

# Space Gothic – The Derelict

## Chapter 1

The view of the stars from the ship was exquisite. The trillion or so that gleamed in the firmament, only dimly lit the meteoroid-pitted hull of the tired, old, space vessel. Very little of this starlight made its way through the porthole window into the dark room where he lay sleeping. The glowing digital letters of an alarm clock, glared into the darkness like a hungry animal, but only barely lit the room with a dull red aura. As the numbers changed from 5:59 AM to 6:00AM the annoying sound of the buzzing alarm screamed out the call to awaken. An instant later the alarm clock is vaporized in flash of light, sparks and smoke.

David sat in his bed with the plasma pistol in his hand; the acceleration coil on the handgun crackled as it cooled. “Third alarm clock wasted this year,” David thought to himself. “I must be getting crotchety in my old age.” There are days he really hated to get out of bed. Floating in the zero-G at the foot of the nightstand was the half empty bottle of whiskey he’d partaken of the previous evening. Floating nearby was the dirty magazine he’d picked up at the last spaceport they’d visited. The nude woman on the exposed page smiled invitingly; her 3d image frozen in an erotic pose that made David wish she were actually in bed with him. Unfortunately, she was only a snapshot of time, capture forever in glossy pages of infamy.

David pulled himself out of bed and to his feet. He stumbled into the Low-G shower and turned on the hot water to wake himself. Fifteen minutes later he was washed and dressed and heading down the corridor to the bridge. David marveled at the fact that he felt gravity. Grav-plate was a recent technological achievement very few spaceships had it yet. Luckily his ship did. David was the captain of the *Hotel California*. The ship was a large tonnage cruise ship designed to get from place to place quickly, while providing luxurious accoutrements for its passengers. Over it’s time in service; the ship’s grand image had been tarnished by the decay of use and disrepair. The passenger sections of the ship still held a glamorous and high brow feel to them. Unfortunately, the areas unseen by the passengers were not as well kept up, and had the air of a forgotten shrine, uncared for and misused.

Many people asked him about the name of his ship, and he'd always tell them the same thing. She'd been named after a folk song from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century—a song very few people remembered more than 100 years later. On occasion he would get out his archived recording of the original piece and play it for the crew. It was a bit of nostalgic trivia—a memory from a bygone day that had been immortalized in steel and titanium. But even the hull of the ship was not impervious to the entropy of neglect.

As he moved down the hallway he noticed a young, good-looking woman coming up the corridor from the opposite direction. She was dressed in a snug-fitting jump suit that accentuated the curves of her leggy form. Her somewhat curly, blonde hair fell about her shoulders like golden foam. She was lit from behind by one of the corridor's main floodlights which gave her the appearance of having a halo.

"Excuse me, sir. Are you the pilot of this vessel," she asked with a voice that sounded aristocratic and somewhat demanding.

David smirked and thought to himself, "Whew! Angel! Be still my heart!" He scanned her up and down, sizing up her figure like a butcher would size up a side of beef.

"Did you hear what I said," the woman asked, this time with more than a little annoyance in her voice. "Are you the pilot of this vessel?"

David responded as politely as he could, "Yes, I am. David Stallman, at your service," he replied offering a hand to the woman.

The woman rudely ignored his gesture, crossed her arms defiantly, and continued talking. "I am Lady Hypatia Derringer. I want to talk to you about the temperature in my room. It must be below freezing."

David frowned, "We do lower room temperatures after 1900 hours to conserve energy, but I seriously doubt it went below freezing." Unlike her personality he thought to himself.

"Well," the woman continued, "I want you to have a technician look into it. I did not pay first class passage rates just so I could catch pneumonia before I arrive at New Paris."

David nodded, "Alright, Lady Derringer. I will have someone check it out this afternoon."

"See that you do," she answered as she marched off down the corridor towards the staterooms.

David watched her go, focusing more attention on how the jumpsuit clung to her behind, than on her request. "Boy, would I like to warm up that cold bitch," he muttered to himself as he turned to continue towards the bow of the ship. He reached the bridge in

a few minutes and was met by his second in command. The man met him with a friendly smile. "Sleep well, Captain?"

"Same as always, Bob," David replied.

"Killed another alarm clock, eh," Bob queried teasingly.

"None of your business, Bob," David replied coldly.

"Forth this year?"

"Third, but who's counting."

Bob chuckled and handed David an electronic notepad. "We should make the New Paris system in twenty days."

"Not soon enough," David responded grumpily. "Lady Derringer is complaining about the temperature in her stateroom again. Get a tech down there today."

Bob snorted his disapproval, "Again? We just had someone down there last week."

David smiled, "Yeah, I know. Send Collin down to do it."

Bob cocked an eyebrow. "Collin? Collin the Cad?"

David nodded, "Yes, Collin the Cad. Not only is he a good tech, but he's also a good womanizer. Maybe he can chip through her icy exterior. She could use a good f..."

Before David could finish his sentence the proximity alarm rang out from the navigation computer. "Peter, what the hell is going on?"

Peter, the ship's helmsman and navigator, sat at his station frantically tapping the keys on his data console. "Sensors indicate a jump portal opening directly on top of us!"

"Evasive maneuvers," David shouted, "Get us out of here!"

Peter's face went pale, "Oh shit!"

No one else on the bridge had time to say or think anything else. An instant later the forward hull of the alien ship finished materializing and rammed the *Hotel California*. The starboard wall of the forward hull tore open like tissue paper, exposing all of them to the hard vacuum of space.

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The low rumble of the fusion drives echoed through the cold and stale air of the corridor. The main corridor was a hexagonal tube that ran the length of the ship. Piping and ducting ran along the ceiling and a heavy metal grating lined the floor. The walls were

lined with inactive computer consoles, vacc-suit storage, and dirty, grey acceleration pads. Many smaller side hallways branched off, weaving through the ship like veins on a leaf. A very dim, cool, blue light illuminated the hall from light-strips embedded in the walls near the floor. Ice crystals floated freely in the zero-g, reflecting the light, and creating a luminescent fog whose ghostly glow was at once both frightening and beautiful.

