

*The Voyage of the Reunion*

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By

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## Space, the Final Frontier

*The Voyage of the Reunion* set out to tell the story of three very different men on the same mission. Captain Adams, commander of the *Reunion* itself, guides the expedition through the dangers of space. Mr. Robert Freire, a representative of the United Planets' diplomatic corps, liaisons with the local planetary governments in order to negotiate their return to the fold. Lastly, Reverend John Kaff oversees the mission and ensures that the expedition upholds the morals and standards of the United Planets. Together, they weave a tale that hopefully engages readers and draws them into reflection on the dangers of and possible responses to advances in technology.

### Rationale

In writing these stories, I took as a foundational principle that, while a story is important, a good story is most important. These words do not have a specific source, but represent the general sentiment which has coalesced over the course of six years in college and two as a professional screenwriter. "Good", however, has a double meaning. It refers both to the quality of the work itself and the morals which inform and undergird it. The goal, therefore, was to make a story that was first and foremost a good story, and secondly, but only by a mere fraction, a moral one. Too many authors have set out to teach a lesson first and thus let the narrative itself fall by the wayside. Thus, this collection of stories attempts to deny that unfortunately expansive tradition and adhere closer to the path of Chesterton, whose works had an unmistakable bent to them but nonetheless entertained and delighted many.

The reasons behind this principle are many, but Nathaniel Hawthorne's story, "The Great Stone Face", articulates them best. It tells the tale of Ernest, a boy who lives his whole life in a valley underneath a natural rock formation called The Great Stone Face. The people of the valley

have a prophecy that one day a man would come who was the very image of the Face, and that man would be the wisest and best of them all. Through his wisdom, he would lead the valley to greatness. Enraptured, Ernest studies the Face every day so that he would recognize the prophesied man when he came. As the years pass, many great men come to the valley, and the residents hail them each in turn as the Great Stone Face in flesh. However, Ernest knows them for what they were: not bad men, but just men. The honorable general has seen too much blood and violence to bear the Face's gentle wisdom. The banker's eyes are too sunken and weak from pouring over his books by candlelight. However, the last of the great men, the poet, who had also been born in the valley but had spent a long time away, sits with Ernest and sees how he had grown into a wise and kind old man. As the sun set, the light catches Ernest and the Face just so, and the poet leaps to his feet. He recognizes what no one else did. Ernest has become the very image of the Great Stone Face. Thus, the story is a poignant articulation of a simple truth: a person becomes that which he or she focuses on.

That statement undergirds all my writing. If people give a matter their attention, regardless of how significant or otherwise it is, and dwells on it day after day, they will start to resemble it. Just as a man out for revenge transforms into a monster, so does a priest become holy by contemplating and communing with God. Whether intentional or not, what a person focuses on becomes their treasure, and where a man's treasure lies, according to Matthew 6:19-21, there too lies his heart. Therefore, *The Voyage of the Reunion* strives to engage the reader in order to guide them towards contemplation and reflection. Ideally, the readers would come closer to a biblical understanding of the world, but the text does not try to force the issue. It certainly promotes a biblical outlook, but it cannot try to prescribe the audience's reaction without betraying its commitment to being an entertaining story people can enjoy.

## Subject Matter

Even though it ranks second in terms of importance, the philosophical outlook of the collection merits some explanation. *The Voyage of the Reunion* takes as its subject matter the oncoming and on-going technological revolution. This topic is, of course, terribly broad, and the story cannot hope to address the whole thing within even five hundred pages. However, it starts from the perspective that technology creates problems for mankind, particularly with regards to how humanity should live alongside and in response to the changes it shall and is already creating. From this angle, it specifically addresses three issues associated with the matter.

The first story concerns one possible response to the horrors and terrors technology can create. Perhaps, some might say, it is better to live without. Return to the way things once were, and mankind can avoid a horrible fate. To those who think this way, everything technology can offer pales in comparison to the price it exacts. Unlike the other two stories, therefore, the first one is the only one based on present reality. Several people groups have taken this stance before, such as the Mennonites, and sometimes it allows them to escape the grip of technology. However, this approach does not provide a meaningful avenue for society as a whole. Now that Pandora's Box lies open, no one can close it again. Furthermore, cutting a community off from the benefits of technology comes with its own dangers. Many today owe their lives to the advances in medical science and practice made in the last decade. Thus, *The Voyage of the Reunion* offers a warning to those who would consider the path of complete rejection and asks them to consider another way forward.

The second topic comes in the second story. As computers advance and become more and more integrated into society, then the possibility is that man and machine will one day

merge. The hope of some, and the subject of the second story, is brain uploads. In short, this topic regards a prediction for the future. Once computers are sufficiently advanced, it may become possible to copy the human mind into a machine, as Andrew Pilsch speculates in *Transhumanism: Evolutionary Futurism and the Human Technologies of Utopia*. According to him, some futurists look to this with hope, and their ideal outcome is to create functional immortality for humanity. Therefore, if the body dies, the mind will live on. However, *The Voyage of the Reunion* draws its view on the matter from less enthusiastic sources.

Pop culture has already made dire forecasts full of dystopian images. The original *Star Trek* series had an episode, “What Are Little Girls Made Of?”, where a scientist created an android duplicate of himself that could survive on a hostile world, but has slowly lost his humanity and become more and more a machine. When the crew of the *Enterprise* arrives, they discover the real scientist long dead, and his android duplicate tries to replace Kirk with yet another android. However, the plot is doomed to failure because machines cannot properly imitate humanity. More recently, the novel and following television series of the same name *Altered Carbon* explores the topic of copying the mind not into a computer but into new bodies by way of a “cortical stack”. This implant goes in the back of the neck and copies the memories and personality to a hard-drive, which it saves. When people die, the authorities remove the stack and “re-sleeve” them into a cloned body, if they are wealthy enough to pay for the treatment. However, the series showcases the horrors that such technology would make possible, and the abuse it could lead to. Not only do the wealthy elite in these fictional worlds own their workers’ time, money, and body, but also they own their memories, personality, and identity too. Pop culture, therefore, has promoted a competing narrative to the utopian ideals of immortality and instead graphically depicted the problems that would come from this technology.

Philosophers, however, take a more nuanced and reasoned view, and this collection attempts to engage more with them than with pop culture's somewhat simplistic approach. For philosophers such as Pilsch and F. M. Kamm, the question is one of identity. They ask questions like whether a computer program copied from a living brain is a real person or not, and if yes, whether the copy is the original person or someone entirely different. The situation creates a Gordian Knot in terms of ethics, and it is one that the characters will each respond differently to in the collection.

Thirdly, *The Voyage of the Reunion* engages with a topic that, while not fully present yet, approaches rapidly. John Danaher's article, "Will Life Be Worth Living in a World Without Work?" forms the basis for the third part. The basic outline of the dilemma he presents is that soon an entire class of people will become economically unnecessary. Automation will make much of the labor force obsolete, and therefore no savvy businessman will hire them. Without some assistance, they will fall into squalor or worse. One potential solution which Danaher proposes is to create a world where, alongside removing the ability to work, society removes the need to work. This shift would hopefully free people to pursue their ambitions and drive society forward. In other words, instead of having the world dictate to people what they can contribute, people would be set free to offer whatever they wish to the world ("World without Work"). While such a situation would run the risk of people instead lazing about and not contributing anything, this problem is not the one that *The Voyage of the Reunion* addresses. Instead, it approaches the issue from the angle of division of labor. If everyone is free to do as they will, then society runs the risk of leaving crucial jobs unfilled, to disastrous results. The collection's goal is not to claim that such an outcome certainly will happen, but it introduces the topic and

proposes that such a problem might arise. The third part is a cautionary tale, therefore, as people strive to navigate this rapidly approaching reality.

### **Method**

Taking these specific problems, all of which are but a fraction of the larger debate into which they fit, and putting them into their own engaging stories has been an enjoyable challenge. The serious natures of the topics merit a sincere attempt to explain them well and present them honestly. However, they cannot overwhelm the flow of the narrative and the voice of the characters, lest the integrity of plot fall apart. Thus, the goal in writing *The Voyage of the Reunion* was to focus on the characters themselves. By giving them strong stances on one side or the other of the various issues and having their stances drive the conflict, the plot remains character-driven while still addressing the concerns the story raises with the respect they deserve.

Making the collection be character-driven, however, requires knowledge and skill in the craft. For this particular project, I had three methods in particular upon which I focused my efforts. The first is Blake Snyder's advice to "save the cat", from the book by the same name. The second was to create and preserve John Gardner's fictive dream. Lastly, Dr. Sarah Jane Murray's work delves deep into character design and offers a practical look at making characters seem complex without a minor in psychology.

To "save the cat", as Snyder puts it, is to have a character who would normally be unlikeable do something that endears them to the audience. This event should happen early on in the plot as well, in order to reach the audience before they have formed any permanent opinions about the characters. If placed too late in the story, Snyder warns, it can instead cause resentment when the audience's expectations do not match the reality of what's before them. In addition,

this act reveals some underlying heroic streak that the audience can connect with and even admire (*Save the Cat* 119-43). For example, in Pixar's *UP*, the opening of the movie shows Carl Fredrickson's life and the tragedy surrounding Ellie, his wife. By the time the main story begins and Carl has become an old curmudgeon with very few likeable qualities to his name, the audience still sympathizes with him (*UP*). Thus, though there were no cats in sight, Snyder's principle still applies.

In *The Voyage of the Reunion*, by contrast, two characters needed to save their own cats. Neither Captain Adams nor Robert Freire are the most immediately likeable characters. Adams is a gruff military man who gives orders and has a stern demeanor. Robert Freire is ambitious and a bit of a snob. Neither would immediately connect with an audience. Therefore, I gave them both their own save-the-cat moments in the first section. Robert Freire's concern for the native woman and her child, which is sincere, hopefully shows a softer side of him to the audience, one he does not show to Reverend Kaff or Captain Adams. In a similar fashion, Captain Adam's first reaction when he learns of the danger Freire is in is to leap to the rescue. This response stems from his desire to protect those under his charge. Though he charges a bit headlong and moves hastily, his motives are admirable. Thus, both have moments early on in the story that show the audience that they have more in them than might first appear. As for Reverend Kaff, due to Freire's dismissive treatment of him and his bumbling attitude, the audience should have sympathy for him even without a dedicated save-the-cat moment. However, this part of the craft focuses solely on the opening section of a story.

On the other hand, John Gardner's "Fictive Dream", described in full in his book *The Art of Fiction*, has to happen all through the story. In short, this principle describes the ideal state of mind for readers. They want to forget themselves for a time and immerse themselves into the

story. The real world around them should fade away. Anything that disrupts that state of mind, an awkwardly placed phrase, language that does not match the seriousness or lack-thereof of the subject matter, etc., must not remain when editing is done (*The Art of Fiction* 17-38). In other words, remove anything that would get between the reader and enjoying the story.

Lastly, Dr. Murray wrote her character design guide as part of her book for screenwriters, *Basics of Story Design: 20 Steps to an Insanely Great Screenplay*. As such, some of it applies only to movie scripts and the like. However, the trio of character elements she puts forward, Mask, Want, and Need, detailed in the fourth chapter “Step Two: Getting Started”, apply universally. In short, when planning out characters, following this process hopefully ends with an author to quickly getting a grasp on who the characters are, what role they might play in the story, and what motivates them.

