tyuschika* have tremendous control over their own physical bodies. All physical traits can be altered voluntarily by the individual with technology and training. Cloning, regeneration, and the transference of memories and experiences are ancient technologies to the Tribe. Death is viewed as something that happens occasionally to an unfortunate iteration of an individual. Because of these factors, the Tribe has a very different view of the Self than any human culture. The Self is far more ephemeral, iterative, and in flux to the *tyuschika*.

The aliens structure their society based on need. Each individual performs the tasks that are best suited to them. What is best suited is determined by extensive testing and then indexed to the needs of every habitat throughout *tyuschika* space. Individuals are then sent to where they will fill their role for society. These are the tasks a person does until they are no longer fit, are no longer needed, or until a

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better candidate is found to fill that role. By performing the roles best suited to them, an individual has access to food, shelter, and whatever material goods they desire. The entire tyuschika economy works in this fashion, making it nomadic, changeable, and demand-based. Compulsory re- testing takes place at regular intervals throughout their system.

Tyuschika society therefore requires strict adherence to professional orthodoxy. One must do one's job as required or become a pariah. Refusal of an assignment is practically unheard of, but those that do are considered outcasts. Those who fail to adequately perform their duties are shunned and denied basic accommodations until they comply and fill their role.

Unsurprisingly, the tyuschika, for all of their outward diversity and individual liberties, are an extremely homogenous culture. They believe that filling ones role, staying in ones lane until it changes as needed, is paramount. Acceptance and tolerance of everyone regardless of appearance, background, or personal preferences is an assumed value. Crime and violence are practically unheard of, yet are corrected immediately when they do occur. Theirs is a society that believes in one right way of being; a society where every need is fulfilled, every desire granted; a society where dissenters are cut-off or reprogrammed.

The Family's focus on harmony is why human culture and civilization are regarded as quaint at best and barbaric at worst. They find our struggles to survive on our own planet baffling, even pathetic. Their social scientists believe we compete amongst ourselves far too much. They believe this is to be the result of trying to preserve too many disparate value systems and competing economic models. They tout their advanced sciences as the key to an individual's freedom and adaptability that makes the betterment of all possible. Indeed, it is this very adaptability of the individual that enables the tyuschika way of life.

We have only to surrender our agency in order to join them.UJ

# VOID

## Chapter 6

*By Andrew Patrick*

She manifested from all corners of the brig, seeping in a sheet of dust as thin as a grain. Gradually she congealed before him, rose, and appeared in the form of Alera Zool.

Lang looked at her, examining the features. The simulation was flawless, down to the stray hairs. Even Alera's imitation leather boots, sheened a color that was once called "oxblood" and now went as "red dwarf", were there. Lang wondered at that. Were the boots real? If he pulled them off, could he wear them? Did this imitation Zool have feet in them, or would those only appear if the boots came off? Was it only a visual simulation, or did the dust, once it devoured someone, retain their pattern on some electro-cellular level that it could reproduce at will?

"Why am I here?" said Lang.

"Why are any of us here?" said the Alera, "we grow, feed, pass on our patterns..."

So it was the pattern thing, Lang thought to himself. "That isn't what I meant."

"I know. But it's a useful answer anyway. You think us very strange. You think us a threat to your

existence. The first thing is true. The second is not."

"I saw you eat Covey. I saw you rip him to pieces."

"And then you saw us painstakingly put him back together. Covey is with us. Covey is here. We can summon him at will."

"That won't be Covey. That will be your simulation of Covey."

"Does it look like Covey?"

"There's more to a man than appearance."

"True. There are also his patterns of behavior. There are his memories, and his specific



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interpretations of his memories. Those we retain also." "Bullshit."

"Did you know," said the Alera, "That Covey had a baby sister whom he never saw after he went to space? Did you know that Covey has her picture inside his jumpsuit? Did you know that he says goodnight to this picture before retiring every night?"

Lang was startled by these revelations. He did not know any of that.

"Is that true?"