A lone maintenance robot patrolled the halls, making repairs here and there, maintaining the vital functions of the ship while the crew slept in their suspension tubes. Six of these suspension capsules lined the walls of the Primary Life Support Center. Six crewmembers floated dormant in their technological cocoons. The liquid-filled canisters maintained them, and protected them from the hi-gees of fusion drive acceleration and deceleration. To say that they slept would not be accurate. It would be more truthful to say that they were unconscious. A chemically induced coma that protected them from the psychological scars of a long and isolated space flight. Because of this, none of them were conscious when the data stream appeared on the communication station monitor. None of them saw the message that would change their lives. The communiqué was encoded for the captain's eyes-only, but it was not saved for later viewing. Attached to it was another coded message—one that told the main computer core to replace the communiqué with an entirely different message. The monitor blinked off just as a spent food canister bounced off the vid-plate. It had been floating though the room, slowly tumbling from an unsecured cabinet in the adjacent wall. The maintenance robot stopped at the hatch leading into the PLSC. Its IR/UV eyes scanned the room and focused in on the canister. The M-bot understood from its programming that free-floating objects such as these were a hazard and should be secured. In the blink of an eye it shot out its extension arm, snared the canister, and returned the wayward cylinder to its proper place. The M-bot then sealed cabinet and moved on down the hall towards the aft of the ship.

Meanwhile, the computer had started a series of tasks. Maneuvering engines fired, and the ship altered course. Air re-circulators and scrubbers came on. Heating and life support systems were activated. Mankind had just barely begun their reach into the stars. Most star systems were still months or years apart at the fastest speeds attainable. The best way to solve the problems of food and air supply was to “tube” the

crew until they reached their destination. This worked fairly well. The technology had only been in use for a few decades. Just long enough for mankind to whet his appetite for exploration. Slowly the crew would awaken, but the process took time. Half a day later, the ship had decelerated to nearly one hundredth its original cruising speed. Soon afterwards, the suspension tubes began their final “wake-up” procedures. Whirring pumps emptied all the fluid from the tubes. Warm, highly oxygenated air was then pumped in. Each crewman received stimulants and vitamin-electrolyte infusions. An hour after that, the first of the crew emerged from their hibernation.

The captain was the one to awaken first. His tube hatch swung open with a hissing rush of air. Goosebumps rose on his skin as the cold air blew in. He pulled himself out of the tube and pulled himself along the wall to the first aid console. He had just enough time to grab a plastic sack from beside the console and cover his mouth with it. He vomited three times before his stomach settled down. Many times he'd told people, “Never throw up in zero-g, it's not pretty.” If you were to ask a spacer, like Captain McNeil, what prolonged space flight was like, he'd most likely tell you that it an unending cycle of anesthetic numbness, and uncontrolled nausea. The suspension tubes always affected him this way—no matter how many space flights he'd been on, he'd never gotten use to it. McNeil was finally able to suppress the sickness in his gut and made his way through an adjacent corridor to the locker room. Once there he found a bar of soap, and a washcloth. He climbed into one of the zero-g showers and turned it on full blast. For some reason, the hot beads of water bouncing around his body made him feel a thousand times better. He scrubbed himself from head to toe, and washed his mouth out again and again until the vomit taste was gone. When he was finished he turned the shower off and waited for the water nodules to be collected by the shower intake. The towel he used to dry himself had seen better days, but it was the best one he had. It had a musty smell, like mildew, only with a little hint of chemical cleanser. He made a note to himself to pick up some new ones at their next port of call.

By the time he'd finished his shower and climbed out into the open air of the locker room, the next suspension tube had opened. Its resident had been Serena Tores, the ship's navigator. She now hovered in the locker room near the second shower, trying to gather the waves of her long, black hair into a bun on the top of her head. McNeil watched her as she worked. As with anyone who had just come out of a suspension tube, Serena was

completely nude except for the vitals monitor on her upper arm. Tiny droplets of bio-suspend fluid glistened on her creamy, tan skin, which McNeil thought was the color of a warm mocha coffee. Many of the social stigmas about nudity had gone the way of the dodo well before the advent of the Unified Nations of Earth. Nevertheless, McNeil was always made uneasy by it. She always amazed McNeil. The tubes did not make her ill like everyone else. But that was not the trait he was admiring at the moment.

He averted his eyes and fumbled with combination on his locker, but his curiosity, and his more-than-business interest in his navigator, got the better of him. He looked over his shoulder and stared at her. Serena's body was that of an athlete, trim and muscular. She had heavy black eyebrows, and generous lips. Her eyes, which turned up slightly on the outer edge, were the deepest brown McNeil had ever seen, as were the areola around her nipples. The zero-g gave an added lift to what McNeil considered a nearly perfect pair of breasts. Serena finished reining in the wild tresses of her ebony hair, and noticed him staring. She'd caught him red-handed (and red-faced) and she decided to make the most of it. She pulled the monitor device from her upper arm and lobbed it lazily towards him. A hint of a smile moved across her face as she slipped into her shower stall.

"Keep dreaming, Gus," she said as she sealed the stall. Her voice had the taste of amusement, and maybe even a little bit of friendly teasing.

McNeil was mortified. Her vitals monitor coasted towards him in a slow tumble. He caught it and affixed it to its holding rack. "Gus", he grumbled under his breath. McNeil hated to be called that. His parents had named him "Augustus Cecil McNeil". He lived with the fact that his parents either hated him or had no understanding of how vicious children could be. His youth was spent trying to avoid whatever nicknames his schoolmates came up with. Even as an adult, everyone insisted on calling him "Gus". A few called him "Captain McNeil". He liked to go by his surname, "McNeil". It sounded so much more intelligent than "Gus" or "Cecil".

