

Space Port

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When I gaze through the viewport of my freighter at the millions and billions of stars, I know there are other worlds. Worlds with peaceful civilizations, worlds with warm climates and friendly inhabitants. There must be. I have always wanted to be a space traveler, but never had the chance, until now, thanks to Gavril Bern. I don't know where I inherited my adventurous spirit. From parents I hardly knew? No chance.

My name is Draedon Ekho, and I live on Europa, a frozen world. I will probably never return to Earth. They tell me it was a paradise, once, but now, with its flooding, storms, and wars, people are desperate to leave. I came to Europa not by choice, but to escape. A bomb landed on our house when I was a boy, and my mother packed me on a freighter bound for Mars, and ultimately Europa, a lawless place ruled by mining consortiums. But many people clamored to go there, because it had a space port and starliners.

I met Gavril Bern at school. Well, it was not really a school, but a medical facility. School lasted one day. They planted a vimmy in our heads, and we became talking encyclopediums. They say I have a good memory. That's because I have an older model vimmy, free of spoilage. Still, sometimes the memories fade out for some odd reason, and I find myself staring into the blue. They plugged an astronaut module into Gavril, and he joined a space crew. I failed the visual acuity test, so did not qualify for a post on a starliner. I became a diver, exploring for silicates on the ocean floor. There is an ocean on Europa, under twenty kilometers of ice.

But I never gave up hope of venturing to the stars. After a near fatal accident aboard a subsea rover, where the carbon dioxide scrubbers failed, and I technically died of asphyxiation, I found myself out of work, but alive. Luckily, a nearby rover came to the rescue. I must have been unconscious for twenty minutes, but the medic on the rover said I survived, because the extreme cold slowed my metabolism, and the oxygen atmosphere in the rover had enriched my brain cells, so they could still function. I was offered a post on a freighter, shuttling cargo between Mars and Europa. Lonely work it was. No one to talk to. I was only a standby pilot. The QM autopilot controlled everything. In the blackness of space, the tiny sun was a dim and distant reminder of where I came from.

When I approach bright Jupiter, sometimes Io, the first moon, comes around the bend, and with my UV glasses, I admire her blue aurora and yellow sulfur plumes. Io, my darling, this is the last time we will see each other.

By chance, two remarkable things happened one starry night, as I was returning from Mars with a cargo of soy and potatoes. Gavril Bern called me and invited me to join the Rebirth Consortium, and I rolled infinity on my spin cube. The chances of those two events happening concurrently were astronomically high. I was elated. I jumped out of my

chair and danced a jig. I believe in chance more than fate. What are the chances of rolling infinity? The primary rolls are burst (two possible), double burst, insect eyes, blank, and infinity, so the chances are one in six. Multiply that by the chance of my friend Gavril, who I had not heard from in ages, calling me on a freighter run halfway between Mars and Europa, and the probability approaches luck status. Of course, if the cube had landed on a side and edge simultaneously, it would have opened a whole new realm of possibilities. This was a lottery win for me. I knew I was headed for the unknown. Finally, I could get off this frozen moon and satisfy my wanderlust. Get rid of my pill cap too. I take an anti-x whenever I feel an invisible hand grasp me by the neck and memories of asphyxiation come back. I get queasy just looking at water. I never did get used to the days and nights and the whole time bit. A Jupiter year was twelve Earth years. A Jupiter month took a whole year, and a day on Europa took eighty-five hours. When I was working beneath the sea, I worked for eighty-five hours and slept for twenty.

I began preparations immediately after landing my freighter, *Arawak*. I would have to dispose of my meager possessions. I handed the bill of lading to the port master, took the cruiser to Station C, and rode the tube down to my hexpod floating on the iridescent water under the ice. I turned on the heater to blow out the clammy air and checked my messages. There was only one, from Royd. Did I know someone named Royd? I'd been away so long, I'd forgotten my friends' names. I made a cup of hot chocosoy, settled into an easy chair, and flipped through the entertainment channels on the wall screen. I didn't see anything I liked, so I finished my drink, and drifted off to sleep.