The Mask is how the characters present themselves. Oftentimes, it overlaps with the character’s archetype (“Step Two”). Captain Adams, for example, fits the general expectations readers have for a military man. He is strong and focuses primarily on his duty. Thus, how he presents himself, his Mask, also describes the archetype he embodies. Similarly, Freire presents himself as an eager worker, ready to serve, and perhaps a little gallant. Kaff appears as a bumbling academic, unused to dealing with people and easy for the others to overlook. Upon first glance, the three of the audience should form these impressions about them.

A character’s Want is, predictably, a character’s immediate goal or motivation, though in this case “immediate” refers not to how close it is in proximity but how high of a priority it is to the person in question (“Step Two”). For all of the three principle characters of *The Voyage of the Reunion*, therefore, one of their Wants is to finish their mission, though each has their own reasons for it. Adams strives to fulfill his military duty. Freire seeks the fame that would come

from returning the lost colonies to the fold. Kaff's motivation is a little less clear, but he primarily wants to help the others. Thus, they all share a goal, but their reasons for it draw them into friction with one another. In the end, therefore, these differing reasons make for a more interesting story.

Lastly, the Need is what the characters must have in order to make them whole people. Typically, they must resolve their Need in order to end the story well ("Step Two"). For example, King Lear has to learn the difference between false flattery and honest love. However, in *The Voyage of the Reunion*, none of the characters ever find what they really need. Captain Adams comes closest. At the end, the reader might hope he will reconnect with his estranged family, or at least send the letter he wrote. Robert Freire needs to find some fulfillment outside his work. Several times, he almost makes a human connection, but his work remains the most important part of his life. As for Reverend Kaff, he has a love of order and the ways of the Church, but needs to find wisdom and confidence in his faith. At the very end, while he does move towards regaining his confidence, he still struggles with his faith. Thus, none of them end the story in the best spot, but none are entirely lost at this point either. Hope remains for each. Furthermore, their Needs highlight some of the collection's general themes. Adams' loneliness and estrangement build upon the feeling of lost humanity that appears several times throughout the story. Freire's single-minded dedication makes him more like an artificial man than a full-realized one. Lastly, Kaff's questioning and concern reflects the reactions that many have or will have to the questions raised by the text. They are difficult problems, and need care and concern to properly address.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

This story, therefore, addresses important and pertinent issues and has been an excellent opportunity to use different elements of writing fiction. It takes its subject matter seriously and attempts to tell an equally serious story. However, it does not simply create a hopeless narrative. Despite the danger present, the characters survive. My hope is that the real world will do the same.

## **THE VOYAGE OF THE REUNION**

### **PART ONE**

*Captain's Log, U.P.V. Reunion*

*Ten planets. No survivors. Only world after world picked clean of all life by the Scourge. Morale is low. Some of the crew have been muttering that all the United Planets' colonies must have been wiped out, and that's why we haven't heard from them in all this time.*

*I've done my best to keep a lid on this sort of talk, of course. The other leaders and I are still hopeful. Reverend Kaff, Mr. Freire, and myself have been working well together. Never thought a man of the Church and a diplomat would be able to stay in the same space, much less work together, but they've had no complaints for me so far. If there are any living worlds out here, by god we will find them.*

*We are approaching the eleventh tomorrow. Let us hope for a better outcome.*

Robert Freire avoided military men, as a rule. They were straight and to the point, which he appreciated as a fellow servant of the state. Still they had this violent outlook that wormed its way into more than just battle. Thus, he had been quite annoyed when an ensign burst into his office without knocking and babbled about the Captain demanding his presence. However, the energy and excitement which permeated the air of the bridge quenched his rising anger and replaced it with curiosity.

The Reverend stumbled in afterwards. A bit of a bumbler, in Freire's opinion, but tolerable as far as representatives of the Church went. He had expected to be at odds with the man, but so far the quiet priest had communicated mostly by email, aside from a few awkward tries at striking up casual conversation when they happened to meet in the halls. At this particular moment, Reverend Kaff was nervously eyeing the activity and waiting for someone to speak to him.

Freire was not so patient. He cleared his throat. "So, Captain, would you care to explain why you demanded our presence?"

Captain Adams looked up from the console and grinned. "Freire! Reverend! I think this one just might be inhabited."

The Reverend sighed in relief. "Thank God. I was worried, you know. Six months out in space and—"

"Just over seven," Freire corrected. Precision was paramount. "Seven months, two days warping around looking at the ruins of our colonies and trying to figure out if the Scourge left any survivors." He chuckled grimly. "Hate those scaly murderers as we all do, but you have to admire their thoroughness and efficiency."

“Thank you, Ambassador,” the Captain snapped. His arms folded tightly across his chest. “That’s the first and last time anyone on my ship is going to give the Scourge anything approaching a compliment. Clear?”

Freire sighed. There was that violent outlook again. Still, best to smooth things over. He gave a small bow. “Of course. My apologies, captain. Chalk it up to my diplomat’s training and let’s move on.”

The Captain nodded. “You’ll be happy to know that we have picked up power signatures from the site we are approaching. The *Reunion*’s sensors can’t tell exactly what is being powered, but in order to pick it up from this range, it has to be a sizeable generator. Perhaps, the main reactor for a surviving colony?”

“Don’t take my words the wrong way, Captain,” the ambassador said, “I am very glad to hear this news. It means I can do my job, for one. But, while you and the Reverend figure out how each destroyed colony fell, I’m tired of sitting in my office and feeling useless.” His lips cracked into a smile. Be diplomatic. Give the man a compliment, and maybe include the Reverend for good measure. “Your first mate is a very amicable man, and not bad at chess, but man cannot live by chess alone. Right, Reverend?”

The Reverend, John Kaff, jumped at his name, surprised that someone was talking to him. A nervous smile spread across his face, and he let out a polite laugh. “Neither chess nor bread, Mr. Freire, but every word that comes from the mouth of God.” He beamed at the whole room in what he must have thought a fatherly smile.

Freire looked back to Captain Adams. “Right, see? The Reverend agrees and that makes it Word of God.”

“I’ll tell Commander Thompson you enjoy his company.” Captain Adams pressed a few keys and the room darkened. A hologram of an almost-pristine planet flickered into existence, the natural landscape marred only by a single dot that marked the location of a large human settlement, about the size of Long Island. “This is from the Colonial Records. Last recorded image of the colony before the Scourge came and wiped out whole sectors. Power output’s high, though.” He looked to the diplomat. “Got anything on the place from the Diplomatic Corps, Mr. Freire?”

Freire pursed his lips and pulled up the planet from his database. “Not much, I’m afraid” the man replied. “Standard colonial charter. They had planned to expand rapidly, but those plans obviously never came to fruition.”

The Reverend piped up in a desperate attempt to contribute meaningfully to the conversation. “Forgive me, gentlemen, if I am out of place, but if they planned on making a larger colony, well, that would explain the large generator, unless I miss my mark?”

“Indeed,” Mr. Freire agreed. What the Reverend said was patently obvious, but that was fine. Diplomatic meetings often involved stating the obvious and pretending to think it profound. “It’s cheaper to buy and install a larger one up front than to tear an old one out and replace it.” Enough of that diversion. Back to business. He flicked through a few more files on his tablet. “Census data is normal for a colony of the time. Ethnic and religious data shows a healthy spread. From everything we know, this should be a pretty standard human society.”

“From everything we know,” Reverend Kaff cautioned. “Keep in mind these people have been on their own for almost three decades now. Who knows what may have happened?”

“We will soon.” Captain Adams rose with a slight grunt. “Well, let’s hope they still accept the old clearance codes.”

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The comms officer frowned and turned to look back over his shoulder. “No reply, captain.”

Captain Adams stared at the viewscreen, which showed the planet rapidly approaching. “Try once more.”

Freire was, despite his diplomat’s training, pacing back and forth. He intended to show an air of calm and collectedness, but the complete and total refusal to answer their hails was worrying him. “And you’re sure,” he said, “They can hear us?”

“Stake my life on it,” the comms officer said. “We’re connected to their network and all. The line’s just dead. It’s a little eerie, I think.”

In Freire’s opinion, the man was not paid to think, but he kept that to himself.

Another few minutes passed, and no response came. Adams leaned forward in his chair and steepled his fingers. “Helm, bring us closer to the surface. Maybe their comms—”

A klaxon blared through the bridge. The crew scrambled to respond. “Report!” Adams bellowed.

“Subwaved-based EMP, sir!” the tactical officer responded. “No effect on our systems.”

Freire, however, was ecstatic. “That explains how they survived the Scourge,” he exclaimed. This was the confirmation he needed. If they had figured out that the Scourge was weak to EMPs on their own, they would have survived. If they had figured it out quickly, they may have even fared better than most of the United Planets. He whirled towards Adams.

“Captain, I have to get down there immediately.”

“Wait,” Kaff stammered. “What if you’re, I mean, what if they mistake you for the Scourge? Should we expect a panic?”

Kaff's caution put a damper on Freire's good mood, but it was impossible to suppress entirely. "Possible," Freire admitted begrudgingly, "Still, I'm the diplomat. The sooner I can get in contact with their heads of government, the sooner we can sort all this out and re-introduce them to the galaxy at large." He turned to Adams. "Perhaps one more hail?"

Adams nodded. "Comms, try one more time. Maybe our unexpected persistence will make them talkative."

But no response came.

Kaff chewed his lip pensively. "This is more in your wheelhouse, gentlemen. I'm not exactly able to evaluate the moral and ethical status of a colony if we can't get in touch with the colony. What are our other options, besides the comms?"

There was a long pause. "We'll have to send a shuttle down," Adams said at last, "an away team to take stock of what the situation is."

Freire nodded eagerly. "Quite right, Captain," he said with a smile. Now came something he knew would push the captain's boundaries, but there was no help for it. Freire's pride and duty demanded it. "And I'll be with them."

Adams looked askance at him. "We're not dropping you in there without some idea of what the situation on the ground is like. We'll send a team to secure a landing site before we risk you."

"Captain." Freire adopted a gallant air. "It is my honor and privilege to perform the office given me by the United Planets. Just as you command the ship and the Reverend here guides our souls, I must see to the diplomatic side of this mission. I would be terribly remiss if I were not there to ensure that first contact goes smoothly. Now, are you going to accept this, or do I need to bribe you with a few cases of fine wine?"

Adams studied him and turned to the tactical officer. “Can our shuttles withstand the EMP?”

The man nodded. “Yes, captain.”

The captain nodded. “Well, Mr. Freire, best of luck.”

“And Godspeed,” the Reverend added.

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The shuttle touched down lightly. Robert Freire took comfort in the military-grade environment suit the sergeant had insisted he wear. More like light power armor, he mused. It gave little physical protection, and what extra strength it gave him just barely compensated for its own weight, but it would at least ensure his personal comms and other electronics survived the EMP. The pulse seemed to lock onto their shuttle the moment they left the *Reunion* and had not let up the whole way down. Some sort of auto-targeting system, no doubt, or else a very accurate gunner. Freire chewed his lip. Hopefully, once he got to talk to the locals, things would go better.

“Secure the area,” the sergeant ordered his squad. To Freire, he added, “You sit tight for now. The moment we see something, we’ll call for you.”

“Right. Of course,” Freire replied. By all rights, he should be leading the way, since this was a diplomatic, not military, operation, but the soldiers were unlikely to relent. He had been around enough of them to know when and where to push. His presence here was enough to set them on edge already. He could only hope to be close enough when they found the inhabitants to keep the soldiers from doing something violent and stupid. Besides, Freire had seen the city on his way down, and it had not given him much hope.