He heard Serena giggle to herself just before turning on her shower. "Idiot," he thought to himself. He banged his forehead against the locker door and muttered to himself. He then finished opening up his locker, and grabbed his jumpsuit from inside. He dressed quickly made his way back to the PLSC. Still he couldn't stop thinking about Serena. He'd known her for nearly two years, but could never manage to find a way to tell her

how he felt. She was too good for him. He held a secret that debilitated him. It not as though anyone on the crew knew his secret; but they did not need to know. He knew, and that was enough. He kicked himself for being such a cad. Only a cad would ogle at a woman the way he did. He wanted to be a gentleman and leader that his crew could look up to. More often than not he felt more like a fool, and less like a leader of men.

Once he was back in the PLSC, he moved to the computer console that monitored the crew's vitals. The status of his crew was played out on the screen in colorful graphs of green and blue. The next tube to open would be Tony's. Tony DiNicola was a civilian who'd hired on with his crew almost a year earlier. Tony was an "obtainer of hard-to-get items". No matter the cost or the rarity of the item in question, Tony always seemed to be able to get what he needed and get the job done. Tony was also the luckiest man McNeil had ever known. McNeil had learned months ago never to gamble with Tony. No matter the situation, Tony always came out on top.

His other crewmembers were still creeping slowly towards consciousness. Their vital monitors gave him enough information to surmise that they would all soon be awake. After checking on his people, McNeil left the PLSC and headed up the long corridor to the bridge. He pulled himself along the hall by way of handholds fastened to the grey steel supports on either side. As he passed the locker room, he could hear Serena singing to herself as she bathed. McNeil paused at the hatch of the room to listen. This Central American beauty had a voice that could melt steel, he thought to himself. McNeil couldn't understand the words of the song, but he'd heard it many times before. Serena would sing it to herself when ever she was at ease. She had mentioned once before that the song was a lullaby her mother had taught her.

A painful twinge in his upper half of his right arm pulled him out of daydreaming. He swiveled the arm and flexed his muscles until he heard the shoulder joint pop. He looked down at his arm and flexed it again. Only a physician would have been able to tell that it was bionic. He'd lost the arm and both legs several years ago in a mining accident. The replacements indistinguishable from his original ones, but they made him feel like he was no longer a real man. McNeil ran his hands through his brown hair and muttered to himself again. He was fooling himself if he thought he could ever be with Serena. He grunted with self-distain and continued on down the hallway. At least he still had one

woman in his life. The *Antigone*.

The *Antigone* was originally a military freighter, which McNeil had converted into a private transport ship. She was a stout ship, some one hundred forty meters in length, and twenty meters high. The forward command and crew module was long and box-like, with a rounded bow. The hull still bore the olive-drab paint that the military had originally painted on it, and it still bore the eagle logo of the UNE fleet. Technically the Barrow Shipping Lines owned the ship, but they had never spent the time or money to repaint her. She was an older ship that showed the scars of age and battle, and the unmistakable patchwork of non-standard upgrades. Her engine section was at the aft end of the ship, far enough from the shielded living quarters to protect the crew from radiation poisoning. The long rectangular cargo carry-alls were linked in a chain from the crew module, dangling out below the engine module. Long sensor and antenna rods protruded forward from structures on the sides and bottom of the command module. Pivoting missile launchers and plasma cannons were mounted on the top, bottom, and sides of the ship. Gus had decided to keep them maintained to protect the ship from interstellar privateers. The primary communication array rotated slowly on the top of the command module, a silent sentinel awaiting word from afar.

Gus had commanded the *Antigone* for so many years, and made so many structural upgrades to her, that he felt the ship was indeed his. In fact, he'd saved almost enough to purchase the ship outright. He longed for the day when he could truly say she was his. BSL was a good company to work for, but Gus wanted to be master of his own destiny. He and his crew were on a merchant run to the New Venice Colony, with a cargo of seeds and fertilizer. Not the most pleasant of trips, but it was money in the pocket with 50% of the payment in advance. Since BSL still owned the ship, and footed the bill for its maintenance and fuel costs, they called all the shots. To BSL every canister of seed, and every tank of fertilizer meant another credit in the bank.

When Gus reached the bridge he glided thought the room to his console. He strapped himself into his acceleration seat, and turned on the vid-screen. Data flashed across the screen. Star charts, fuel consumption rates, power levels, and life-support status. All the data he needed to command. At once he noticed that the ship had not yet reached New Venice. After some quick calculations using the navigation computer, he determined that they were still a month away from port. He reviewed the main computer's task log. The

incoming message, which had prompted the ship's computer to wake the crew, was from BSL HQ. Gus typed in his clearance code and the message was posted to his monitor.

*Barrow Shipping Lines, Ltd.*

*General Contact Alert*

*Condition Amber*

*This alert is being sent out to all ships in the Halcyon Sector.*

*An unidentified ship, of unknown origin and design has appeared in UNE controlled space. It appeared out of a spatial rift and immediately began to use unauthorized military frequencies. UNE Space Commission HQ received several messages, but none of them have been deciphered. Several attempts were made to contact the vessel, but there was no reply. The ship first appeared on 2106.1.12 in near Earth space. Military fighters were scrambled, but the ship disappeared before it could be intercepted. The ship reappeared on 2106.1.23 off an outer planet in the Galeed system. There it stayed for four weeks without contact, then again disappeared. The last contact was on 2106.2.3 where the ship appeared in the Sirran system. Five M3 scout ships were launched to investigate but the ship again vanished. Some long-range scans were completed but very little data was gathered. UNE HQ has calculated the ship's probable trajectory. It will again appear somewhere in the Halcyon sector. The UNE Space Commission has asked all civilian ships in the area to be on the lookout for this vessel as it may be a spatial hazard for some vehicles. The BSL Board of Directors has agreed to comply with their request, but would also like to attempt contact with the crew of the unidentified ship. All BSL ships with high range sensors have been tasked with tracking the ship when it appears. Your orders are to make contact with the vessel. As BSL employees, all ship's crewmembers are required to attempt contact. Deviation from this task will end in forfeiture of all profits from present shipping plan. If unidentified vessel is inhabited—make contact with crew. If unidentified vessel is unmanned—board vessel and claim as salvage for BSL, Ltd.*

*Terrance Barrow, COO*

*Barrow Shipping Lines, Ltd., Earth HQ.*

McNeil read through the message and snorted with disgust. He scanned the rest of the task logs and found that the main computer had already been programmed to scan for the ship. In fact, the computer had found it. It was in orbit around a gas giant in the Saldyan system. The Saldyan system was uninhabited, and rested on the outer rim of the Saldyan Nebula. The computer had already plotted and initialized a course to intercept the unidentified ship. "Well, they certainly didn't waste any time," McNeil cursed under his breath.