"When Covey was a boy, he used to sneak into the cornfield of the farmhouse where he grew up

and play a harmonica he'd pilfered from a corner store. He played it softly enough not to wake anyone. He never told anyone in the world about that. But we know it. We remember it. All of Covey's memories are ours."

"That can't be true."

The Alera thing smiled. "Alera Zool wanted you."

"I know that."

"Yet you never acted on it."

"Nor did she."

They looked at each other.

"What do you need me for?"

"Need?"

They know how to conceal, Lang thought. "You didn't bring me all the way through space from

the prize for your amusement. Do you have amusement?" She did not answer.

"If you have Alera's memories, then you know all the times she remembers laughing," Lang said, louder and angrier than he intended. "So you can call up that experience. Do you have anything like it?"

The Alera thing blinked. "No."

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"No?"

"No. We do not enjoy the absurd. We don't even really acknowledge it. We have no expectation

of a rational universe, so benign violations of rationality are no more pleasurable than malign ones. "But we can laugh," it said, and proceeded to toss her head back and repeat without flaw the lilting, earthy chuckle that Alera Zool had. Lang had loved that laugh. This was like watching a horse count with its feet.

"You're not really laughing."

"We understand the phenomenon better than you do. It was a mystery at first, but the more of you we absorbed, the more we understood the memories, the more it fit into a personality matrix. Understand the stimulus, replicate the response."

"Fine," said Lang, "You get laughter. You never answered my question. What do you need me for?"

"We don't."

"Then why am I here? Why haven't you absorbed me?"

The Alera Thing said nothing.

Lang looked at his feet for a few moments. There's something I'm not getting, he thought. He

tried to figure out why they would hold him like this, why they would take the trouble. They can fly

the Vulture anywhere, without him. If they've truly absorbed the memories of his crew, then they know where Earth is. They could fly straight there and...

What if it's something that they're not getting?

"I should be dead," said Lang. "Or, absorbed, as you put it. I should be a dust-cloud you can summon at will. Back there in the galley. You had me surrounded. Why didn't you pounce?"

The Alera Thing maintained her silence.

"You can't. You can't absorb me, and you don't know why. So you brought me here to sit in the escape hatch while you decide what story to concoct. You don't need me. You just don't know what to do with me."

## *Void, Chapter 6*

The Alera Thing rubbed her fingers together as if in thought. It seemed to Lang a childlike gesture, as an infant discovering it has hands and can do things with it. "We have an offer."

"Okay."

"The reason we cannot absorb you is the implant in your left forearm. The biometric reader that Union captains receive on their promotion or purchase of a ship. It is different from the nodes in others and gives off a frequency that repulses us."

Lang had forgotten about that. It had been several voyages since he took over the Vulture. "What, really?"

"We are as surprised as you are," the Alera Thing said, "But nevertheless, it's so. No one else on

this ship has such a device. When we carried you across from our vessel, we confirmed it. Pinpointed it." "So that prize of ours..."

"...is ours, yes. We placed ourselves there in plain sight, before the battle, in hopes that someone would retrieve us." "We?"

"We are the beings with whom your species has been at war. What you call buzzdroids are our hive warships, nothing more. We operate them consciously, but they are not 'alive' in any way you would understand."

"And you are..."

"Very old, Arturus Lang. Very old, and possessed of a highly advanced and refined consciousness. You might call us 'spirits', but it is hard to find a term less simplistic for what we truly are."

Lang looked down at his hands. He had begun, on this journey, to notice the thinness and dryness of his hands. This was a sign of aging, which did not bother him. He had long understood the inevitability of decline. What bothered him was that he did not seem to know how old he really was. Sure, he could call up his birth date on Earth, but he no longer had any idea what year it was on earth, and time in the Union, shuffling around the galaxy, was a slippery thing. A Union doctor might do a biometric reading and give him an approximate age, but that was guess work.

He looked up from his reverie to look again into the eyes of the thing masquerading as Alera to see if there was anything of her looking back at him.

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Again he saw only hunger.

"How did you find me and bring me here? Where was I?"