It was abandoned. No signs of war or conflict. Just abandoned. If the Scourge had attacked, it would be flattened. As it was, the sunlight gleamed off empty towers, and vines crept

over raised highways. The scanner had picked up signs of life, though, and reported that some of them might be human. Amongst the dense foliage, however, it could not tell for sure where those potential humans were.

The soldiers disembarked out the back door of the shuttle, and Freire watched them move into the trees surrounding the clearing their pilot had blasted for them to land in. He idly tapped the armrest of his seat, nervous.

Reports came back from the away team at regular intervals. No signs of human life. Plenty of animals, though, some widely known and some native to the planet. Freire began to relax. Yes, the place was a little eerie, but there was no immediate danger. The surroundings were peaceful. His eyes wandered over the exotic plants that had grown over the street and already pulled down some of the buildings. Everything, he mused, had already been reconquered by nature. Now it was only a matter of time before the city vanished. Soon after, the colony's reactor would fail. They built those things to last, but it would shut itself down eventually. Then, almost nothing would remain to tell the universe a human colony once lived here.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw movement between two trees. An animal, he told himself, but peered closer anyway. A moment later, he leapt to his feet. A face, or what he thought was a face, stared at him. They locked eyes for what felt like five seconds before it disappeared.

Freire's mouth worked silently for a moment. The locals, it had to be. But how had they evaded the scanners? "This area is secure, right?" he asked the pilot.

"Yes sir," the pilot responded.

"Call the others back," Freire ordered and made for the exit.

The pilot froze. "Sir? Sir! I wouldn't step—"

Freire ignored him. The pilot had his duty, but Freire had his own. Heart hammering, he stepped onto the alien world and approached the spot where he had seen the face. “Hello!” he said. “My name is Robert Freire. I’m a diplomat for the United Planets, and I—”

The bushes rustled. With a war-cry, five men in crude metal armor charged out. Freire put his hands up in an attempt to placate them, but it did nothing. Right as he heard the pilot shout something, a hammer connected with the visor of his helmet. It knocked him off his feet and to the ground. Winded, he could only stare up as one of the five stood over him. The hammer came up once again and crashed against the side of his helmet. This time, the impact knocked him unconscious.

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“Captain,” the comms officer said, “We’ve lost contact with the shuttle pilot and Freire.”

Adams leapt out of his seat. “The away team?”

“On their way back to the shuttle.”

A tense minute followed as they waited for the team’s report. At last, the comms officer looked up and shook his head. “No sign of them. Away team says it looks like some kind of scuffle, but whoever’s responsible is already gone. And took the two of them.”

Adams cursed long and loudly. “Get another shuttle ready. I’m going down there, and I’m taking a full squad of marines in hard-suits. We’ll scan every square inch of that rock until we find them.”

“Is that wise?” Kaff asked nervously. “If something happens to you too—”

Adam’s growl silenced the Reverend. “I didn’t want this to happen, but I’m not about to let our chief diplomat get himself killed because he wanted to play hero of the United Planets.”

“Marines are suiting up now, sir.”

“Very good.” Adams strode towards the door. “Commander, you have the bridge. I’ll meet the marines at the hangar.”

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Freire awoke several hours later, according to the time projected on his (now cracked) helmet visor. The medical readout also informed him that he had a concussion.

He heard something stir beside him and tried to sit up, but found that his arms and legs were tightly bound. “Who’s there?” he called out.

“It’s me,” the pilot said with a groan. “They got the drop on us. Couldn’t risk firing without hitting you.” Freire’s eyes adjusted quickly to the dark, and he saw the other man slumped in the corner, arms and legs bound with thick ropes. A quick check confirmed that his own limbs were similarly bound. A smart move on the natives’ part, but not one that boded well for diplomacy.

“That’s perfectly fine,” Freire assured him. “Where are we?”

“Well,” the man said, “They dragged us down here. Kicked me about because I was still conscious. Gonna have the mother of all bruises on my back for the next few weeks. Don’t know where we are now. They dragged us pretty far. But then they left us here, and I don’t know where they went.”

“I see,” Freire said. Not how he hoped first contact would go.

The pilot lowered his voice. “I don’t like this, sir. Hope our comms are broadcasting strong enough for help to find us.”

Freire’s heart began beating quickly again, and he suppressed the urge to gulp. “The feeling is mutual,” he assured the pilot. “If it is any consolation, I will assure Captain Adams that

I caused our current predicament.” It was only right. More than that, it was his duty. If one wanted to succeed, really succeed, one had to own his mistakes.

“That would be appreciated. Once we’re safely back aboard.”

Freire took the opportunity to look about the room. It might have been a closet at one point, down in the maintenance area of a subway tunnel perhaps. Now, however, the door was thrice-barred and sealed, locking its unhappy occupants inside. Any tools had long since been removed, leaving only the bare shelves, and even those looked picked over. Scavenged, perhaps? Freire reminded himself not to make wild speculation. He needed more data on these people, who he was now certain were the original colonists, before he made any final decisions. He had so many questions and so few answers.

The chance came sooner than he would have liked. The door slid open, and four men filed in. Each wielded a spear and wore crude armor carved from a strange metal. Freire frowned. No, not so strange. Very familiar, in fact, but not the kind typically used for spears. It was a plasteel alloy typically used for starship hulls. It also had the unique effect of hiding or scrambling sensor data, which explained why the scanners had not pin-pointed their position earlier. Clever, disconcertingly so.

Behind them, with great pomp and circumstance, came an elderly man with what Freire thought was a ridiculous headdress. He sneered down at the two captives. “So,” he said in passable Galactic Standard, “These are the Metal Demons?”

Freire pushed himself to a half-upright position, the best he could manage while bound. “Greetings in the name of the United Planets,” he said formally. “My name is Robert Freire, a diplomat. I and the ship which brought me are here on a mission of peace. We seek to re-establish contact with all members of the human race left stranded among the stars. It has been

over two decades, but surely one like yourself remembers the time when humanity stood united?”

The old man stood unmoved. “We remember,” he said. “It was the darkest of times. A time when we were trapped in bondage to the Machine.” His eyes were cold. “But we killed the Prophets of the Machine and brought its armies crashing to the ground.”

“The Scourge.” Freire was guessing here. “We call them the Scourge, if I am not being presumptuous.”

“Oh. The invaders, yes. They also fell. No.” The old man pointed his staff at them. “The Prophets were men: men like you. Their sins were what brought the Invaders. And now you will share their fate to ensure the sins of the past remain in their graves.” To his companions, he said, “Seize them.”

The four surged forward and, between them, managed to hoist the two bound men up. The pilot shouted in anger and Freire babbled in an attempt to get control of the situation. While he was taught not to judge a culture solely based on the first five minutes experiencing it, being captured and presumably killed was giving him a rather dim view of the lot.

They dragged the two captives into a large chamber. Once it had been a subway station, but the roof had collapsed over one track and left it open to the night sky. Under this, they had erected an altar of sorts. It was a crude concrete slab, decorated with the burned out husks of machines. The top surface itself was scorched and marred, but a dried red stain in the middle of it made Freire’s heart leapt to his throat. Though he had no guarantee, it looked like old blood.

A great crowd of people rose as they entered. Women and men with gaunt, drawn faces. Children with too-skinny limbs. Their faces were pocked and marked by disease. Everywhere Freire looked, another set of gaunt, hollow eyes stared back at him. Between them, the old man,

and the altar, it was as if he had stepped out of the real world and into a primeval nightmare of primitive superstition.

The four men dragged him and the pilot up to the altar. The crowd shuffled up behind. Their leader turned to them. “These are the servants of the Machine!” he declared. “Their evil has brought this blight upon us! With their death, the plague will lift.” A few ragged cheers came from the crowd.

Freire raised his voice. “Plague?” he said. Now there was a chance. If there was a plague, surely the medical team aboard the *Reunion* could help. They could turn all this around yet. “Well if you have a plague, why didn’t you say so? If that’s all, then we can certainly help.”

“You will,” the old man said. “Your tainted blood shall cleanse the faithful once and for all.”

Ah. The man was insane. Freire’s tentative hope flickered fitfully. “Come now, don’t be unreasonable. We have medicine. Trained doctors! We can cure you. There is no need for murder.”

The old man rounded on him. “Silence,” he hissed, “You will be silent.”

“What is it?” Freire asked. “Scullman’s Virus? The symptoms look—” He took another glance for good measure. It certainly looked like Scullman’s. He was not a medical professional, but he had caught it as a child. “—similar.”

The old man’s face colored. “We do not know of what you speak.”

“Scullman’s is easily treatable,” Freire said and forced his voice to be calm. “In one week, we can cure the whole—”

“Silence!” the old man roared. “We will not be deceived again. We will not be drawn back into the Machine’s grip.”

A young woman shuffled forward, a baby in her arms. Her eyes were hollow and flat, and the baby coughed weakly. The room fell silent. All eyes turned to her. The old man's eyes burned and bored into hers. For a moment, her spirit quailed and her eyes fell; they fell upon the child in her arms. She raised them again with new determination. "Is what you say true?" she asked Freire.

"Yes," he said, voice full of sincerity, "We can save you."

The old man's face became a mask of fury. He spread his arms wide. "Have you all learned nothing?" He spat. "The Machine enslaves, it does not heal. We are free as we are. We made the choice. We created the shield, the shield that would destroy any machine."

Freire's eyes lit up with realization. "The EMP field. You set it up. First to defend yourselves, but then you decided it was best to leave it on. Live a simpler life." He struggled to a sitting position. "But we can help you."

He glowered at Freire. "We are fine as we are. We do not need your help."

The woman remained unconvinced, and her eyes remained on Freire.

"Let us help you," Freire said. He turned to the old man. "Please. Let us save you."

For a moment, the old man remained frozen. "Perhaps," he said at last, "Perhaps you speak sincerely. But it matters not. We are better off dead than back in the Machine's grasp." He yanked a spear from one of the guards and brandished it over Freire. "And now you too shall die!"

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"Captain, we are nearing the location of Mr. Freire's transponder," the marine pilot said.

"Very good!" Adams responded. "Take us in loud and proud."

"Sir, yes sir."

“All right, marines,” Adams called. “Get ready to drop. Anything look hostile? Shoot it.”

---

A loud roar came from above. Not the sound of a beast, but an engine. An attack shuttle crashed through the remains of the roof and showered the crowd in small bits of concrete. Spotlights lit up the altar and the voice of Captain Adams blared out over the speakers. “This is the captain of the United Planets’ ship *Reunion*. Release those two men now or you will answer to me.”

The old man shielded his eyes, but hate stamped itself on to his face. He raised the spear once more. The sound of a single shot rang out, and the old man disintegrated into a pile of dust and electrons.

“No!” Freire called. With that one shot, all hope of reconciling with these people faded. That one shot ended the mission. They would never accept someone who had killed their leader. Even if some had been willing to stand up to him, their voices would be lost in the midst of a call for vengeance.

Ten of the ship’s marines leapt free of the shuttle and slammed into the earth, weapons at the ready. The locals shrieked in terror and fear. Those that could scattered. Those too terrified to move fell to their knees and stared in open-mouthed awe.

Two marines picked up Freire and the pilot. “Targets secure!” the squad leader shouted. The jump-jets on their backs flared to life, and they shot back up into the air. In a few moments, they were all back aboard the shuttle. Adams stood near the entryway and clasped Friere’s hand in both of his as he entered.

“Glad to see you in one piece,” Adams said, giving Freire a hearty handshake.