"Who didn't waste any time?"

McNeil was startled by Akiko's sudden appearance and question. Akiko Kumimoto was the ship's computer and language specialist. She was a woman of full-blooded Japanese descent, who was petite and fragile looking. She hovered in the zero-g near his left shoulder. Her hair was pulled back and braided into a thick ponytail that hovered in the air behind her head. Her still damp bangs clung to her forehead, showing McNeil that she too had taken a quick shower after reviving. McNeil smiled at her and replied, "BSL-HQ has sent us on an errand."

"Errand? What kind of errand," She asked as she floated past him to her own station. As she glided lazily past him, McNeil could smell the sweet aroma of her. He wondered how she always managed to smell like fresh roses. "A ship of 'unknown origin' has appeared nearby and we're the lucky ones chosen to investigate," he answered wryly. Akiko frowned as she strapped herself into her seat. "I do not see what that has to do with us. This should be a job for the military or the Space Commission." Her voice was filled with the haughty tang of one born into a privileged family. She often put off tasks that she felt were too menial for her. "What right do they have to send us off to investigate anything out of the ordinary?"

"The same right they have when they send us any place, Akiko," Serena answered as she entered the bridge. "We signed a contract. Subsection 128 of that contract states that they have the right to change our destination and transport locations at will. If we don't comply with their orders we forfeit our share of the profits." Serena's voice was

clear and stern. Akiko frowned and said nothing.

McNeil watched Serena as she took her seat. The denim jumpsuit she wore was tight enough to leave little to the imagination. Her sleeves were rolled up above her elbows, and the front zipper of the suit was pulled down low enough to show a good deal of cleavage. She winked at him as she buckled herself in. McNeil blushed again, and cursed himself under his breath. "She may be an incorrigible flirt," he thought to himself, "but that doesn't make me any less of a Peeping Tom." He turned back to the console, and began typing in commands. "Tores," he started with only a bit of chock in his voice, "give me a read out of our exact position as soon as you can, and then get me an ETA on the coordinates we're headed for."

"No problem, Gus," she replied laughingly.

McNeil could only grit his teeth.

Michael Dokkesen was the next crewman to show up. He entered the room with his usual lack of style—bumping into bulkheads and control consoles as he went. He was the crew weapon specialist and helmsman. A sturdy man of Nordic birth—he was both extremely tall and heavily muscled. As was his habit, he had not taken a shower after emerging from his tube, so his short blonde hair lay greasily against his head, and he had a grimy look about him. "Good morning, everyone—if it's actually morning at all. Anyone in the mood for a little brandy," he said offering up a small silver liquor flask. His question brought forth a disgusted sound from Akiko. He only smiled, "I find it soothes the nerves after a long tube-sleep." His voice was so full of self-satisfaction that he could have put Narcissus to shame. He took a long swig from the flask, and then returned it to his vest pocket. Most of the crew found him to be a brash and overconfident hedonist. Wholly driven by pleasure, he was quick to action, as long as the action was in his favor.

Michael had a way with people that McNeil didn't care to understand. He could either put them entirely at ease, or irritate them to the point of violence. He took his seat at the helm and belted himself in. At that moment he noticed the display in front of him was not the orbital approach for New Venice. "Son of a...Where the hell is the space port? For that matter where the hell is New Venice?"

"Ooh, a little slow on the uptake there, Michael," Serena answered sarcastically.

"You know what, Tores? Bite me!" Michael didn't hold anything back.

Neither did Serena. "You'd enjoy it too much, Dokkesen."

“Not as much as you would,” Michael snapped back, his toothy evil grin stretched across his face like a scar.

“I’m not into self-deprecation,” Serena replied coolly.

Michael continued to smile, “And I’m not into cold Mexican.”

“That’s enough,” McNeil intervened before Serena could respond verbally. Instead her response to Michael was the upturned middle finger of her right hand. He could tell that Michael had crossed the line with her and that Serena would hold this grudge for a while.

“To answer your question, Michael, we’re about a month out,” McNeil replied. “BSL has another little job for us to do on the way.”

Michael slammed his fist on the panel in front of him, “Damn it! I was looking forward to a nice dinner and a night on the town. Stinking capitalist bureaucrats! Damn BSL! What the hell kind of job could they possibly have for us out in the middle of nowhere?”

“Perhaps if you stopped swearing for a moment you’d find out.” The reply came from the person now floating into the bridge. Jade Kilroy was the ship’s medical officer. She hovered near the center of the room glaring at Michael. Her eyes, like her namesake, were the palest green, and they sliced through Michael’s anger like shards of glass through flesh. “There are days when I would dearly love to wash your mouth out with hydrochloric acid.”

“That’s not the only thing that he needs washed,” Akiko growled.

McNeil stifled a laugh. Serena did not bother to stifle hers. Michael smirked and spat back a challenging reply, “I bet you’d like to try, Jade.”

Jade was a petite woman only half Michael’s size, but that did not stop her from her next action. She smiled at him, boldly grabbed his jaw, and squeezed her fingertips into his cheeks, forcing his lips out like a guppy. “Don’t tempt me, Dokkesen.” With that she kissed him long and hard on the lips.

“Geez, get a room,” McNeil said with disgust. He would never comprehend women. Jade was a woman of perfection. She was proportionally perfect in body, and mentally perfect in mind. She was analytical, and logical, but she was also compassionate and caring. Soon after she joined the crew, she and Michael had become romantically involved. McNeil often wondered what Jade and Michael could possibly have in common. Jade claimed it was the intellectual challenge of taming a hormone-crazed Norseman. Michael, in his own self-centered way, said it was the sex.