On the second alignment of Io, I left my hexpod, took the tube to the surface, and rode the ice shuttle to the space port for my interview with Gavril Bern, commander of the *Liberation*. The ice shuttle was slower than the cruisers, but I liked to have time for quiet contemplation. I had loaded my cat, Snork, onto my belt, loaded my otopod with my music collection, given my jet sled to my neighbor, and didn't bother to notify the owner of *Arawak* that I would not be returning.

The shuttle arrived thirty minutes later, and an amazing sight greeted me. Jupiter smiled down on four big passenger liners, six freighters, and twenty or so cruisers. The giant planet seemed so close, I could almost touch it. Bright lights of the port reflected off the blue ice. I took off the breather and rode the automated corridor into the port. The artificial air smelled clean and fresh. I had already passed the psych test, and my cum rad dosage remained low, so I walked into Bern's office confident he'd take me.

Gavril and I were friends at school. We had made some dives together under the ice, but then gone our separate ways.

"Draedon! Good to see you. How long has it been?"

"More than half a Juppy."

He greeted me with a warm handshake. He had aged considerably.

His face looked pale. The cold and lack of sunlight on Europa turned people into ghosts.

“How are you doing, Gav? Are you commanding the entire port, now?”

“Not really.” He smiled. “You look worn.”

“You’ve acquired a few wrinkles yourself.”

I bumped into a wall lamp and almost knocked it over.

“Relax. Sit down. Sit down. You’re jumpy as a Martian toad.”

“Excited, that’s all. I want to thank you for this opportunity.”

“Have a bocco brew.” He pointed to the dispenser.

I helped myself and took a seat in front of his desk.

“Tastes bitter.”

“Probably sat in storage too long.”

I gave him my resume chip. He inserted it into his tablet and scrutinized the display.

“I still remember that time we raced jet sleds,” he said.

“You beat me, but not by much.”

“So, you really want to go?”

“I do.”

“You worked as a diver at Extor for three months?”

“That’s right.”

“Lonely work in the deep ocean, eh?”

“Yeah.”

He gave me a cold stare. “Why’d you quit?”

“They let me go after the accident. Insurance rates went sky rocking high.”

“I heard about that. You were in the news.” He glanced back at the resume. “Then you were a freighter pilot for six months.”

“Yeah. Did a lot of runs between here and Mars.”

“Know anything about Rebirth?”

“I only know it’s going to exploit the tunnel beyond Pluto. I got excited when the news came out that you were going to head the project. What’s the opening?”

He smacked his lips and leaned back in his chair. “My first officer quit. He got cold flippers at the last minute.”

“What does the job entail?”

“The usual stuff. Assist me. Manage crew allocations. The QM takes care of everything now. I’m just a glorified pilot. The only decisions I have to make are where do I want to go, and what do I want to do when I get there. Ha. Ha.”

“You make it sound easy.”

“What model QM did you have on those freighters?”

“Sixteen-B.”

“We have the Twenty-four-D. They added a new module. Plugged in some new personality types.”

“I didn’t like those QMs. I disabled mine, once.”

“How’d you manage that?”

“Had a good computer hack. We reprogrammed some of the front end.”

“You always were pretty sharp with the computers.”

“I know I can do the work, and if you find an ocean planet, I have lots of diving experience. I invented a new type of acoustic sensor. I can help build the structures.”

“Don’t worry. I know you can handle it. A passenger ship is much like a freighter, only bigger.”

I sipped the hot drink, made from boccho beans imported from Mars.

Those quantum minds made a human feel helpless at times. They had been perfected around the beginning of the Kepler Era, and controlled all the systems on starliners. The title of commander was a misnomer. They had backup systems, too, because a QM was very delicate. But they were arrogant. The one I had on *Arawak* kept talking back to me on my runs to Mars. Why did you do this and why didn’t you do this and you did this wrong. Finally, I sent him down minimal road.

“Got any special skills?” he asked.

“Such as?”

“Anything. Extra languages. Tools.”

“I work well in the dark.”

“Yeah, that’ll come in handy. Space is dark.” He grinned.

He thought I was joking, but I was serious.

“Sometimes the lights would fail on my rover, and I’d work by instinct.”

“On the ocean floor?”

“Yeah.”

He hunched his shoulders. “That would scare me to death.”

“I can memorize blueprints and control room layouts in no time.”

“Not sure if that will be useful. Your biggest job will be to keep order with the misfits.”

“Misfits?”