The Alera Thing nodded as if it was expecting that question. "We were there. The shaft you crawled down is a portal to our world, you might say. You have a rare distinction, Arturus Lang. Not many have been as close to our world as you have and ever returned."

"I don't get it."

"You won't."

"Jae..." said Lang.

"She is gone. She attempted to blow up our ship. We prevented her, but not without triggering an explosion that did some damage. It will not be flyable without repairs."

"And you didn't...absorb her?"

"No. The explosion sent her off into space. We suspect the shockwave killed her, but we cannot know for certain. She is gone, Lang. Regrettably, gone forever."

Lang accepted this news with no emotion on his face. "You mentioned an offer," said Lang.

"We want you to remove the node that repulses us." "In exchange for what?"

"In exchange for us."

"I don't get it."

The Alera Thing blinked. Lang couldn't tell if it was the first time it had blinked, but it surprised him. Did it need to blink, was it purposefully maintaining the illusion to gain trust? Maybe it was a muscle memory that carried through whatever this thing retained. Maybe all of them would blink as they absorbed species until the heat death of the universe, never really needing to or knowing why.

"How many times have you thought of it?" said the Thing. Lang blinked. "Of what?"

"Of the void."



## *Void, Chapter 6*

"I'm a starship captain. I live in the Void."

"It calls to you."

"It calls to all of us. It's a well-known thing. We deal with it."

"Do you know why?"

"Everyone knows. It's the enormity of space. The distances. The time loss. Space isn't Earth. So we get a little wiggy now and then. The Union has ways of dealing..."

"I am here. I belong here. Everything is in space. Everything is space. I am space." The Thing said this with the kind of longing that Lang first said it when he learned it as a third-class navy on the Old Boy's Toy. Alera must have said it recently. Maybe right before they ripped her down to component chunks of organic matter.

"So?" said Lang.

"So," said the Thing, "have you ever considered the words of it?"

"It's a comforting litany."

"It's untruth. Which is to say, it's a truth that gets stretched into untruth. You are not space. You are part of space, in the sense that everything is some recycled portion of stardust. But this is meant to trick your mind into ignoring the truth you naturally intuit - that you are not where you belong."

As she said this her voice took on an authority, and yet a gentleness, that had been missing before. For the first time Lang got the impression that this Thing, this multitudinous Thing, was speaking to him as itself, genuinely communicating something it had learned.

"You think you have the human experience all pegged, don't you?"

"The Void is in your eyes."

"Bullshit. Now you're just talking."

"No, Alera remembers it. She saw the emptiness within you warring with the glad wisdom you used to survive."

"Alera doesn't remember anything. You fucking ate her, remember?"

## Void, Chapter 6

"Alera is here with us. As are the rest. The entire crew of the Pricey Vulture remain in our lives forever. Except Jae, and you. Jae is lost. But you can yet join."

Lang felt heat in his face. He felt a horrible intuition inside of him. "No thanks."

"You will remain. All of your memories. All that you knew and learned and retained will survive." "It won't be me."

"But it will. What is 'you'? A collection of material compounds pressed into a particular shape?

You see how easily we can reproduce that, without missing a detail? A pattern of thoughts? We retain those and use them to inform the whole. No one we absorb is ever gone. Their own memories, and not just memories of them, survive."

Lang swallowed. He felt cold inside. He thought of an old spacer legend, one of the early Admiralty warships, the *Theseus*. It had been badly damaged in battle with the xenohomes of Elysia-2, and two separate junkers had picked up pieces from it. The Union was split among competing guilds in those days, so both crews had sought payment, but the Admiralty only paid per ship, not per weight, so only one junker could collect. This prompted both guilds to put their own money up to restore the *Theseus*, each building off the scrap they collected. In the end, an Admiralty court was unable to determine which ship was the actual *Theseus*, and so refused payment to both. The cost overheads forced the guilds into bankruptcy and the Union was formed. The Admiralty ended up taking over both ships for practically nothing in the auction. One was designated *Theseus II*, and the other *Theseus III*, and that was that.

Which ship was the *Theseus*? Neither, but both of them could be called that.