A high-pitched beeping rang out from the panel in front of Gus. It was a yellow-level alert. It was a minor annoyance, but still worth investigating. He tapped the keyboard with his calloused fingers, logged a query on the alarm, and then scratched his chin. In his attempt to avoid any more embarrassment at the hands of Serena he'd completely forgotten to shave. The rough, black whiskers itched, and instinctively he scratched, like a dog scratching at a flea. The computer finally came back with a response. He turned to the crew and asked, "Is Freddie awake yet?"

Michael nodded, "Yeah, he and Tony were headed down to the engine room when I left PLSC to come up here."

McNeil pressed the intercom button, "Freddie, do you copy?"

Freddie's jovial voice came back loud and clear over the speaker, "Aye, aye. Mon Capitan". Frederico Giannopolos—whom everyone called Freddie. Freddie had served in the Colonial Marines before joining the crew. For reasons he would not explain, he'd been dishonorably discharged from the service. McNeil thought this strange as Freddie was the most honorable man he knew. Freddie was the ship's engineer and spent most of his time keeping the ship's systems running smoothly.

McNeil grinned despite himself, "The starboard valves on the coolant leads to the main drive are jammed. Can you take a look at it?"

"No problem. As long as that damn maintenance bot stays out of the way."

"Thanks," McNeil replied. Freddie hated the maintenance robots. Every ship was required by law to carry at least one. He often said, "The only trustworthy engineer is one that can think for himself."

McNeil pressed the intercom button again, "Tony. Get over to the cargo holds and make sure everything is secure."

Tony replied with as much sarcasm as he could muster, "Oh...joy...I live to count crates of cow dung."

Serena laughed out loud at his outrageousness. Of course, the fertilizer was synthetic these days—no one used cattle droppings anymore—but it still smelled similar.

McNeil switched off the intercom and turned towards his other crewmates, "Serena, when you get that giggle out of your system do you think you could give me a ETA with the unknown?"

Serena had chuckled and wiped a tear from her eye. "Yes sir," she replied.

“Akiko,” McNeil continued, “I’d like you to see if you can make contact with them. Use all the linguistic decryption schemes you can think of.” Akiko nodded silently. McNeil turned lastly to Jade and Michael. They were still lip locked and getting friskier by the minute. “If you two love birds can pry yourselves apart...” Jade broke the kiss and headed swiftly to her seat. Michael snorted his disapproval. McNeil shook his head. “Jade, I want you to check our medical supply inventory. If we run into hostiles aboard that ship we may need all the medical supplies we can find.”

“Yes, sir,” Jade replied.

Serena looked up from her monitor, “ETA to unknown craft, 45 minutes at present speed.”

“Faster than I expected,” McNeil answered, “Michael, get down to the armory and prep for an excursion. We need vacc-suits, and plasma pistols. I’m going to assume the unknown is hostile until we learn otherwise.”

“On my way,” Michael responded, as he popped his harness and floated free of his seat. The intercom beeped again and Freddie’s voice sound out, “Captain?”

“Yes. What’s up Freddie?”

“I’m down here on Deck 2, and there’s something strange going on with the coolant valves. The local monitor says that the coolant flow is at maximum, but the computer is telling us that the valves are jammed. When I opened up the access panel it looks like the...”

Freddie’s sentence was cut short by a resounding blast that shook the whole ship.

## Chapter 2

Alarms blared from every panel. The computer sounded a klaxon as the recorded emergency voice chimed to life. “Emergency. Hull breach on Deck Two-Section Eight. Emergency Procedure Twelve initiated. Sealing all hatches. Coolant leak reported in Section Seven. Star Drive shutdown commencing.”

The emergency lights came on and the bridge doors sealed with a metallic bang. “What the hell,” McNeil cursed, and switched on the intercom, “Freddie! Status report!” The intercom played back only static.

Another explosion rocked the ship. McNeil could see the stars spinning outside the main view port. The *Antigone* was tumbling off course. Michael, who had just reached the bridge hatch when it slammed shut in front of him, was flung across the bridge like a rag doll. He landed head first into the communications console next to Akiko. He hit with a sound like a melon being crushed by a sledge. Jade screamed out his name. Blood, bone, and gray matter showered out in the zero-g like a gruesome fountain. Akiko took a face full of the material and immediately threw up.

The computer klaxon sounded again as the emergency voice continued. "Emergency. Hull breach on Deck One-Section Seven and Eight. Emergency Procedure Twelve initiated. Sealing all hatches. Coolant leak reported in Sections Six and Seven. Star Drive shutdown aborted. Star Drive overheating. Estimated time to fusion core breach -- ten minutes."

McNeil tried the intercom again, "Freddie! Respond!" Again there was nothing but static. Jade scrambled out of her harness and leaped toward Michael. Serena caught her in mid flight and pulled her down, just as another blast went off. This time the ship began to tumble the opposite direction. "LET ME GO," Jade screamed, but Serena would not let her loose.

McNeil tried frantically to get the ship under control. The Reaction Control Thrusters were working but the ship's mass and speed were too great to slow the tumble. He either needed more power or less mass. In an instant he made his decision. He typed madly on his keyboard. Three large levers popped out from the bulkhead above him. Akiko saw what he was doing and yelled, "Captain! Don't!" But it was too late. McNeil grabbed two of the levers and pulled. Explosive bolts fired and half their cargo holds blasted away into space. An instant later another set of explosive bolts fired, and the drive reactor was jettisoned. McNeil turned his attention back to the controls. The computer chimed in again, "Automatic Pilot inoperative. Computer Navigational Systems inoperative. Manual override initiated." He wiped the sweat from his eyes and grabbed the thruster control stick. The ship felt like a bucking bronco beneath him as he pushed the RCT's to their limits. The ship's hull shuddered and whined under the stress. A blast of sparks shot out from a nearby panel, almost blinding him. From deep within the bowels of the ship came a sound like the door of a safe being ripped in two. After what seemed like an eternity, McNeil finally got the ship under control. The klaxon continued to sound.