“You fool!” Freire yanked his hand free. “You’ve ruined everything. This was the first colony we’ve found in months, and you military meatheads ruined it!” Not the most diplomatic stance, but Freire could not bring himself to rein in his fury. He was making progress. Shooting the spear would have been sufficient. But no, they had killed a man, and with it any hope of peaceful resolution.

Adams’ hands remained extended for a moment. Then, they fell and his face hardened. “Freire,” he snapped, “You were seconds away from being killed.”

The locals let out a communal shriek. As Freire had predicted, anger had replaced terror. Spears flew up at the shuttle, which had no hope of striking home but made the intent clear. They had no intent to listen now. Freire slumped down into a seat. “Just take us back to the ship,” he chuckled bitterly, “There’s nothing we can do now. They set themselves up for this. EMP field defended them, but destroyed their own unshielded electronics. Now they believe that they are better off without it. They chose this path, and thanks to you we can’t convince them to leave it.”

Adams grunted. “Well, all the worse for them, then. Pilot! Get us off this rock.”

*Diplomatic Corps Missive*

*Submitted by: Robert Freire*

*Gentlemen,*

*We found some humans, at least. Due to their cultish beliefs and the fact that Captain Adams killed their leader, they have made it abundantly clear they don't want to talk to us ever again, but we found them.*

*I know the review board might question this decision, but I am afraid I am going to have to respect the wishes of the locals and leave them to their own devices. Here is a summary of the encounter to date:*

*We landed on the planet. Immediately, I and the pilot were ambushed and taken captive.*

*They intended to kill us both, and only Captain Adam's swift arrival saved us (footage of the event included with file for verification purposes).*

*Full-power scans of the rest of the planet show no other signs of human life on the planet.*

*A second team sent down to try and reestablish contact was greeted with spears.*

*I think, therefore, that we can safely say that we are not welcome. I do admit that this is a very frustrating experience. We have the means to save them all. There cannot be more than two hundred left, and the Reunion could easily fit that many inside her hold. Our medical facilities could heal their sick and treat their injured. However, we cannot cure them of their own stupidity, if you'll allow me to be thoroughly undiplomatic.*

*Still, I feel I must apologize. This whole debacle has put me a little bit on the back foot. I will do my very best going forward to ensure things proceed more smoothly.*

*Regards,*

*Mr. Robert Freire*

**PART TWO**

*To the Most Revered Society of the Church Galactic*

*Your divine eminences,*

*My position here remains precarious. True, Mr. Freire and the captain do show me due respect, but I think they would rather not have me here at all. It is disheartening as I have done everything in my power to accommodate them and stay in my lane. I have restricted myself to merely commenting on the affairs of the colonies upon which we have arrived. The list is very limited so far, but I think I have shown remarkable restraint.*

*I am repeatedly dismayed, you must understand, by the heedless and immoral behavior of the crew. If this were one of our ships, they would all be brought before the review board in no time flat. The time spent in the virtual spaces alone is enough to dismay me. They pay so much attention to the worlds they create that they have hardly enough time to care for the concerns of what is real. However, I am upholding the terms of our agreement with the government, have no fear. I am afraid that all it will take is one major breach of ethics before I can no longer remain silent.*

*Respectfully yours,*

*Reverend Kaff*

The man on the *Reunion*'s viewscreen adjusted his glasses. "Well, I shouldn't ramble. Let me sum up by saying, welcome. We are very glad to have you."

"Thank you, doctor," Mr. Freire said, a genuine smile on his face. "Allow me to say that this is a welcome change from our last stop."

The doctor laughed. "Oh, think nothing of it," he said. "We have been looking forward to the return of the United Planets for a long time. We have quite a lot to share with the galaxy at large."

The transmission ended. Freire turned to Adams, a grin on his face. "That went well," he declared. "I mean, I still have many things to arrange, but I am off to a good start. Openness and willingness to reintegrate makes my job many times easier."

Adams gave the man a curt nod. Personally, he was happy to see the man back out of his room and in a good mood. He had been moping about ever since Adams had saved his life. It still bothered Adams that the man had been so angry, but the captain was committed to their success as a group. They had to find a way to work together if they wanted to succeed.

"I will be interested to record the details of their society," Reverend Kaff mused. "In particular, I find it fascinating that their apparent leader still goes by the title of doctor and not something more befitting his station. It speaks of surprising and encouraging humility."

Freire shrugged. "Such things are in your purview, Reverend. I shall restrict myself to the legal matters."

"Oh, speaking of, Mr. Freire, I do hope you won't be so caught up that you will entirely ignore my reports," Kaff said, a shy eagerness in his voice. "I know my inclusion was a controversial choice, but I will try to highlight only the relevant information. The stuff you can actually use, I mean. I hope that makes sense."

“Of course,” Freire assured him.

“I don’t mean to pressure you,” the Reverend continued. “But I feel like you and the captain have been, you know, ignoring me.”

Freire let out a chuckle. “Don’t take it personally, Reverend. Men of my profession are skeptical of academics as a habit. If you do see any glaring problems, I welcome your input. It only can help me do my job better, hmm?”

Kaff gave him an uneasy smile. “Well, I hope there’d be more to it than just helping you do your job.”

With a shrug, Freire replied, “I’ll give everything a once-over, but after our last disaster, I have to redouble my efforts. I only have time for what’s relevant.”

The Reverend’s shoulders slumped. “Ah yes. Of course. I see. Very dutiful of you. But do give some thought to--”

“Perhaps,” Freire interjected, “This conversation belongs somewhere other than the bridge of a warship.”

“Quite right.” Kaff’s head bobbed in agreement, “Perhaps tonight?”

“Oh, I’ll be busy,” Freire said. “With this breakthrough, I’ve got so much work, I don’t know when I’ll have a spare moment. But, I’ll let you know.”

“Ah.” The reverend closed his mouth and sat down.

Captain Adams hid a sigh and tried to pay attention to their approach. That right there was the kind of division he did not want. He had seen too many soldiers like Freire. They were out for personal glory and almost got their whole command killed for it. Well, good thing Freire was not in the military, then. He set these thoughts aside and returned his attention to what was directly in front of him.

A dusty world slowly filled the screen in front of them. However the *Reunion*'s current course took it not towards the surface. Rather they were headed to impressive space station orbiting it. Scars and pockmarks showed proof of a great battle many years ago. Still, the station itself was powered and lit. Its hangar doors opened slowly as they approached. Adams grimaced. It reminded him of a maw. Something felt off. He had not spent this long in the service without getting a sixth sense of when something was wrong. Even if he had never made Admiral, he knew he was no green officer. He knew to, if not trust, at least listen to his instincts.

"Scan it," Adams said quietly.

The comms officer nodded and did so. "This is odd. Captain? No life signs reported aboard."

"An automated station?" Adams mulled this over. "Hail them again."

Their transmission was immediately accepted. Their host, Dr. Jarlath, appeared onscreen, eyebrow slightly raised. "Problem, captain?"

"Dr. Jarlath," Adams said, "Perhaps you could explain what we're seeing here. There do not appear to be any life signs on board your station."

"Very astute. Your sensors are more accurate than I expected." The doctor adjusted his glasses. "I see your concern, but it is unwarranted. That would be part of our defensive shields. They prevent the Scourge -- I believe you called them that? They prevented the Scourge from locking onto us. We discovered that their targeting systems locked onto life-signs, and so removing the life-signs made it very difficult for them to find us. Rest assured, I will be there to greet you when you enter the hangar."

Adams eyed the opening with trepidation. "Roger," he said, "Proceeding."

Dr. Jarlath smiled. "I await your arrival."

Kaff and Freire studied the screen with anxious anticipation. The other conversations on the bridge died down. The gaping hole of the station's main hangar, the size of a full dry-dock, loomed before them. "I don't like this," the helmsman muttered.

"Entering that hangar does leave us at the doctor's mercy," the Reverend agreed.

"Captain?"

Adams thought for a moment. If others felt the way he did, that all but confirmed his suspicions. "As long as we remain outside, our weapons offer some deterrent. Send him this message. 'Unable to enter hangar. We're sending a shuttle over'." The crew immediately carried out his order. Adams leaned back a bit in his chair. "We'll see how he responds," Adams muttered to the other leaders of the expedition.

They did not wait long. A power surge ran across the station and its lights flared to a blazing inferno of color. The *Reunion* heeled over to the side. Alarms blared. Lights flickered. Adams' voice bellowed above the cacophony. "Report!"

"Tractor beam sir!" the tactical officer said. "Strong one! Trying to compensate."

"Hail the station!" Adams snarled.

The doctor answered promptly, a smirk on his face. Adams wanted to punch it right off.

"Problem, Captain?"

"Doctor, you're lucky this is a diplomatic mission. Break off your attack right now," Adams ordered.

"Attack?" the doctor repeated. "I think you're overreacting."

"Don't play games," the captain snapped. "Break it off or we start firing."

The doctor sighed and took off his glasses. He produced a handkerchief and began wiping them clean. "This happened with the planet too," he says. "I assure you, captain, I mean you no harm. Please, lower your shields and enter the hangar. I will explain things in full there."

Captain Adams raised a hand, the word 'Fire' rising to his lips, when Freire cut in. "Doctor! Hello. Robert Freire, United Planets Diplomatic Corps here. Perhaps you could help allay our fears with a little explanation of what's going on right now."

"Please," Reverend Kaff added.

The doctor sighed. "Oh very well." He redonned his glasses. "Gentlemen," he said, "I finally did it. I have created immortality. I cracked the code, you see. Fully authentic uploads. The human mind quite the enigma, but I managed to create a system that could handle it." He sighed in contentment. "And with it, I saved the entire planet. Not just from the 'Scourge', but all the ravages and dangers of time. They are all safe."

"And what does that have to do with us?" Adams demanded. The sinking feeling was getting stronger, but he wanted the doctor to confirm it before he took action.

He straightened and smiled. "This is the gift I mentioned. This is what I shall offer the United Planets. No more must we live in fear. We shall all be immortal. It started with this planet, but it shall continue with you."

The bridge was silent, save for the computer reading out a list of alerts and system statuses. Captain Adams leaned sideways and whispered harshly, "Fire the weapons. Full salvo."

The doctor chuckled. "Please captain. I have spent the past twenty years repairing and upgrading this station. Your weapons will have no—"

Adams ignored him. "Fire."

Though caught between the force of its own engine and invisible hand of the station, the *Reunion* had managed to turn away slightly. Now parallel to the station, it brought a full broadside to bear and let loose from the ship's port side. Lasers and missiles struck the station's shield with the such great force that it flickered and failed for a moment. New scars appeared along the station's side. The doctor's face momentarily registered surprise.

"We've made a few breakthroughs of our own in the past few decades," Adams said defiantly. "Your shields are out of date." And of course, his ship had all the latest weaponry, specially outfitted for this mission. Adams' confidence surged.

"Indeed." The doctor's smile was a little strained. "No matter. One more moment and—" A rainbow corona of energy embraced the *Reunion*. Its shields rotated rapidly, searching for the best frequency to counter it. Adams scanned the readouts. They left him confused, however. This attack fit no conventional weapons-profile, and it was draining the shields at an alarming rate. The ship's Virtual Intelligence was compensating quickly and would figure out a counter in a few moments, but things would be rather close.

"Steady," he said to the crew. "Keep up the barrage. Shields will modulate in a—"

"Shields pierced! We have a breach!" the tactical officer shouted. Beside him, the comms officer stood up with a sudden scream. He clutched at his head, eyes wide and mouth agape. Adams half-rose from his chair, the call for help on his lips, but it was too late. The man fell over, dead before he hit the floor. A moment later, the shields were back online.