The Thing took another step to him. They nearly touched, and Lang could feel an electric current in the air. He looked up and saw Alera's face and could no longer critique the appearance of it. It was Alera's face, as sure as he was sitting there.

"It will hurt," said Alera's voice, "but then..." "...forever" said Lang.

"...forever" said Alera.

Lang sighed. "Let's go to sick bay."

# Chapter 7

The door opened, and they stepped out of the plain white glare of the brig into the redder light of the corridor that led from the extreme aft of the Vulture. They walked abreast of each other at a gentle, even pace and did not turn their heads from forward. Neither spoke.

Lang felt sleepy and calm inside as the walls rolled past him. He did not think about what was going to happen to him. He accepted it as reality. It would hurt, but then it would not hurt. Nothing would hurt. Nothing would hurt, or suffer for a lack, a need unsatisfied. Nor did he carry the illusion that his awareness would necessarily continue, in the same manner as now, or at all. But something would be aware of him, of his life. Of his whole life.

They approached Kronz, or the simulacrum of him, in the corridor. Lang wondered what the Kronz Thing might be doing. Doubtless it was some task to the maintenance of the ship. He wondered if Kronz was chosen particularly because of his specific expertise to a specific task. He wondered if the personalities and memories and knowledge remained discreet when absorbed, or if it became diffuse into the whole. He wondered if Kronz was walking around with Hunstail's memories. He wondered if they could tell the difference. He supposed they could.

When they passed, Kronz and Alera walked directly through each other. A moderate puff of dust verified that this was indeed a collision, but neither of them seemed to mind. Some of the dust flew around Lang but none landed on him, and very quickly the stray dust followed and rejoined either Alera or Kronz as they passed. No one said a word.

As they continued, it occurred to Lang that the lights were much redder than he remembered. Perhaps lower-frequency radiation was more comfortable for them. If that was true, then it would have been painful for the Alera Thing to speak to him as long as she had. Maybe the lights were getting redder as they got closer to the quarters. Were they living in the quarters? Did they need to?

"I want to see the prize," said Lang. "Why?" said the Alera.

"I don't know. I just want to see it." "There is no reason to see it."

"I know. And there's no reason to stop me. In fact, you can't stop me. So why not just let me?"

The Alera looked at him, and Lang again saw the predatory gaze that had first met him when they had devoured Covey. But it was an impotent gaze, and they both knew it. So she turned away after a moment and they walked down an adjoining corridor and up a flight of dirty chrome stairs to the observation deck.

## Void, Chapter 7

*The Pricey Vulture* had been built by the son of one of the most famous junk captains in the Union, Jack Holder. Holder had made so much cleaning up from various Admiralty slug fights, had owned so many scrap-ships, that he eventually retired from active sailing and took a permanent position on the Union board. Spacers had come to call him "The Commodore", though not within earshot of Admiralty men, who took umbrage at military ranks being applied to spacers, no matter how archaic. It was the Commodore's eldest, Han Holder, who had built the *Vulture* as the first of a luxury line of junkers, complete with entertainment suites and a deck from which the stars could be watched in all their glory slinking harmoniously by. The *Vulture* and her sister ships were well-made but priced too high for the market, and Han lost a fortune on them. Lang had acquired her out of mothballs for a song.

Lang looked out from the bubble at the top of the observation deck and saw the length of his ship. He saw her bridge, and he saw her stern, and he saw the starboard wing extended to hold the prize that was not a prize. The damage to it was noticeable, but even in such a condition the Admiralty still would have paid well for it. He looked at it for a long time, and thought.

He had known Jae a long time, like most of his crew. He had enjoyed Jae's company, as a crewmate and as a bed-companion and as a friend. He thought of her corpse spinning through the stars until some imperceptible gravity brought her back into some solar maw in a billion years, and he could not escape concluding Jae wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

The Alera stood beside him. He wondered what she was thinking. Then something occurred to

him.

"What happened to the *Executor*?"

The Alera looked out at the stars. "The way you see..." she said.

"What?"