“The passengers. I’ve got refugees, religious sects, adventurers, excons, a slice of humanity all yearning to be free.”

“Won’t they be asleep most of the time?”

“It depends how long we have to travel.”

“What’s the probability of finding a planet suitable for life?”

“The astronomers have pinpointed three or four candidates.”

“That’s good.”

He looked at me, and his expression turned serious. “You realize we might never return.”

“I understand.”

He fidgeted with the mug on the desk, then turned his head and glanced at Jupiter’s orange glow that filled the whole window screen. “It took scientists a thousand years to create the pico tunnel, but they can’t guarantee it will remain open.”

“Why is that?”

“They have to create enough exotic energy to suppress the fizz—”

“The fizz?”

“I’m no physicist, but it’s my understanding that particles and antiparticles come into existence in space. They have to prevent that at the opening. That’s hard to do.”

“That’s good motivation to find a planet. We better hurry.”

He turned to my resume again. “It says here you assaulted a synthetic, once.”

“Minor disagreement.”

“I have synthetics aboard. You don’t get along with them?”

“I can get along with anybody. It won’t happen again.”

He seemed satisfied. “Have any questions for me?”

“How long does the trip to Pluto take?”

“About four Earth years. We’ll take the slow boat. The synthetics will monitor operations while we’re in stasis. Once we exit the tunnel, you’ll be on call around the clock, and if things come undone, well—”

“I know. Worst job I ever had, I had a boring tool get stuck one time for 545 hours. I didn’t get any sleep.”

“It shouldn’t be that bad.” He put his hands on the desk. “One last question. Why do you want to go?”

I ran my thumb across the stubble on my chin. “I love exploring.” It was a brief answer, but I didn’t want to elaborate.

“All right. Put your stuff in storage, kiss your babe goodbye, and report to the loading dock of *Liberation* in eighty-five hours.” He handed me my chip. “I loaded some documents on to your chip. Read the passenger manifest and watch the crew introductions. I’ll let you interview some of the late arrivals to the crew. I brought this girl named Nai Fern aboard, but I haven’t had a chance to talk with her.”

“What do you want me to ask her?”

“Her reasons for going. I’m not sure what her job title would be. She claims to be an expert linguist and telepath. She could come in handy in deciphering alien languages.”

“I’ll think of a title.”

“Thanks.”

As I rode the shuttle back to my pod, Europa grew smaller. I didn’t know what lay out there, but the unknown didn’t hold any terrors for me. I had dived in the oceans of Europa, and reveled in my loneliness at the bottom of the sea. I had no fortune that owned me, no obligations, no family, no loved one. After the accident, when I died for thirty minutes, I became a hero, a celebrity. But I hated the notoriety. I had to get away from Europa and rediscover myself, if only to prove I was not manufactured. The empty spaces between the stars did not scare me; the ghosts following my footsteps scared me. What would I bring with me? I would bring my music. Music would be my refuge.

I read the passenger manifest. Many of the people were refugees from a ruined Earth. I memorized the ship schematics in no time and watched the crew introductions. I was impressed with the ship security systems. It had fourteen holomodes, micro darts for those unruly passengers, and

telepathic overrides. I knew Royd Dirigong. He was a good engineer. He and I had worked together at Extor. He had designed the gas mixers on the diving systems. I also knew Jinntip Nukkadon, Royd's sweetheart. She was a research biologist. The name Yevgeny Shiripov caught my eye. I thought he was still in prison, but evidently Gavril had pardoned him. He had hacked the QM on *Arawak*. I owed him, because he had not implicated me. I wondered if the companies wanted to send him out of the solar system so he wouldn't be a threat to them. He was such a computer genius. I rode the tube to the surface. Jupiter, you're no longer going to rain your electrons down on me. I didn't envy the people that worked on the surface. They had to wear extra protection, because Jupiter bombarded Europa with high energy electrons. That's why the ice glowed. Excited as a schoolboy who had just won an ice race, I marched to the shuttle, ears plugged into my favorite tune, and slid across the slick walkway. I boarded the shuttle and said goodbye to Europa. For a moment, I felt elated. Was I born for this?

The ship looked like a giant wasp, with spherical head, cylindrical body, and eight fins at the tail section. I entered the ship and found my cramped cabin. I called Nai Fern, and she appeared fifteen minutes later. "Welcome. I'm Draedon Ekho, Gavril's second. Have a seat."