Kaff covered his mouth. Freire stared with open-mouthed shock. Captain Adams, however, turned to the viewscreen, jaw clenched in fury.

"What did you do?" he demanded.

“The same thing I did to the planet,” Jarlath replied evenly. “I’ve saved him. Instant mind-scan. It copies over everything at once. Of course, the drawback is that the invasive nature of the scan fries the living brain, but it only causes—” He gave the captain a smile that was supposed to be comforting, but gave Adams a chill instead. “—mild discomfort.”

Adams had heard enough. Jarlath was a threat to his ship, and he would not let that continue. “Tactical,” he said, “Cut secondary systems and reroute to—”

“One moment please,” the doctor said. A faint shimmer appeared beside him on the screen. The comms officer materialized next to the doctor, a beatific smile on his face and a distant look in his eyes.

Adam’s held up a hand. “Hold fire,” he ordered. Eyes blazing, he said. “What’s the meaning of—”

“You killed him,” Kaff interrupted, speaking as if coming from a daze. “He was alive one moment and, just like that, you killed him.” Adams glowered at him. He did not appreciate being cut off like that.

“I assure you, I did not,” the doctor said. “He’s right here.” He put a hand on the comms officer’s shoulder. “Tell them.”

The comms officer’s eyes snapped into focus. “Captain Adams!” he said with a bright smile, “Hello sir. It’s been a while.”

“We perceive time faster,” the doctor said. “A year can pass within the space of a conversation. Slowing down to talk to you is actually quite the challenge.”

“It’s amazing here, captain,” the comms officer continued. “It’s, well, it’s pretty much heaven. The doctor explained it all to me, and it took some getting used to, but this is better than anything you could dream of out there.”

Captain Adams slowly let his hand drop. This whole thing was really messed up. Too much was happening. He wanted to shoot the station out of the sky, but now he hesitated. Maybe, he mused ruefully, this sort of behavior is why he never made admiral. He cleared his throat. “Lt. Jonathan,” he said, “Allow me to clarify something. I am staring at your dead body. You’ve died, son.”

Kaff’s face went white. He seemed to be coming to grips with what was going on himself now. “A virtual world,” he said in horror. “You’ve made the virtual world their reality. A false heaven.”

“Ah yes. I suppose the Church would object,” Dr. Jarlath said with a sigh. “But your ideas will change once you experience it for yourself.”

“Besides,” the comms officer added in a conciliatory tone, “it’s not like the Church’s morals are gone here. I’ve actually attended some services. We still got to follow the same ethics and all.”

“An abomination,” Kaff insisted. “A nightmare. One that must end.”

“I agree,” Adams growled. “Tactical! Target the main reactor and burn your way—”

“No!” Kaff exploded out of his chair, eyes wild. “No, we cannot destroy them. We must free them.”

Adams blinked. “You just said—”

“Free who?” Freire scoffed. “The doctor killed them all.” Adams let out the smallest of sighs. And now everyone was interrupting him.

“But he hasn’t,” Kaff said quietly. The doctor’s gaze shifted to Kaff and his grin widened. “He hasn’t killed them, I mean.” Kaff gestured to the comms officer’s dead body. “I

mean, he did, but also he didn't. The doctor has made a new Jonathan. He made a new version of everyone on that planet."

Dr. Jarlath nodded. "In a way, none of them ever died. They simply transitioned between modes of existence. All their memories, all their experiences, everything that makes them, well, themselves is right here."

"No," Kaff said firmly. "You killed them all, and yourself. But you may have made new people. Copies of the old. I shall have to examine this for myself."

"Why?" the doctor said. "If the memories are real, does it matter if the body is not the original one?"

"It matters to the Church," Kaff declared, voice a little shrill.

It was time to take command of the situation, for good this time. "This conversation is over," Adams declared. "Doctor, release my ship or I will destroy yours."

Kaff's head snapped towards him. "No! They must be saved. We must find out if they are real or not. I—" He swallowed. "I forbid you to destroy that vessel."

"They're dead, reverend," Freire said bitterly. "All you'll find aboard is ghosts."

"Yes." Kaff's voice was shaky. "All the originals are dead. But even so, some version of them still exists. A second version. If you destroy the ship, you destroy a whole planet of innocent people. A second planet. Can you kill them all a second time?"

"To stop us from dying a first time?" Adams scoffed. "Gladly."

"Captain," the comms officer said, nervous. "Captain, please don't kill me for real."

Adams' face hardened. "Tactical, are our shields back to full strength?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Then fire at will," Adams growled.

The tactical officer grinned like a feral animal. “With pleasure, sir.”

The *Reunion*’s weapons opened up with renewed fury and vengeance. The ship turned its deck towards the station, allowing the weapons on top and on its side to fire at once. All the tubes opened, pouring homing missile after homing missile into space. The lasers pierced the station’s shield again and again, battering and scouring the hull. Hot metal fragments shot off into space, carved from the station’s reinforced hull.

“Captain, I assure you that I mean you no harm.” The doctor’s image flickered with bands of static. His smile grew strained. “I have run all the calculations. I have considered all the angles. This project of mine will ensure humanity’s survival into the far future.”

“You’ve condemned them!” Kaff cried. “Condemned them to an unreal world.”

“You aren’t saving humanity,” Adams growled. “You’re killing it.”

“Yes!” Kaff wrung his hands.

“Keep firing,” Adams ordered.

“No!” Kaff raised his hand as if to strike, but it fell to his side again.

“Captain, please,” the doctor said. “Just let me through your shield. You’ll all be safe. Trust me. I have run all the calculations. You would come to the same conclusion as I, given the time and resources at my disposal. Join me.” He began to stammer ever so slightly. “Your arrival is fortuitous, actually. We had to scuttle all our jump-capable ships during the Scourge attack. I’ve been waiting for a jump drive, a functioning one, for so long. I just need your ship, and then I can spread this gift to the whole galaxy.”

“Adams, please!” Kaff called desperately. “We can’t kill a whole planet’s worth of people. They might not be the original people, but we can’t know if they are real or not. I need time to examine them and talk to them before I can determine—” Adams met the Reverend’s

eyes with an unswerving air of determination. “You might be about to commit mass genocide.” Kaff’s voice fell to almost a whisper. “As a representative of the Church, I cannot condone this.”

“He has a point, captain,” Freire said. “Perhaps if we tried to disable—”

“All of you be quiet!” Adams bellowed. The *Reunion* kept firing. The hull of the station was beginning to warp now. Even its impressive strength could not hold up forever.

Kaff saw this. He swallowed, took a deep breath, and lunged for the tactical officer. The attack was completely unexpected. The tactical officer fell with a cry. The pair fell into a heap of tangled, thrashing limbs. Adams’ eyes blazed, but he did not have time to lay into the reverend. Kaff’s hand shot up from the pile and slammed on the tactical controls. He aimed for the weapons, but he missed his target and hit the panel beside it.

The *Reunion*’s shields went down.

Onscreen, the doctor’s face split into a wide grin. “Welcome aboard, captain,” he said.

Adams’ world lit up in a rainbow of colors. He felt a searing pain in his head and heard himself screaming as if from far away.

Time crawled to a standstill. Adams felt himself drifting away, down into a deep, dark pit. He sensed that much was happening around him, but the only thing he could hear was Dr. Jarlath’s voice. “This procedure will only take a moment,” he assured Adams. “But since your perception of time is expanding, it may seem like a few minutes to you.”

“Get out of my head,” Adams growled.

“Oh my. Such hostility. Do not worry. We’ll have plenty of time to talk things over soon. I just need to start copying things over.”

Adams looked around, or tried to. He heard Jarlath’s voice, but that was all. He did not have a target. He had nothing he could fight.

Jarlath's voice went on. "Fairly standard childhood. Loving mother, dutiful but distant father. Most military men are, I'm afraid. I'm sure he did not mean it personally."

Adams would have clenched his hands into fists if he could have felt them. "He was busy."

"Of course, of course. I meant no offense." Jarlath assured him. "Ah. Now this is interesting. Married early, I see. And had a son of your own."

Adams heart sank. Unbidden, visions of those early days came back to him. He had risen quickly once upon a time. Youngest captain in the fleet. Newborn son, loving wife. The world had seemed bright, even in the midst of the Scourge's invasion.

"Decorated for valorous service. On the fast track to become an admiral." Jarlath paused. "And yet, years later, here you are. Still a captain. My, my, you did stall out, didn't you?"

Adams winced.

"Oh. Oh I see how it is. She left, and took the child with you. Then came the depression, your career faltered, and you barely managed to keep your rank."

"Spent years rebuilding. Regaining trust," Adams said. "Eventually worked my way back up to where they trusted me with this assignment." Why was he saying this? Maybe he could not help himself. The man was already in his head.

"Lost your family. A tragedy, but not one that need ever occur again. I'm sure we can create convincing facsimiles of them," Jarlath said, "until we find and upload the real ones."

Rage and fury ignited inside Adams' chest. "You're never laying a finger on them, you hear me?" he snarled. His vision went white.

As if through the eyes of a dreamer, he saw the *Reunion* fire again. The station's shields failed a final time as the lasers and missiles hit vital systems. An explosion at the station's very

core rocked it, and the lights aboard flickered. The rainbow in Adams's vision evaporated and fell over, clutching his head.

"Captain!" Freire was beside him in an instant. "Captain, are you all right?"

"I'm still here," Adams said groggily. "Keep firing on that--that son of a cheap..."

"No!" Kaff cried. "Captain, we disabled him. We've won! You don't need to—"

"This man wants to kill the whole galaxy. He almost killed me, and he did kill Jonathan! Sit down and let me do my job, Reverend!" the Captain snapped.

The doctor flickered back onto the viewscreen. "Captain," he said nervously, "You should listen to the Reverend. You wouldn't want a whole planet's worth of people on your conscience, would you?"

"A planet full of monsters," Kaff growled, "monsters with the memories of men. Goodbye, doctor."

One final salvo tore the station apart.

Kaff sat and stared in horror at the screen. Adams rounded on him. "And as for you," he said, voice seething, "You're a kind man, Reverend. But too much kindness is almost as bad as too little. Both get men killed." He gestured to two of his officers. "Get him off my bridge. We're going to have a very long talk after we clean this up."

*Captain's Log: Am I real?*

*Never thought I'd be asking myself this question. I got lucky. Real lucky. A split second longer and I would have been gone. Can't shake the feeling of being not-myself, though. No clue what that doctor's machine did. We'll never know now either.*

*I've been going over it all in my head. Trying to see where my memory ends. I can't say that I've found any gaps, or at least no more than I remember. That's the kicker, though. I wouldn't remember them much, would I? I'll never know if I am who I think I am now.*

*Ah well. Can't go on like this. Got to push forward.*

*The Reverend and I had a long talk. I'd love to strip him of his position after the stunt he pulled, but he does have the authority of the Church behind him. We came to an understanding, at least. I'm in command of the bridge. That is final. The next time he does something like that, well, I'll have him shot and face the consequences back home.*

**PART THREE**

*Captain's Log*

*Morale is cautiously high again.*

*We discovered another colony. This one appears fully inhabited, and populated with normal people. Initial contact with the governor, a woman called Chryse, went well, and we have agreed to discuss things further once we are closer to their communication satellites' effective range. If things go too well, I may not have anything to do. That would be a welcome change from the last two times.*

*Still, we cannot get too complacent. Just because things look like they are going well does not mean that something will not pop up and ruin the whole thing. We must be on the lookout.*

The governor rose from behind her very well-appointed and organized desk. So organized, in fact, that it hardly seemed to have anything on it. “Welcome, friends,” she said warmly. “Welcome to Atlas VI. My name is Governor Chryse.”