"Nothing. The *Executor* was infiltrated by us. Badly. We tried to take the whole crew at once. The captain of the ship understood what was happening, and scuttled her the only way he knew how."

Lang had no other words than "That makes sense."

"It does. And it settled a question within us about tactics. Have you seen what you wish to see, Lang? May we proceed?"



## *Void, Chapter 7*

Lang looked out at the stars again. "What about the way we see?"

The Alera did look out at him this time. "You are a complex species. Individually, I mean. Collectively, you function much the same as insects or other animals, but as an individual, you have such complexity within you, so many conflicting impulses and memories. You are so easy to kill out here. We do not have that problem: Extremes of temperature, even in the near-zero of deep space, only slow us. When you look out at the stars and the galaxies, you see so many ways to die. It must be horrible."

Lang said "We can go."

They moved softly down the gangway and obliquely through the corridors that lead to Sick Bay. The form of Covey was there, waiting. When Lang and the Alera walked in, he began to prep instruments for surgery. He put out gauze and medical epoxy and isopropyl syrettes, and the Alera coughed. The Covey looked up.

"He won't have time to heal."

"Right," said the Covey, tonelessly. "Habit in the memories."

He left all those unnecessaries on the tray and instead charged the surgical wand. The device flowed with a hot blue light, the product of a cauterizing radiation that cut at the molecular level cleaner than any diamond laser. Lang had trained with it, a long time ago, when he was passing his Basic Spacership Battery, and once or twice as a refresher. He'd had the chance to use it once, aboard

the Gunner's Haven, when the sawbones had gone out the airlock and Captain Crowley had injured his arm bringing the prize in. It was minor surgery: a flesh wound, but the whole time he'd kept

thinking: Don't knock the head off the thing. Don't knock the head off the thing.

The GR-90 Surgical Wand was notorious for its delicate contact housing. If you pushed it or banged it too hard, you'd knock the housing clean off and then the radiation would flow out like a wild whip of pure blue death-energy. There were stories throughout the Union, though they had some of the elements of urban legend: it was always someone who crewed with someone whose brother had done it and cut his own arm off. You never met any of these armless bastards.

It hadn't mattered. Lang removed the bit of junk steel from Captain Crowley's arm and cauterized it nice and neat. Crowley said the doc himself couldn't have done it better. What had been the doctor's name? Lang couldn't remember.

The Covey handed Lang the surgical wand. He looked at it for a moment that

## *Void, Chapter 7*

stretched softly, eating up past and present alike. Only now, Lang thought. Only now.

"Covey," said Lang "Do you remember the day I hired you?"

The Covey looked at him and said that he did remember.

"I don't," Lang said. "I don't remember that day at all. I don't remember hiring you. I don't remember what made me decide to hire you. I interviewed three other guys for your position. But I don't know why I settled on you or what our conversation was."

"You said you'd be glad to have me."

"Yeah, that sounds like me. But I don't remember. I don't remember at all."

"It doesn't matter," said The Alera. "Cut it out, and it all goes away."

"It doesn't go away," said Lang.

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't remember the day I hired Covey. It's gone. Covey was so fucking nondescript that no part of his personality made any impression on my memories. I. Do. Not. Remember. But it happened. Do you get it?"

The Alera looked at The Covey, who looked back. Neither spoke.

"If it had not happened," Lang said, "Covey would not have been on this ship, and he would not have died on this ship, and I would be taking this surgical wand from a different copy of a different shipmate. You wouldn't notice the difference. Different set of memory data, who cares? But a whole human life would be different."

He looked at them, trying to see if they were processing the point. They remained silent as graves.

Lang sighed. "The things I don't remember are as much a part of my life as the things that are. So, I decline your offer." And with that, he smacked the GR-90 down on the operating table.

For a moment, he was afraid he'd hit it too hard. The explosion of blue light damn near sawed the table in half. But when he pulled it back up, the long whip of bright blue light came up with it, pouring like a fountain from the wand in his hand.