McNeil let out a heavy sigh. He hoped no one could see his hands shaking. Part of this was the adrenalin coursing through his system. Another part was the bio-electronic interface for his artificial arm. He rubbed his hand together and shook them, trying to regain a little control.

Just as he was beginning to gather together his shattered nerves, the jettisoned reactor core went critical. The hot, bright flash of the fusion explosion struck them only milliseconds before the photon wave and fireball did. McNeil grabbed the controls again and rode the shockwave like a flotsam on the sea. He could only pray that the radiation shielding was enough to protect them all from the lethal RAD levels bombarding the ship. This was about the time the computer began to babble again. "Automatic pilot inoperative. Computer Navigational Systems inoperative. Life-support functioning at thirty-nine percent. Estimating failure in six point seven hours. Hull breach on Deck Two-Section Eight. Hull breach on Deck One-Section Seven and Eight. Coolant leaks reported in Sections Five, Six, and Seven..." McNeil switched off the klaxon and the voice. He was in no mood to handle the unemotional, monotone of the computer harbinger's voice.

When his ears stopped ringing he could hear Jade sobbing and Serena trying to console her. He looked around the room to assess the situation. Jade was in a fetal position and Serena was holding her as if afraid to let go. Akiko glared at him as she wiped the filth from her face. Michael's body hung lifeless at the far end of the room. Tiny nodules of blood bounced around in the zero-g like billiard balls on a pool table. The air was thick smoke and debris. The stinging smell of ozone and blood permeated the air. McNeil went to see what could be done for Michael. The sight that met his eyes was a memory he'd take to his grave. Michael's forehead and face were caved in. Most of his skull was where his brain should have been.

McNeil was glad his stomach was empty. If he hadn't thrown up earlier he surely would have now. McNeil then pulled himself across the room to the emergency locker. He opened the hatch and pulled forth a first aid kit, four re-breather masks, a thermal blanket and pocket laser. He quickly handed out the masks and gave the first aid kit to Serena. "Akiko," he stated, "I need your help over here." The re-breather muffling his voice so he sounded as though he were speaking into a Styrofoam cup.

Akiko unfastened her harness and swung out of her seat. Together she and McNeil

carefully wrapped Michael's corpse in the blanket and sealed the therma-lite blanket with the laser. Akiko had started to turn green again, so McNeil put his hand gently on her shoulder. "Take a minute, OK," he said softly. Akiko gritted her teeth and nodded. McNeil was just now beginning to let the last few minutes sink in. Michael was dead. He was an ass most of the time but he sure didn't deserve to be killed. Especially not like this. McNeil's thoughts then turned to Freddie and Tony. Freddie was most likely dead as well. He had been in the section of the ship that had exploded. If the fire and the explosion didn't kill him, then the vacuum of space most likely had. Also, Tony hadn't answered the intercom after the first explosion. He was most likely somewhere near the explosion, or caught in one of the ejected cargo holds. Maybe his luck had run out, but McNeil hoped not. He pulled himself back to the command chair and began typing on his keyboard. "Let see how bad it really is. Computer: Systems Report!"

There was a short pause and then the computer replied, "Automatic pilot inoperative. Computer Navigational Systems inoperative. Life-support functioning at thirty-nine percent. Estimating failure in fifteen point seven hours. Hull breach on Deck Two-Section Eight. Hull breach on Deck One-Section Seven and Eight. Coolant leaks reported in Sections Five, Six, and Seven. Star Drive inoperative. Cargo holds three and four jettisoned. Internal comm-grid inoperative. Thrusters functioning at seventy-six percent capacity. Oxygen tanks five and six ruptured. Emergency oxygen down to fifty percent. Long Range Sensors inoperative. Long Range Communications functioning intermittently." As the computer continued to coldly, and tonelessly read off the list of damaged systems, McNeil began to rub his temples. He had a major headache started and he knew it would get much worse before it got better.

When the computer had finished its tirade of doom, McNeil spoke. "Computer: How far to unknown vessel?"

"1.2 Million Kilometers."

McNeil spoke. "Computer: Can we make it there on thrusters?"

"Affirmative."

"Good," McNeil replied. "How long will it take?"

"19.75 hours."

McNeil continued to rub his temples heavily. With less than sixteen hours of life support remaining they needed to work fast. "Computer: Transmit a General Distress Signal.

Report any responses immediately.”

“Affirmative. Transmission commencing. Estimate eleven days before signal reaches nearest outpost.”

McNeil shook his head and cursed under his breath. He then pulled himself out of his seat and floated back to where Serena and Jade were. Serena had fastened Jade into her acceleration couch. Jade’s eyes were closed and she was whimpering softly. Her arms and legs hung limply in the zero-G. Serena floated up to McNeil and whispered in his ear, “I gave her a sedative, Gus. While she’s out we should take the body to the infirmary, and check on Tony and Freddie.”

McNeil shook his head, “We’ll get the body out of here, but after that we need to try and restore full life support or we’ll all end up like Michael. “

Serena frowned, but she understood, “The infirmary is on the deck directly below us. Life support is halfway back towards engineering. There’s no telling how much damage has been done, so we’d better get moving before something else breaks.”

McNeil nodded and turned back to Akiko. Akiko had regained her composure somewhat and was a little less pallid. “Akiko, stay here and see if you can get the computer-controlled systems back on-line,” he ordered. “Start with the intercom and see if you can find Tony and Freddie. Then start work on the guidance system. We’re headed to the infirmary and then down to the PLSC to see if we can get back full functionality of life support.” Then he turned his attention back to Serena, “Let’s go.”

Akiko floated to the main computer station and began her enormous task. McNeil and Serena confirmed that there was still atmosphere outside the bridge door. The controls were not working so they had to force their way out. The main corridor was strewn with debris and wisps of smoke. They made their way down the hall to the next hatch. They had to force this one as well. “If this keeps up we’ll never reach the lower decks,” McNeil grumbled. He then grabbed Michael’s body and headed down the hall.