Freire gave a slight bow while Adams and Kaff gave less dramatic greetings. “The pleasure is ours,” the diplomat said smoothly.

“You would not believe the trouble we’ve had,” Kaff said with a tentative smile. “It’s so good to be, well, welcome for once.”

“Thanks for meeting in person,” Adams said. “We’ve had some problems with that before.”

The governor laughed, a sound like the tinkling of tiny bells. “You are all too kind. In truth, words can hardly begin to express how grateful we are to have the Union back with us. Our records speak well of it, and we owe it for the bliss and comfort in which we live.”

All three took in a subtle breath. “Bliss and comfort” was a worrying phrase. Each remembered how the previous meetings had gone. Freire recovered first and put on his best smile. “Of course,” he said smoothly. “We will be happy to have you back.” His lips quirked into a smile. “I must admit this is going far better than I expected. We have had a lot of trouble on our other stops. Are you sure you don’t have some dark plan or something like that? No hidden secrets?”

Chryse clucked her tongue and thought for a moment, but only a moment. “No,” she said, “No, I can’t think of any.” She smiled. “We want to rejoin. It’s as simple as that.”

Reverend Kaff let out a small sigh. Freire was dancing around the issue, in his opinion. If they were going to make sure nothing wrong was going on here, they had to ask pointed questions, ones that she could not evade. “If you will let me ask...” Their eyes all turned to him

and he swallowed. “What I mean to say is, let’s be sure we’re all on the same page here. What does rejoining look like to you?”

She shrugged. “What is there to think about? We’ll be a part of your society again and bring what we have found back to the galaxy at large.”

Kaff perked up at that. “Oh of course! The charter.” Their eyes were on him again. He flinched inwardly. “That is, I believe I recall something about the colony having a charter of some kind.”

“Correct,” Chryse said brightly, “The Atlas Project, we called it. We’re an experimental society, you see, founded only a short time before the war and the Great Silence. We were dedicated to making a world without work.”

Adams looked between Chryse and Friere. “I’d wager that explains the bots, then.”

“Oh yes. Our mechanical servants take care of all our necessities,” Chryse said. “Though I will admit, you could not have come at a better time. Our system does have some parts we cannot replicate here. The wider galaxy, we hope, can provide them.”

“I am sure that can be arranged,” Freire said smoothly.

“Send us a list,” Adams offered. “We might have some in storage. My engineers can get to work while you and Freire hammer out the details.”

Kaff, however, was not quite ready to leave the previous topic. “I assume the project was a success?” he asked eagerly.

Chryse’s brow wrinkled, but she chuckled. “Oh, of course. I suppose I should get to that.” She cleared her throat and rose from her chair to pace back and forth behind her desk. “I’ve been rehearsing this speech for a while now. All afternoon, at the least. So, here goes!”

“We’re all ears,” Freire assured her.

Enthusiasm undimmed, she clapped her hands and the lights dimmed. In a serious but pleased voice, she began. "According to the original charter of the Atlas Colonization Project, our goal was to set up society without the need to work, if you catch my meaning." She chuckled. "If someone wants to work, then by all means, let them. However, no one should be forced into labor in order to survive. That's all."

She cleared her throat. "Now, our findings were interesting. At first, of course, many people did pursue self-gratifying entertainments. They watched holo-vids, played AR games, and devoted themselves entirely to leisure. But over time, well, our citizens got bored." She shrugged. "They began to devote themselves to more lasting pursuits."

She spread her arms wide. "We advanced. We grew. We expanded our knowledge of the universe. When you set people free to do as they wish, free from the tyranny of labor, you'd be surprised by the wonders they will create. This lesson is our gift to the Union. They can learn from our struggles, but mostly our successes, and build a better, freer galaxy."

"Sounds like a paradise," Adams said. "But these two are the ones you'll want to talk to. Looks like everything checks out here, so I'll be headed back to the ship. Good luck, Robert, Reverend." He nodded to them each in turn and left the room.

"Well," Chryse said, "he seems like a competent and hard worker. I am sure he will do a great job." She eyed Freire. "But perhaps, ambassador, further discussions could wait for now. Say until after you and the Reverend have had lunch?"

Freire inclined his head. "We are at your service, governor."

She clapped her hands together. "Excellent. I'll just order us up some lunch. Anything in particular you would like? Our auto-chef's recipe list has not received an update in quite some time, but it does know quite a lot of recipes."

The two men gave her their orders and together they moved to the next room, where the governor had a long table set near to a window. It overlooked a bustling city, full of people and life. However, as Freire and Chryse exchanged pleasantries and he complimented her on her choice of tablecloth and cutlery, Kaff looked a little closer. He was trained for that, to look closely at a society and try to determine its faults.

The people down below did seem happy. The buildings did not have that uniform structure of a planned city, but all had individual touches and flair. The sides had artwork wrought into them, people hung banners and colorful lights at odd angles, and everything spoke to an overabundance of freedom and individuality. Yet the lights flickered at odd times. The flow of traffic sputtered and halted. Trash piled up in the corners. The maintenance robots, which Chryse assured them were the backbone of this society, were few and far between.

Reverend Kaff frowned. The infrastructure which held all this up was strained, but not yet to the breaking point. However, he saw no obvious signs of immorality, except laziness on the part of a few drunks who had begun their evening celebration early. Assuming, therefore, that Captain Adams could replace whatever parts the system needed in order to restore it, this society might last. Thank the Lord for that.

The governor called them over for lunch. Their meals were on the table, a piping hot bowl of soup for Freire and a simple sandwich for Kaff. As the other two continued to talk, Kaff muttered a small prayer and took a bite.

It was the worst sandwich he had ever tasted in his life. The bread was flavorless, the meat was a near-textureless mush, and the vegetables crunched worse than chips. He choked and spat it out. A coughing fit quickly followed. He reached for the glass of water and drained it one go. It had a bitter aftertaste. "What," he rasped out, "is wrong with the food?"

Chryse and Freire both were staring at him. The governor's eternal smile faded. "I'm not sure what you—"

"The water, it's bitter," Kaff said.

Chryse chuckled nervously. "I will admit the filters are a little old, but I think that brown is a bit of a—"

"This cannot be healthy." Kaff said. He turned to Freire. "Try your soup." Freire hesitated, but looked to Chryse with concern.

She pulled a face. "Sanitation has always been a tricky one. We've had to have the machines take care of that. No one finds fulfillment in unclogging toilets."

"It's bitter," Kaff repeated with emphasis. "Who's in charge of your machines?"

"No one, at the moment," Chryse replied. "It's a complicated position that requires a lot of hard work to qualify for, so we let the colony's AI do most of the work. That thing has been a life-saver on many occasions, let me tell you."

Kaff had heard enough. He rose from his seat. "I'm going to call the captain," he muttered. "Freire, you...do whatever you need to do."

Freire nodded. "Perhaps that is for the best."

It only occurred to Kaff after he was out the door that Freire meant that it was better he leave and stop annoying the governor. He sighed and dialed Captain Adams' comm channel.

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Adams sat back on the bridge, monitoring reports. Kaff, Freire, and Chryse were surely enjoying their time together, but he had more important things to do than hob-nob with bureaucrats. The first of the repair crews had set out and, after a brief shooting match with some

malfunctioning security robots, made their way to an access terminal. They should be getting some data now.

He keyed in the leading engineer's comm code. "Status."

"Captain Adams, sir," the man replied with enthusiasm, "We are splicing into the mainframe right now. Streaming the telemetrics to you."

"Copy," Adams said as the numbers streamed across his datapad. He winced. If these reports had been about a ship, he would have assumed it had been through a serious fight. Still, the colony's management AI had done an admirable job rerouting power and keeping the essential systems online.

The engineer hailed him again. "Captain, we have a small problem."

"I can see that," Adams stated.

"I'd wager so, yeah," the engineer replied. "This whole grid is a mess. Errors everywhere. Worse, the self-diagnostic software is on the fritz. We're going to have to shut the whole thing off and reboot it in order to get a clean read of what's wrong."

"Proceed, then," Adams ordered.

The engineer hesitated. "There is a slight risk to the colony, Captain."

"I'll take responsibility," Adams assured him. "Look at these readings. If we don't give it a shot, then it'll break on its own sooner or later."

"It's already mostly broken," the engineer said wryly. "Ten-four. We'll report when we have something for you."

The transmission ended. Adams leaned back into his chair. A world where no one had to work. Sounded like a paradise, the sort of place he wanted to leave behind for his children. His lips curled into a sad smile. How long had it been? He had to be in his teens now. When all this

was over, Adams told himself, he would be sure to pay them a visit. Well, if they would let him in the front door. In the meantime, he was building a better world for them all, whether they appreciated it or not.

His comm beeped again, but this one came from the Reverend. Adams frowned and answered it. “Adams here.”

“Captain.” Kaff was stammering again. Something had him upset, nervous, excited, or a combination of the three. “The governor served us lunch.”

“Yes,” Adams said patiently, “bureaucrats do that when they have something important to do.”

“No. Well yes, but not the point,” Kaff insisted. “The sandwich tasted like, well, like starship fuel smells, if you’ll forgive me for saying so.”

“A local delicacy?” Adams asked.

“Hardly. Simple bread, beef, and lettuce. I’m not a man of extravagant or adventurous tastes.”

That was some cause for concern. Not Kaff’s dietary choices, but if the Auto-chef’s systems were on the fritz, things could be more dangerous than even the fractured telemetrics let on. “Food is an essential system in the colony’s mainframe,” Adams said slowly. “If it’s been compromised...” He shook his head. “You’re sure of this, Reverend?”

“Absolutely, captain,” he said.

The engineer’s voice came back over the comms, frantic. “Captain Adams, sir!” An alarm blared in the background. “We’ve got a problem. We shut part of the system down, but we had to override the colony’s AI to do it. Someone had given it administrator privileges, and it was not letting us in. Now it’s lost it, and the whole thing is crashing.”

“Then bring it back online,” Adams ordered.

“Tried that, sir. Got in through the maintenance protocols, and...” He swallowed. “This thing has worked unsupervised for ten years, captain. They’re not supposed to go more than a year without a review at least. All its protocols are tangled up on each other. It’s done its best, but now we’ve kicked over its house of cards.”

“Cut to the chase,” Adams said. “I don’t need a full explanation. You’re not to blame.”

“Sir, the reactor’s protocols were the first thing to go. It’s going critical, and if it does the colony goes with it.”

Adams sat up in his seat. “See what you can do.”

“Yes sir.” The engineer’s voice did not sound hopeful.

Adams called the *Reunion*’s shuttle control. “Flight control. We may need a lot of space very quickly. Clear the cargo holds and prep the shuttles for a potential rescue mission.”

“Aye sir. How many should we expect?”

Adams took a deep breath. “The population of one small colony.”

“Sir! That will overcrowd us.”

“We can fit them,” Adams said grimly. “It’ll be tight, but we can fit them.”

The officer shouted a hesitant but willing affirmative. Adams keyed back into the engineer’s channel. “Status report.”

“It’s no good sir,” the engineer said. “This whole system was ready to collapse from a stiff breeze, and we gave it a shove. We can delay the meltdown, but not stop it.”