The Alera opened her mouth wide like a shark and tried to envelope him, to

## *Void, Chapter 7*

repulse and shove him down, but Lang was too fast for her. He whipped the wand around in a 360, slashing The Alera and the Covey Copy in half in the space of a second. The top parts of them sprayed apart like the dust they were and disintegrated into piles on the ground. Their bottom parts stamped their feet with rage and started gathering and regrowing themselves.

Lang walked briskly out of Sick Bay, following the red lights outside. He heard no sound of alarm but the rush of dust through the filter system. It would try to stop him. Lang smiled.

Fifty yards down the corridor, he saw a wall of dust two inches thick barring his way. It made itself look like brick but Lang was not fooled. He took a run and a jump and slashed it to ribbons with the wand. It fell apart like a house of cards and Lang went on, faster.

The lights grew redder as he passed the mess hall. Redder and redder and redder still. His heart grew in excitement as he ran, partly from the effect of the red on his neural patterns, partly because he knew the pattern meant something. And partly because of the joy he had felt in slashing Alera Zool's shitty xenocopy in half. He had enjoyed that a great deal.

Copies of the rest of the crew tried to jump him just at the entry to quarters: Kronz and Hunstail in the front, Gaussman and Luntz on either flank, Fulgor and Willems from the rear. It was comical. They couldn't lay a dusty finger on him, just try to repulse him in another direction and confuse him. A few brutal slashes with the blue death-whip and they redistributed to constituent parts. The only problem was they made no sound.

The lights in the Quarters was red, red, red: red as blood, red as dying stars. It served only to heighten Lang's breathing and widen his eyes. He was on the right trail, he could smell it. He ran on intuition's direction towards Alera Zool's quarters.

In front of him was a whirlwind of dust, blowing, shaking the air around it, muttering mad imprecations. Lang sneered and raised his wand. He was going to strike when a gust of hot air blew from the whirlwind and knocked him over. The wand clattered away from him and the blue energy scorched his scalp as it went down. He yelled in pain and lay on the floor, panting. The whirlwind swirled around him and blew another gust at him. It lifted him from the floor and knocked him back. Then it came at him again.

They could blow me off the ship, Lang thought, if they wanted to. Shove me in the airlock and take their chances with the Admiralty board. Once they got to Proxima, it hardly mattered anyway. He got up and ran at the whirlwind before it could ready another hot breath. This time it bounced back. He did it again. It

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repulsed again. He saw the wand lying on the floor where it had fallen, still tricking deadly blue energy. He saw the whirlwind readying to blow again and he hit the dirt. When he came back up he slashed at it and could smell it weaken on the air. It smelled like burning.

They fought for a few minutes more and it felt like a day. Each time Lang slashed at the whirlwind with his blue death-wand it became weaker and weaker and smaller and smaller and its hot breath less shocking and painful even when it did get him down. Lang did not think about what he was doing or how strange it would have been to an outside observer. There was no outside observer: only he and his hate, them and their hunger.

Hate won.

Bits of burned and blackened dust lay on the floor in front of Zool's quarters when he opened the door. Inside the light was red as the doorway to hell. On the ground was a thing that seemed to be both plant and animal: black and tendrilous and toothy and leafy and rooted and winged. It seemed to squeal as Lang approached it, to click and snap in some guttural tongue.

Lang looked at it and wanted to smash it to pieces with his bare hands, but that seemed unwise. He looked at his wand, which was guttering out. He dropped it on the ground.

The thing tried to scurry away from Lang like a wounded beetle. Lang kicked it. It squealed again. He kicked it again, harder, and felt something crunch underneath his boot. He kicked and stomped and kicked and stomped and green goo came out of it but it didn't seem to hurt him and he didn't care anyway. He kicked and stomped until there was nothing but mush on the cold floor.

Lang might have expected the red of the lights to lessen, but they didn't. He walked to the bridge in perfect silence. No one crossed his path. He noticed nothing but small collections of dust being slowly pushed by the flow of air from the life support systems.

When he got to the bridge, he sat down in his chair and with a few keystrokes set the light colors to normal. Then he sat, and stared out at the wide bright universe. Then he slept. He did not dream.