Unfortunately, the blocked hatches did continue. Each one was computer sealed, and without power to the control circuits they had to be physically forced. Trying to get leverage in zero-g was no simple task, but somehow they managed it. At several points they found they had to work their way around sections that had been exposed to vacuum. At about the tenth door McNeil leaned against a structural support to rest. “Take a few minutes, okay,” he told Serena flatly, “I need a break.” He was amazed that

Serena did not also need a rest; she looked as fresh and as fit as when she'd had when she first woke up.

Serena nodded and glanced over at the floating sack that contained Michael's body. "You know, Gus, Mike was an ass. There were times I thought I'd throttle him myself, but I never wanted something like this to happen to him." Her voice cracked slightly and her eyes began to show the glassy sheen of tears.

Gus, who'd forced himself to bury the shock and the pain, began to feel the sickening knot of sorrow clench in his stomach. When he saw the tears in Serena's eyes, he took a deep breath. His heart was pounding and he suddenly felt very uncomfortable. He let go of the handhold on the wall and floated towards her.

Serena quickly wiped the tears away and tried to regain her composure. "Sorry, Gus. I'm usually better at handling stress."

Gus reached out touched her shoulder. "Serena," he started, "I've seen you pick a fight with six guys in a bar because they were rude to you." The part that bothered McNeil was that she'd actually beaten them. "You don't have to play at being tough all the time." Serena managed a small smile, "No. Not all the time." She leaned in and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, then turned and floated down the hall to the next sealed hatch. McNeil was a bit stunned. To receive any form of affection from someone so unattainable made him feel at once both stronger and more self-confident, but also a little unworthy. He touched the cheek where her lips had been. Her spicy aroma lingered in his nostrils. He shook his head as if doing so would clear it of the ungentlemanly thoughts that rampaged inside. He grabbed the edge of Michael's makeshift body bag, and followed her down the hall.

After four more of the annoyingly difficult hatches, they had reached the infirmary. Luckily the refrigeration unit was still working. They placed Michael's body inside and held a short and silent vigil. McNeil took stock of the damage in the room while Serena sorted through debris collecting undamaged medical supplies. After a few minutes they were able to put together a well-worn first aid kit, and they headed off towards the PLSC. The trip there was less arduous. They only had to bypass six hatches, but the damage to the structure of the ship became more severe the further they went towards the aft of the ship. When they reached the hatch to PLSC, they were concerned to find the hatch sealed and the vacuum warning light on. A quick look through the window in the hatched

showed them their worst fears. A good eighty percent of the entire section was simply gone. The other twenty percent was so heavily damaged it seemed unlikely that it could be repaired.

McNeil floated back against the wall opposite the hatch and started laughing. "Perfect. Just...perfect."

Serena stared at him as he continued laughing. "I don't think this is funny at all...captain," she said coolly.

McNeil smiled, "Of course it is," he replied, "Now I know it can't get any worse."

Serena hovered against the wall next to him, "You should say things like that. It can always get worse."

McNeil stopped laughing, "When did you become such a pessimist?"

"When it became perfectly clear that we're all going to die a slow, lingering, suffocating death," she replied wryly.

"Were not dead yet," McNeil replied. With less than a moment's thought, he floated in front of her, cupped her face in his hand and kissed her. At this point he figured he had nothing to lose, and he fully expected Serena to knee him in the groin. Instead he was surprised to have her return the kiss with equal fervor. She grabbed the front of his jumpsuit and pulled him to her.

Softly she spoke, "I was wondering how long it would take you to get up the nerve to do that." Then she folded her arms around his neck and kissed him again.

Just then a familiar voice seemed to appear from out of nowhere, "Uh, I don't mean to intrude, but do you really think this is the time and place to be doing that?" Quickly, McNeil and Serena parted and looked in the direction on the voice. At the nearest corridor junction floated Tony—his luck had not yet run out.

\* \* \* \* \*

Akiko sat at her station trying to reroute all the systems she could. In the last half hour she had been able to restore long-range sensors and some of the internal comm-system. She ran a diagnostic sweep using the sensors and noticed something peculiar. The alien vessel they were headed for was transmitting an earth vessel distress code.

She pondered the possibilities. They would be able to get a clearer scan once they were closer. If they could get closer. Gus and Serena had not yet restored life support. Instinctively she rerouted power to short-range sensors, and ran a thorough scan of the ship's hull. The damage was fairly extensive. She was able to determine that the PLSC section was heavily damaged. It was unlikely that life support would be functioning anytime soon. She contemplated the situation. How do you make air without life support? The solution leapt out of her memory like a long lost friend. "Computer: Where is closest working water recirculator?"

There was a short pause before the computer replied, "Deck Two. Section One." Akiko floated free of her seat and headed down the corridor.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Tony, you lucky bastard! It's good to see you," McNeil's embarrassment at being caught in an interlude with Serena was dulled by the joy at finding his friend alive.

"We thought you were dead," Serena added.

"I thought I was too," Tony replied, "but I was able to make it through to a safe section of ship before the cargo holds blew." He then turned to McNeil, "Which reminds me, dipshit-- I owe you a punch in the nose for nearly getting me expelled into space with the rest of the ship's cargo."

McNeil gritted his teeth, "I'm sorry buddy, but I had to think about the rest of the crew. I had to try and save the ship."

"Well, you saved me as well, so I supposed I'll let it slide. I did end up with a broken leg though." Tony gestured down to the makeshift splint on his leg.

"How bad is it," Serena asked as she moved toward him to examine his injury.

Tony backed away, "Not bad if you don't touch or bump it."

Serena smiled and replied, "Come on, DiNicola. Don't be such a baby."

"Not a chance, Tores," Tony said defensively, "I'll wait and let the doc look at it."

McNeil shook his head, "Jade's a bit out of commission at the moment. Michael died right in front of her. She lost it, and we had to sedate her."

Tony was quiet for a moment before he responded, "Michael's dead? Jeez! What happened?"

McNeil did not answer. The images flowing through his head of Michael's death made his stomach knot and his throat go dry. Serena answered in his stead, "He wasn't in his acceleration seat when the first explosion hit. He died from blunt trauma to the head. Most likely he didn't feel a thing." Leastwise, she hoped and prayed that he had not. Tony shook his head in disbelief, "What about the rest of the crew?"