“Roger,” Adams said grimly. “Return to your shuttle and make for the governor’s palace. You’ll be picking up the Reverend and Ambassador on the way.”

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Chryse raised a glass and clinked hers and Freire's together. "To new friendships," she said.

"To new friendships," Freire repeated. He took a sip and hid a gag. The wine was worse than paint thinner. How did they survive like this? His comm chirped in his pocket, but it was just Adams. Whatever problem he had encountered could wait until after the governor had thoroughly discussed matters. And afterwards, well, she was a pretty woman, and they were both still in their thirties.

Whatever matter troubled his mind was forever lost when Kaff barged back in, eyes wild. "The reactor's going into meltdown," he said. "We all need to get out of there. Captain Adams is sending shuttles, every shuttle we have. Governor, please signal for an evacuation. Other shuttles are on their way to pick up your citizens."

"What did you do?" Chryse demanded. "Everything was working perfectly before you meddled with it."

"I am sure the captain did not intend—" Freire began.

"But he did do something," Chryse snapped. "That system was working fine, but the moment you show up it collapses?"

Kaff grimaced at her words. The system was certainly not working fine if it thought what he ate counted as a sandwich.

Freire's comm chimed again. This time, he answered. "Captain," he said with forced calm, "why don't you explain to the governor what is the meaning of all this."

"It's simple. If you wish to live," Adams said. "You will all evacuate."

"We never should have trusted you. You planned this," Chryse snapped. "I don't know why, but you must have."

“That’s hardly fair,” Kaff protested weakly, though he had little hope of it having any effect. “We have no reason to wish you harm.”

“Silence,” she snarled. “You have no right to do this. You want to drag us back into the slavery of having to work. I’ve read your holy book, Reverend.”

“Governor.” Adams’s voice was stern. “We are not your enemies. In another time, I might have supported your project. Right now, that does not matter. I do take responsibility for the situation. My men triggered the meltdown—”

“Ha! I knew it,” she declared.

“—by accident,” Adams said pointedly. “You left the system unmaintained for years and years.”

She spread her arms wide. “But no one wanted to learn how. It was long and complicated, and anyone who tried got hounded night and day by complaints from the whole colony.”

“And now nothing can stop it from falling apart,” Adams said sternly. His voice softened. “Please, come aboard the *Reunion*. We will immediately set course for our home port, and you can have me called up on court-martial if you want. Just come aboard. Please.”

Chryse bit her lip. “We don’t have anyone qualified to fix the reactor,” she said bitterly. “I suppose you have left us no choice.”

“Thank you,” Adams said. “I am sorry.”

Freire cleared his throat. “Maybe when you are back in our home, you can use what you’ve found to make all of the United Planets better.”

The ground shook, a tremor passing through it.

“I suggest you run,” Adams said. “The reactor’s begun its meltdown.”

Kaff leapt to his feet. "Quite right, captain," he declared. "We'll see you aboard the *Reunion* shortly."

Chryse shook her head. "Go if you must. I have to oversee the evacuation."

Freire's head whipped towards her in surprise. "But governor, surely you can do that from the *Reunion*, where it's safe?"

"It's my responsibility," she said haughtily. "I took the job willingly, and that makes it even more important to do it right."

Kaff stepped forward, a nervous expression on his face. "How can I help?" he asked.

"Reverend? You too?" Freire exclaimed.

But Chryse eyed Kaff, took his measure. She nodded. "Very well. Help by gathering the essential records while I broadcast the evacuation plan. Captain Adams, I presume your men have some idea of where the shuttles will be setting down?"

"Of course," he replied. "And we'll have one on standby for you."

Freire fidgeted. "I should be aboard the ship," he said. "I'll be sure the refugees are organized and safe upon your arrival." Kaff's eyes narrowed. He sensed an ulterior motive behind the man's words, but had no time to dwell on it.

"Thank you, ambassador," Chryse said. She looked over at Kaff and met his eyes for just a moment. "Lord willing, we shall all meet again shortly."

Freire bowed and fled the room.

Kaff's task was not difficult. He went to the next room and downloaded all the colony's census data, records, and other official forms en masse. Once finished, he moved back to the main office and helped Chryse wherever he could. Together, they watched the population of the

planet move out and board the shuttles. Every so often, a tremor shook the colony, but they said nothing to each other about it. Hours later, Captain Adams gave them another call. "It's time."

Chryse nodded wearily. "Yes. Yes, I think it is."

A tremor, stronger than the others, shook the building. Chryse stumbled and fell, but Kaff was beside her in an instant. "Maybe a little past time," he said.

With his help, she regained her feet. "Then let's not waste any more time," she said grimly. Together, they ran for the last shuttle.

The ground shook once more and they stumbled. "Hurry," Kaff said. "I don't know how much more time we have."

"Not much," Adams said over the comm. "You two are the last ones coming, so get to the shuttle and get out of there."

"Trying," Chryse said with forced optimism.

They ran out of the governor's penthouse and onto the administration building's roof. Their shuttle hovered a few feet off the ground. "Come on!" the pilot called. With one last burst of energy, they made it to the bottom of the ramp. Kaff stepped foot on it first, but right as Chryse had one foot on the ramp and one on the roof, another tremor shook the building. It began to collapse from under her. Her eyes went wide. She began to fall backwards, out of the shuttle.

Kaff's hand shot out and grabbed her arm. He pulled her inside the shuttle just in time. "Go!" he told the pilot, and the shuttle sped upwards, away from the doomed colony and towards the safety of the *Reunion*.

## ENDING REFLECTIONS

Captain Adams sat at his desk, a steaming cup of coffee next to him. How many centuries had it been since mankind first discovered this stuff? Still good as it was back then, even synthesized out of a machine.

It was a good pick-me-up. Command expected regular updates on his progress, sent via tight-beam wormhole transmission. It took a lot of power, and everyone had messages to send home, but his took priority. Even his private ones, not that he had much reason to send them.

### *Captain's Log*

*We have turned the ship back towards friendly space to drop off refugees and resupply. Morale is high once again. Discovering and rescuing living, breathing humans was just the mental boost the crew needed.*

*Ship remains in good condition. Minor issues with the atmospheric filters solved. The crew found a small stowaway cat one of the engineering crews adopted from the planet. Proper punishment dispensed, but I deem the kitten good for morale. She is in a much more comfortable place in the mess hall now.*

*Will arrive at next location within two weeks.*

*Captain John Adams*

He sat back and took another sip of coffee. Short, sweet, to the point. Precisely what the brass liked to see. That would do for his official duties.

Still, his hands hovered over the keyboard. He could still send a personal message. No one would question it. Unbidden, his fingers began to type.

*Sarah,*

*I'm sorry.*

*Jack*

He frowned and quickly deleted it. A sigh escaped his breath. He tried again.

*Michael,*

*Hey there sport. How are you doing? It's your dad.*

*I'm sorry I've not been around. You must think I'm a terrible father. You are probably right. I don't know what to tell you. I've written this letter so many times. Scrapped them all. I've promised to come around more. I've promised to write more often. It's all a load of bull, and you know it. Promises don't mean anything until you act on them.*

*If and when I ever get back from this mission, I want to take you to one of those VR arcades. Just you and me. Or if you've outgrown them, somewhere of your choosing. I don't know when that will be, but if you'll let me, that's what I'd like to do. We can go from there.*

*See, I've learned something out here. In this universe, it's easy to get caught up in a world of your own. And when you're on your own, you make stupid mistakes. So, let's not be alone.*

*Love you,*

*Dad*

He stared at the screen for a long moment before hitting delete once more.

Reverend Kaff found himself staring out the viewport more and more these days. Space was so serene. Everything passed by slowly. He had time, plenty of time, to consider each and every star. Not like real life when things happened so quickly.

He had learned things out here, out in space. His brothers back home might not be happy with them. Still, he felt it was his duty to share them.

*The Most Revered Society of the Church Galactic*

*Your divine eminences,*

*Your encouraging words have been a boon to me in this dark night of the soul. I thank you most sincerely. As we enter the tenth month of our voyage and turn towards home, allow me to put to pen a few general thoughts concerning my experiences.*

*I know now that I have erred greatly. Neither option presented to me was morally right, but I chose the one that would in the end have caused more pain. Evil, an ever-present force in our lives despite some people's attempts to deny it, simply cannot be avoided. This is not to say that we should give up on seeking for a more perfect solution, but we also must not despair if none can be found. In the words of Martin Luther, we must "sin boldly and throw ourselves on the grace of God."*

*I have failed in my duties, repeatedly. I know this, and it is to my shame. I hope to reconcile with my compatriots. Perhaps they can find it within themselves to forgive me. Yet, as my father said, you can give up all hope of a better past. No matter how traumatic, we must look to the future. There is no salvation to be found in trying to change what has occurred. We must look to the Present, and the Future soon to follow, for our hope.*

*Yet the future is uncertain. Our own power is no guarantee of a better tomorrow. But fortunately, we, my brethren, have a power outside of ourselves: one that will not betray us. I trust and pray that, if we come to Him with honest intent, He will not betray us.*

*Sincerely,*

*Reverend Kaff*

Robert Freire paced back and forth. He should be happy. An entire colony saved. A successful mission. He had, with some help, brought back over a thousand people from the vast reaches of space. At least that's what the history books would say, right? He hoped so.

Naturally, he could not forget the contributions of the others. That would be unsporting. He had to earn his right to be remembered. Still, there was no harm in helping history along, was there?

He signaled the ship's computer and spoke in a loud, clear voice.

*Begin recording.*

*I sit here in the dark.*

*I am right where I wanted to be. I fought hard for this. I wanted it so badly. And now I have it. Sure, it hasn't been all that it might have. There have been struggles, that much I cannot deny. But I, I am here! They are not. The diplomatic corps picked me, not them. I alone shall have the credit.*

*My name shall be remembered forever. Even if it ends up as a mere footnote to someone else's research project on the Reunification of Mankind, it shall not be entirely forgotten. Years from now, someone will be thinking of me.*

*It's strange, is it not? Almost ten thousand years ago, our ancient forefathers wanted to be remembered. They viewed it as a sort of immortality. Not much has changed. I understand that urge, that need. It is in me too.*

*Yet it is harder these days, and easier. So many people do noteworthy things that no one can keep track of it all.*

*Will I be remembered? I can only hope, I suppose. Trust in myself. Trust in my accomplishments. Yes, that is the key. I must have faith in my own power. That will carry me through.*

*End recording.*

Even as he said the words, doubt beset him. His own power. What power did he have, really? The future would be the future. In the end, it would decide if it remembered him at all. With a wry smile, he exited his office and went to go find a drink.

## Bibliography

### Principle Works

Danaher, John. "Will Life Be Worth Living in a World without Work? Technological Unemployment and the Meaning of Life." *Science and Engineering Ethics*, vol. 23, no. 1, Feb. 2017, pp. 41–64. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1007/s11948-016-9770-5.

John Danaher, an ethicist with a focus on emerging technologies, writes here about the problem of automation. He foresees a time coming soon when technology will make a whole class of people economically superfluous. When that time comes, he foresees two problems. First, society will have to decide how to distribute the economic benefits of this new boon. Secondly, humans will have to find some measure of fulfillment outside of labor. In crafting his response, he argues that the change is neither wholly good nor wholly bad, but needs an integrative approach, by which he means viewing technology as a part of humanity as opposed to external tools.