# Chapter 8

Jae Havensy was not dead.

The mechanic was smart enough to realize that they wouldn't try to absorb her if they thought she was already gone. So the limited explosion on the prize was part of a plan. She had stuffed Lang's emergency suit with spare parts and wiring pulled willy-nilly from various consoles, enough to give it the illusion of volume. When she lit the fuse remotely, the dummy flew out into space. She space-walked in secrecy until oxygen depletion forced her to make for the Vulture One. She grabbed a new emergency suit there and gingerly made her way back to the ship, armed with a magnetized grappling staff for securing prizes to the wings.

Lang discovered all of this when Jae violently shoved him awake and then made to attack him with the staff.

"Are you, you?" she shouted.

Lang assured her that he was.

"Really you? No philosophical bullshit now." She had not lowered her staff.

"It's gone," Lang said. "It's dead."

"Show me," said Jae.

They walked back to quarters and into the room where Lang had killed the thing. It was still

there. Under the white lights it looked small and helpless. "And this was controlling all of ... them?"

"So it seems."

"You smashed the hell out of it, Skipper."

"I did."

"Good for you."

Lang told her the rest of the story right there, in the room, with the smashed thing and its green

effluvia in front of them. He told her of how close he came to surrendering. "I think I've been in space too long," he said at the end.

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Jae nodded.

They spent the night in Lang's quarters. Sleeping.

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Getting back to Proxima was a daunting task for a two-man crew, but not impossible. They just had to sleep in short shifts to get everything done. The dust was hoovered into a containment unit and, after much deliberation, they decided to unhook the false prize and blow it up in space.

"Admiralty won't like it," Jae said. "They'll hate to lose the knowledge opportunity."

"Only way to be sure," Lang said.

Well, yeah..." Jae said.

As they pulled away at impulse speed from the lonely wreck of the pseudo-attack ship that hid a

portal to dimensions uncharted, a pair of sonic charges was left attached to it. Lang and Jae, eyes red from sleepiness, watched it drift away. It looked small and helpless in the great vast expanse. Once

the Vulture was clear, Lang said "hit it," and Jae flipped the last of three red switches. The sonic charges erupted and cut through the prize and space around it like a pair of expanding saw blades.

"We don't get paid now," Jae said. "Wouldn't be right to," Lang said. "I know."

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The Admiralty was not angry.

"You did the right thing," said Captain Goretz, a bluff, bullet-headed man who had lost an eye in some legendary early scrap with the buzzdroids. "There's a time to balance opportunity with a healthy respect for the unknown. The truth is, we've been tangling with these creatures a long time, and neither side is growing tired of it yet. Which means we're probably just sniping at each other's edges. So long as we can reproduce attack ships, and they can reproduce droids, neither side is hurting. If we were suddenly to understand them, or us them, things might get catastrophic. So we'll take all you've told us under advisement. It all gets filed away."

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The Admiralty did take the containment unit of the dust. "Top men and all that cal," said Goretz, with a wry smirk. In appreciation of this find, and as compensation for the loss of an expected prize, the Admiralty authorized a one-time hush-hush payment to Lang and Jae. It was well in excess of what they might have made from the attack ship. Lang did some quick calculating. He could cash out and retire if he wanted.

The Union concurred with that assessment. They politely recommended that both Lang and Jae divest their shares of the Pricey Vulture and conclude their spacing careers. The Union expressed willingness to vote both of them a pension if they would agree to this.

Lang took the money. Jae did not.

"They recommended," said Jae, as they had a final dinner before going their separate ways. "They didn't insist on it. I'm not ready to hang my spurs up, Skipper. I'm still young. I can still make a real fortune." She had taken a portion of the Admiralty money and her share of the Vulture and bought a first officer's share of the *Galaxian*, a cruise starship that made tourist runs for core surfers. "It'll be profitable, and quiet," she said, "and I always wanted to do a little core surfing. Sounds like a good way to pass the time when I am done."

"Smart," said Lang. "I try."

"You succeed."