McNeil responded to his query this time. He cleared his throat but he felt as though the words had to be forced out like toothpaste from a tube, "All the rest of the crew is accounted for now...except for Freddie. We haven't found him yet."

"It's not likely that we will find him," Serena continued, "The section he was in was the first to blow out. If the explosion didn't get him, the vacuum most likely did."

"I'm not giving up on him yet," McNeil inserted angrily, "Tony's still alive. Maybe Freddie made it too." McNeil knew he was fooling himself, but he refused to admit the loss without some kind of proof.

At that moment, the comm.-system chimed and familiar voice was piped into the corridor, "Captain, this is Akiko. Can you hear me?"

McNeil floated to a nearby comm-panel and flicked the "on" switch. "Yes, I can. What's your status?"

"I've got internal communications, back up in most parts of the ship. Internal and external sensors are at 90% functionality. I took a scan of the ship and determined that life support was a lost cause."

"Yeah, we're down here at the PLSC, and we came to the same conclusion," McNeil replied.

Akiko continued, "The good news is that I've found a way to create oxygen for us using the water recirculation system. A rudimentary hydrogen/oxygen electrolysis device should provide us with enough to reach our destination."

"All right, get on in," he answered.

"I already am." The comm-panel clicked off and she was gone.

McNeil liked the idea, but knew that it was only a start. She would be able to make oxygen, but the ship was already getting cold. Even if they could breathe, they would freeze to death if the heat weren't turned on soon. The only option McNeil could think of was the spacesuits. They were insulated against the cold and they had internal heaters. Unfortunately their battery life was only 18 hours. If the alien ship had breathable air

they might survive. He could only hope nothing else would go wrong.

### Chapter 3

McNeil, Serena and Tony made their way back through the wreckage towards the bridge. As they passed the connecting corridor section eight Tony made a grizzly discovery. Floating free in the zero-gravity was a mangled human hand with a colonial marine tattoo. They'd finally found Freddie. McNeil felt a bit light headed. He'd never lost a crew member under his command, but today he'd lost two. He hardened his heart against the feelings pounding on his soul, trying to break him down. The trio took the hand to the infirmary, slid it reverently into a plastic storage bag, and stowed it in the cooler with Michael's body.

Tony floated quietly near the freezer for short time, head bowed and hands clasped. After an 'Amen', and crossing himself he turned to his friends, "Let's go. This place gives me the creeps."

McNeil nodded, and looked to Serena. Her arms were crossed as if it were the only way she could hold herself together. She looked back at him with pain in her eyes. "I thought you said things couldn't get any worse?"

McNeil's flat toned response belied his pain, "I guess I was wrong."

\* \* \* \* \*

The next fifteen hours were busy and tense. Tony worked on a way to generate heat in the bridge so the crew could stay warm when the life support failed. Akiko was able to set up the system to provide enough air to get them to their destination; unfortunately it was still nearly five hours away. McNeil and Serena spent some of the time outside on the hull, surveying the damage done by the explosion. The grav-boots allowing them to walk wherever they needed. Each of them tethered to the ship by a heavy synthetic cord that would save them if the grav-boots failed. They discovered that a good third of the ship was unsalvageable. They patched what small holes they could and returned to the confines of the ship. Once the modifications were in place and functioning the crew got

into their vacc-suits and waited impatiently to reach their destination. The air and heat in their suits would most likely be needed later, so they only used them for added warmth. They conserved all air and energy they could.

Jade sat unconscious in her couch. McNeil knew the sedative they'd given her would last another five to ten hours. Periodically she would let out a sad moan, when a dream or memory would push its way through. He only wished he could get some rest. All of them were exhausted, but none of them could sleep. The anxiety of their dilemma hung upon them like a yoke of hot metal. Each of them busied themselves with some little task. Akiko studied the computer core to see what data was salvageable, Serena monitored the navigation to make sure they didn't veer off course, Tony to measure of ships supplies, and McNeil studied ship displays to find out what had gone wrong. From the system logs he could tell that their explosion was most likely caused by faulty coolant valve. The valve became froze and so pressure built to a critical level. That was the primary explosion. The secondary explosions were most likely caused by the fusion reactor subsystems overheating. McNeil checked the maintenance logs and found that the valve had been serviced recently by the company. There could only be two explanations: the valve was not serviced properly, or the valve was sabotaged. The first explanation seemed the most likely, but he could not dismiss the second.

"Captain, I think you should have a look at this," Akiko piped out suddenly.

McNeil kicked free of his seat and floated to Akiko's station. "What's up," he asked, the valve fault still bouncing around in his mind.

Akiko had a concerned look on her face that immediately put McNeil on edge, "I ran a system check and file restore to see what damaged data I could retrieve. I found a trace of a file that was marked for your eyes only, but had been partial written over by the message we received from BSL HQ. I traced some commands fed to the computer and there is a Trojan style program that was initiated just after we were contacted by them. I believe the program was designed to eliminate the original message, but for some reason the task did not complete."

McNeil frowned and thought about the possibility of sabotage again, "Okay. Can show me the original file?"

Akiko nodded and brought the message up on her vid-plate. It was incomplete to say the least.

*Barrow Shipping Lines, Ltd.*

*To Captain Augustus McNeil:*

*BSL and the Space board have received distress signal....*

*...unidentified ship....collision with transport....investigate and provide assistance...  
...contamination risk possible...Derringer safety primary concern...salvage  
unnecessary...*

“Not very clear is it,” McNeil stated unhappily.

“No sir, its not,” Akiko replied.

“See if you can reconstruct the rest of the message and see who sent the Trojan.”

Akiko again nodded, “I’ll do my best.”

McNeil smiled, “You always do.” He pondered on this for some time, and decided not to tell the crew yet about the valve fault. If there indeed was sabotage, he wanted to find out who was responsible and why it had been done. He didn’t want to alarm the crew if it was just an unhappy coincidence.

(to be continued)