She pulled the second chair closer and sat down.

Two of her could have fit in the chair. She had a tissue pressed against her nose.

"What's wrong?"

"Only a nosebleed."

She seemed so fragile. She must have special gifts for Gavril to have accepted her.

"This shouldn't take long. Gavril wants to know why you want to go on a trip into the unknown."

"Do I have to explain? *Dois-je expliquer?* I want to go to the time before time, when there was neither existence nor non-existence—"

She seemed to withdraw within herself. Her voice grew louder, and she stared into space— "Before even the gods, or maybe only one god—the unknowable, the Only One who breathed breathless in itself. Who knows the secret whence came this manifest creation? Does He know it, this Most High seer, whether his will created, or was mute? He knows it—or perchance, e'en he knows not—" She reappeared, her eyes focused on me.

"You're a poet, too."

"That was not me. I was only reciting part of the hymn in the Rigveda."

"Are you looking for God?"

"Maybe the unknown one."

"I don't follow."

"The Greeks had altars to an Unknown God, Agnostos Theos.

Perhaps they were superstitious and didn't want to incur the wrath of a god they had forgotten to name. Or perhaps he is a god that can never be known. We may never know the secret of creation, but we can keep

looking.”

“I’m not looking for a god. Peace of mind will do.”

She settled back in her chair and smiled. “I’m sure we’ll both find what we’re looking for.”

“Can we get back to this?” I pointed to the screen.

“Oh. You need something for your notebook. Europa bores me. I want to immerse myself in strange cultures—”

She rattled off half a dozen reasons in a whispery voice. My speech recorder couldn’t keep up.

“I want to leave all the wars behind. There must be something out there. I heard the astronomers have detected habitable planets.”

“We might be lucky. Of course, there are no guarantees—”

I pulled her resume from the computer terminal.

“You came to Europa about four months ago?”

“Yes.”

“From where?”

“I came with my family and a group of refugees from the Asiatic Group.”

“Still have wars going on?”

“Yes.”

“I come from Alaska Island, but that was a long time ago.”

“You must like the ice, then.”

“Not really.”

I scanned her resume. She was certainly a woman of great knowledge and intellect.

“Impressive. You mastered all Southeast Asian dialects by age fifteen.

You have a doctorate in linguistics, you are fluent in symbolic languages, and you’re a natural telepath.”

How old were you when you left Earth?

“What?”

“How old?”

“Oh. Seven.”

“Alone?”

“Yes. Let’s get back to you. Gavril doesn’t know what job title to give you, but I think with your skills, I’d say cultural savant.”

“Sounds good.” She squirmed in the chair.

She was probably dying to probe an alien mind.

Alien is an inappropriate word. You should say brothers and sisters in time.

I wiped the perspiration off the back of my neck and took a deep breath. She was reading me. “Sorry.”

“If natural language fails, we need to be able to communicate in other ways.”

“How?”

“Music. Mathematics. Physical gestures. Electrical waves. Words may be inadequate where we’re going.”

“I agree. But we’re taking a lot of cultural baggage. Peoples’ heads are full.”

“I have no cultural prejudices. I don’t belong to any particular religion.”

“You assume we’ll find intelligent life.”

“There are millions of habitable planets, aren’t there?”

I nodded and closed the terminal screen. “That’s all I have.”

“I’m looking forward to working with you.” She slid off the chair.

I shook her delicate hand. “Take care of that nosebleed.”

“Yes.” She left.

Liberation was going to take 9,000 colonists in search of a home. The colonists were a bunch of misfits, as Gavril had called them, that didn’t fit in with the rigidly controlled life on Earth and Europa. Earth was at war even though half the land mass had disappeared as a result of flooding. The mining consortiums controlled Europa. The choice of occupations was limited. Either work for a mining operation, and explore the ocean floor, or join the crew of the passenger ships that left every year to take colonists somewhere else. Our crowded solar system overflowed with people. Mars had been terra-formed, and Europa’s cold climate didn’t suit most people, so they naturally tended to search for new planets to own, or exploit. We were a destructive species. Everywhere we went, we left in ruins. I hoped that if we found a planet, we would keep it a secret and live there peacefully, and no one would follow.