They drank toasts to each other's future endeavors and shook hands. They had no words. They turned and walked away from each other with smiles. Both of them looked back and waved once.

\*\*\*

Lang took the collected profits of his long spacing career and settled on Alcmaeon, a terraformed moon of a gas giant in a circumbinary orbit of the Kepler 1647B system. The place was designed to evoke Earth, but not too closely. It was mostly water with a series of atoll archipelagoes and one island almost big enough to be termed a continent, though none of the Alcmaeonians call it that. They just called it The Island. Lang bought an atoll a short way into the western sea that had a small house built into it. He lived there under the twisting blue suns and fished and swam and sat in the shade licking choconut residue from his fingers. He lost track of time.

Now and then he would hop into his fast hover-skiff and knife above the waves like an inverse mako shark to The Island. He would drink with the locals, read a few newsfeeds, even catch a flick-show if the mood struck him. Mostly he just

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stuck his feet into the sand and smiled quietly to himself when the sand did nothing about it.

One day while he was traveling back from The Island on his skiff he happened across a fishing balloon. This was one of the newer models, that would deflate and reflate the balloon into a raft all around the gondola. Then an anchor-wire could be shot to the ocean floor.

Lang slowed his skiff and killed the engine. He would have to extend his own flotation wings, as the skiff was too thin to stay above the waves on its own. But that was all right, because they had solar panels installed in them, and he was slightly low on power. So he let the wings out, and hailed the gondola to see if anyone was there. No one was, which meant the person was probably fishing underneath.

He scanned the horizons. No one else was on the water in any direction he could see, and The Island had slipped over the horizon some little ways ago. He was not far from his atoll, but he wouldn't be able to see it for a bit yet. He wouldn't want to wait out here too long. In point of fact, he wasn't sure why he had stopped.

He looked down at the sea. It was brownish-green in color, even this far out, because the seas of Alcmaeon were nowhere near as deep as those of Earth, and the binary stars refracted a different light into the sky. The skies above Alcmaeon were usually orange, even at high noon. The effect made the seas seem like nothing so much as vast mud puddles, translucent and empty. How anyone could go dive-fishing into such waters was beyond him.

Presently a splash of water came up some twenty feet off the prow of the skiff. Someone in breathing gear with a set of murk-killing radon lights attached to the front diving mask. The diver swam to the gondola and tossed something wriggling into it, then climbed in after. As Lang watched, the diver peeled off the mask and skin suit to reveal long brown hair.

She noticed Lang in his skiff and said "watch out."

Presently a lizard head the size of a small chair breached out of the waves. It howled an unholy sound and Lang dropped to the floor of his skiff, clutching his ears, his heart pounding. He'd heard a few of the native Almaeonians mention sea dragons, but he'd dismissed it as local legend of the Loch Ness Monster variety back on earth. He did not know they were real.

A few seconds later he looked up again, and it was gone.

"Sea dragon?" Lang said.

"Yeah," said the diver. "They live deep under. They don't usually breach because



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the air hurts them."

"So..."

"Well," said the diver, with an insouciant grin "If you provoke them..." and she held aloft a harpoon on which a serpent was skewered, wriggling and making a thick clicking sound. The diver drew a knife and cut one end of it off, and it shuddered and was still.

"Believe it or not, they're delicious," she said.

"I believe it. My name's Arturus. I live on the atoll about ten clicks west."

"I'm Thea. I know the one you mean. Gorf's Atoll."

"Who's Gorf?"

"Last guy to live there."

"I see. So when does it become Arturus Atoll? That sounds better."

"As soon as you die there."

Lang nodded. "So what you're saying is, I need to go harpooning with you."

She gave a light, lilting laugh. "I admit, it seems stupid. It's about the only real danger around here. But when you taste it..."

"So you're coming over?"

"Am I?"

They went on like that, a man and a woman on the sea of a distant moon covered with water in a star system thousands of light years from the place of Arturus Lang's birth, feeling out the rhythms intrinsic to their nature. It felt nothing like shaking hands and everything like home.UJ