This article helps form the basis of the third section of the story. In it, Governor Chryse oversees a world where automation has made a paradise where the citizens do not need to do any work they do not want to. The benefits they have received mirror Danaher's discussion: freedom, flourishing of arts, etc. However, the story addresses a situation that Danaher overlooks. Namely, it focuses on the difficulty of filling the roles necessary to run society in a world where little incentive exists to take on complicated or thankless tasks.

Gardner, John. *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*. Vintage Books, 1991.

*The Art of Fiction* is a book full of practical advice for writers. Though it is particularly aimed at younger writers, the recommendations it makes apply to all. It covers elementary topics, such as the importance of proper grammar, as well as more esoteric ones, such as Gardner's thoughts on the aesthetics of writing, metafiction, and variance between story structures. The overall tone is academic and serious, and Gardner emphasizes developing the proper skills in order to make the story appeal to the reader.

This book describes one of the project's chief objectives. The fictive dream, which Gardner discusses in Chapter Two, is a key part of giving readers the enjoyable experience they come to a book for. It is, in short, the sense of immersion a story should give, which allows the reader to forget the real world for a time. The full mechanics of it are in the introduction to this collection.

Gates, Jaym. *Eclipse Phase: After the Fall: An Anthology of Transhuman Survival & Horror*.

Posthuman Studios LLC, 2016. Ebook.

*Eclipse Phase: After the Fall* is a speculative work of fiction set in the *Eclipse Phase* universe. It contains a variety of stories centered around themes of transhuman horror and questions of identity. The world they share has a few constants, however. First, everyone has a cortical stack in their spine, allowing them to live on after their body dies by being re-sleeved into a new form. Second, the physical body is malleable, and people can change their form easily if they have the funds for it. Thus, the primary purpose of the collection is to consider what parts of humanity make it human and what parts are secondary, as far as personal identity is concerned.

This collection, then, forms part of the conversation that part two of *The Voyage of the Reunion* enters. It is very much a work of popular fiction, and, as the title “An Anthology of Transhuman Survival and Horror” suggests, takes a very pessimistic view of what the future may hold. *The Voyage of the Reunion*, on the other hand, only addresses the subject of computer uploads and leaves aside the matter of re-sleeving and designer bodies in order to maintain a narrow focus.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. “The Great Stone Face.” University of Virginia Library, 1996.

“The Great Stone Face” is a book by Nathaniel Hawthorne that embodies the idea that a person becomes that upon which they focus. As such, it has become the central inspiration for my writing, as I want to give the world good, moral stories that capture their attention and give them something good and noble to focus upon.

Kamm, F. M. “Moral Status and Personal Identity: Clones, Embryos, and Future Generations.”

*Social Philosophy & Policy*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2005, pp. 283-91.

doi:10.1017/S0265052505052118

Kamm’s article offers a more academic approach to the some of the concerns raised by *Altered Carbon* and *Eclipse Phase*. In particular, he focuses on the topic of cloning and what it means for personal identity. His arguments cast it in a positive light. The duplicates, he says, do not diminish the personhood of the original, and furthermore they are beings in their own right. In particular, he devotes much of his time to discussing the “Non-Identity Problem”. In short, this argument states that the creation of clones is immoral because one should not make a person who is better or worse off than the original. In response, Kamm argues that the person cloned

cannot be the original with regards to the clone's own personhood. In other words, the clone is a fully independent being, and thus he is no better or worse off than anyone other than himself.

The key element of Kamm's arguments with regards to *The Voyage of the Reunion* is that cloned persons are unique and separate entities. In part two, the three main characters are split over how to respond to a population of uploaded consciousnesses. Though none of them believes that they represent the real persons, Reverend Kaff voices the concerns that they might be new and distinct persons, and therefore objects to their destruction. Kamm, were he present, would likely agree.

Morgan, Richard K. *Altered Carbon*. Gollancz, 2001.

*Altered Carbon* is Richard Morgan's best known work of fiction. It pre-dates *Eclipse Phase* by a few years, and many of the ideas present there find their intellectual roots in Morgan's work. The story itself pertains to a man hired by one of the wealthy elite to solve his own murder, and from there the plot winds its way through a world where body-snatching is a real concern, death is temporary, and those in power abuse the lower classes physically and psychologically for their own gain. The complete and total control they wield in the story extends even to a person's identity, and they can recombine and alter anyone to suit their needs. This dark look at a potential future propelled Richard Morgan to the forefront of the cyberpunk genre and paved the way for his future success.

That said, *The Voyage of the Reunion* draws only upon the ideas presented in the book and the derivative works of fiction which reference it. The plot itself contains certain elements unbecoming of a Christian work, and thus it does not come recommended. Still, it formed the basis for the doctor from Part Two, who did as he willed with the lesser citizens of his planet.

Though he was kinder than the rich and elite in *Altered Carbon*, the crew of the *Reunion* still needed to destroy him and what he represented.

Murray, Sarah Jane. "Step 2: Beginnings." *Basics of Story Design: 20 Steps to an Insanely Great Screenplay*, Storyrhetoric, LLC, 2017.

Dr. Murray is a well-regarded and successful screenwriter who, when she is not working in Hollywood, teaches classes at Baylor University. This book is the latest iteration of her philosophy and teachings about screenwriting. Most of the work focuses on the three-act screenplay and gives directions, tips, and warnings for screenwriters seeking to write in the same model Pixar uses for all their movies. However, the fourth chapter discussing character design is applicable to all fiction.

This section promotes a method for making characters that distills them down to their most basic narrative elements. Every character has a Mask, how they present themselves to the other characters and to the audience, a Want, something they actively seek in the story, and a Need, the item, lesson, or person they must acquire in order to end the story happily. Though this method is not the only way to write characters, it has worked well for *The Voyage of the Reunion*.

Pilsch, Andrew. *Transhumanism: Evolutionary Futurism and the Human Technologies of Utopia*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=5015532>.

Andrew Pilsch, currently an associate professor at Texas A&M, wrote this book in order to discuss how technology has shaped humanity's vision of and hopes for the future. In it, he describes in mostly positive, or at least hopeful, terms how people look to technology to free them from their constraints. In particular, he tries to root the transhumanist traditions in rigorous scientific exercises, something for people to take seriously and not to discard as a new fad or quasi-religious cult. The book, therefore, spends much time tracing the history of and discussing the perception of transhumanism as it has evolved from a Nietzsche-adjacent philosophy into the utopian ideals seen in such shows as *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. In particular, Pilsch argues that transhumanism is the primary philosophical issue in the present generation, and that modern art is inextricably bound up with it.

With regards to the story, it provided good background information and a firm foundation for plotting out the course that *The Voyage of the Reunion* would take. In particular, Pilsch links a wide variety of cultural phenomenon together that I tried to address. Not much of his work appears directly in the story, but it provided the basis for further research and thought during the planning phase.

Snyder, Blake. *Save the Cat: The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need*. Michael Weiss Productions, 2005. Kindle ed.

Blake Snyder's work has some overlap with Dr. Murray's. Both of them have screenwriters as their audience and heavily favor the Three-Act structure of story design, which is not necessarily applicable to short stories. Dr. Murray, however, references Snyder in her work, and thus going directly to the source was preferable. The most important part of his work is the principle to "save the cat", from which the book draws its title. In other words, early in the

story, the author should give characters who the audience is not naturally inclined to like some heroic or noble moment to endear them to the audience and garner them some sympathy.

This principle was the third one which *The Voyage of the Reunion* focused on. The goal, early on, was to show that the two less sympathetic characters, Adams and Freire, could have qualities to them that the audience would connect with. While neither should come out on the other end wholly sympathetic, the hope is that the audience will still root for them to some extent.

Susskind, David. *A World without Work: Technology, Automation, and How We Should Respond*. Metropolitan Books, 2020. Ebook.

This book by David Susskind, currently a fellow in economics at Balliol College in Oxford, is foundational to the discussion of how automation will change the face of the world. Academic articles and journals written on the subject frequently reference him, and the U.K. employs him as an economic advisor. The book itself traces the movement of the “labor surplus” from the fields, factories, and now the service industry as automation has slowly taken over society’s need for their skills. He looks to a future where they will cease to be needed at all, and hopes to create a world where technology grows alongside humanity in order to support it instead of growing to replace it. Ultimately, he still has hope for the future, but his concerns do temper it.

His work, therefore, shapes most of Part Three. Danaher’s work references it, and much of what his article brought also stems from Susskind. Ultimately, *The Voyage of the Reunion* is not interested in whether it is possible to create a society where technology grows alongside humanity, but rather the potential pitfalls that might arise if such a goal reaches fruition.

### Inspiration

Doctor, Pete, director. *UP*. Pixar, 2009.

This film provides one of the best and clearest examples of what it means to “Save the Cat”.

Eggers, Daniel. “Hobbes and Game Theory Revisited: Zero-Sum Games in the State of Nature.”

*The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 49, no. 3, 2011, pp. 193-226. *ProQuest*,

<http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fhobbes-game-theory-revisited-zero-sum-games-state%2Fdocview%2F992930052%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D12085>.

While the initial story did not delve deep into a discussion of the State of Nature, the power dynamics present in the remaining colonists mirror the discussions present in Eggers’ work. His argument is very technical, but the relevant part pertains to how quickly a strong leader will take over. In the story, the old man is that leader.

Mitchell, Sandy. *Caiaphas Cain: For the Emperor*. Black Library, 2003, Ebook.

The *Caiaphas Cain* series is Sandy Mitchell’s best known body of work. It is, purportedly, a memoir written by an imperial commissar defending humankind in the far future, with supplementary material drawn from other fictional writers. Though in terms of underlying themes and moral principles, it has little to recommend it above any other work of popular

fiction, it does a fantastic job of giving the different authors their own voices and drawing the reader into the fictive dream.

Smith, Nicholas H. "Introduction: Philosophy of Work." *Revue internationale de philosophie*, vol. 278, no. 4, 2016, pp. 429-433.

Smith provides a more philosophical look at the underlying benefits of work. In particular, he relates it to identity and discusses how work forms an individual's idea of him or herself through desire, education, and work's relation to language itself. In it, he draws upon the philosophies of Marx and Hegel primarily, but tries to find a balance between them.

Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*. ed. David. Womersley, New York: Cambridge UP, 2012.

*Gulliver's Travels* inspired the overall structure of *The Voyage of the Reunion*. Even after several revisions, the story still mirrors it loosely. The Lilliputians gave rise to the planet where everyone rejected technology, and therefore problems that once seemed small became insurmountable as they diminished. The giants of Brobdingnag inspired Dr. Jarlath, a man who thought himself a titan. Part three of *Gulliver's Travels* involves a panoply of peoples, but Governor Chryse and her people are directly inspired by the island of Laputa, which solved their problems via science. Unfortunately, the planet that was to mirror the Houyhnhnms required too much space to include and keep the story a reasonable length.

Teixeira, João. "Transhumanism, Immortality and the Question of Longevity." *Revista de*

*Filosofia Aurora*, vol. 32, iss. 55, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.7213/1980-5934.32.055.DS02>.

This article takes a strong stance on the problem of brain uploads. In particular, it posits that a copy of a person lodged in a computer would be closer to an interactive grave marker than a real person. Much of what it says, though, other authors say better or more thoroughly.

“What Are Little Girls Made Of?” *Star Trek: The Original Series*. Created by Gene Roddenberry, season 1, episode 7, NBC, 1966.

*Star Trek* as a whole did inspire the format for *The Voyage of the Reunion*. Both feature a cast of characters travelling to different planets and encountering moral dilemmas at almost every turn. However, the episode “What Are Little Girls Made Of?” in particular deals with copying people into android bodies, and whether such people are real or not.