



# 500 Light Years From Home

by candygramme





It wasn't quite midnight on a stuffy, cool Richardson night. The lone pedestrian raised his voice in song as he wove his way down the pavement. He was happily drunk, mellow and beaming, his neck wreathed in a garland of plastic flowers.

It was late in the evening, but it was still the first of March, 1999. Jensen Ackles was 21 years old at last, and he was having the time of his life. His friends had thrown the best party ever for him. There had been music, and girls, and dancing and a stolen kiss with Paul, the man he'd wanted to date for weeks, and who had finally asked him out. The booze had been flowing freely, and he'd had at least his fair share.

His best friend, Ty, had been preoccupied with the topless model who'd been brought as someone else's date, and Jensen had decided to walk home rather than wait for him to give up on her. Now he was somewhat clumsily navigating the route back home to his apartment. He was singing 'Drift Away' loudly and drunkenly, contenting himself with the chorus over and over again as his alcohol-infused brain struggled to recall any of the words to the verses.

Turning the corner onto his street, he executed a couple of neat dance steps before stumbling into a flower bed and sitting down with a bump.

Staggering to his feet, he gazed forlornly down at the azalea bush he'd just decimated and hiccupped. "Oops!"

His phone shrilled, and he fumbled for it, stumbling again as he put it to his ear. "City morgue. You stab 'em; we slab 'em," he slurred.

"Hey, Jen, where you at?" Ty's voice was equally thick with alcohol. "Did you bail?"

"Yeah. On my way home now. Got to get my beauty sleep. Just because..." There was a sudden burst of static, and his connection died completely, leaving him frowning, poking disconsolately at the buttons on the phone as he resumed his unsteady progress.

The air seemed to have thickened, and as he walked he could feel a tightness building at the back of his head, felt the hair rising on his body as if the whole atmosphere had become electrified. Jensen began to wonder if he was getting sick. He suddenly felt as if he were about to throw up.

A low humming sound suddenly made itself audible, rising from a dull vibration that Jensen could feel through his teeth to an almost ear-splitting crescendo, he was suddenly sure that something bad was about to happen. He thought that he should maybe make himself scarce. His home was in the next block, and he broke into a stumbling run, confused but anxious.

He never made it. The sound rose to fever pitch, and suddenly there was light, a light so bright that it stopped him dead, unable to see, unable to hear, fear suddenly evaporating his happy, drunken good humor to stab a cold finger into his heart.

There was a moment of sheer, cold panic, a sensation of heat, pressure, weightlessness, and then nothing at all.

When the light was gone, and the sound had died away, all that was left behind was Jensen's cell phone, lying on the sidewalk, and Ty's voice, calling, sounding more and more concerned.

"Jen? Hey, Jen, you there? Jensen?"

And of Jensen there was no sign.

~~~~~oo(O)oo~~~~~



*The year is 2299. Location is the Space Fleet HQ in the Mare Imbrium, Luna.*

The line shuffled toward the double doors, and the two men who had just joined it were dressed like all the rest, in fatigues with their rank emblazoned on the sleeve. The man in the lead was well above normal height, and he wore a beret on the shaven head that gave him away as being a pilot.

"What are you going to do with yourself now that you're no longer on active duty, Chewie?"

The speaker following was a six footer, but he appeared small beside his giant companion. The two of them were filing out of their final de-briefing and had begun making their way from the auditorium to join the line-up to receive their discharge papers.

Captain Jared Padalecki was 28 years old, and at 6'5" he towered head and shoulders above the man who had been his second in command for more than half his missions, Lieutenant. Chad Murray. He turned to cuff the smirking Murray around the ear with one huge hand.

"Call me that one more time, bitch, and I'll piss all over your girlie mags." Facing front again, he stepped into place at the end of the line of space crew, all of whom were awaiting their golden handshake. "I've got a bunch of hazard pay saved up, and I'm gonna buy myself a ship and go joyriding around the abandoned sector - see what I can find. Now that the Grays have been chased back to their own space, there are bound to be interesting things they've left behind, just waiting for little old me. I hear that Chris Kane lucked out a few weeks ago and brought in a complete, working stasis machine. He put it up on Ebay and made a cool couple of million. The dude is set up for life."

"No shit!" Chad had been listening with great interest. "Sounds like a great way to go." He cleared his throat as another pilot emerged from the processing room, clutching his discharge papers. "I was going to go Earthside, but my sponsor wrote me that I'm expected to marry some chick that the coven has chosen for me. Apparently, according to him, our genes are compatible or some such crap, and they think I should get down and start makin' babies as fast as I can." He grinned as Jared turned again to shoot him an incredulous look. "Yeah. No way. I realize that my genes need to be passed on for the greater good of the species, but I need tons more practice before I start makin' babies. Think of all those gorgeous women out there, and what they could teach me."

"I guess." Jared frowned, thinking hard. "Well, dude, if you're less than charmed at your prospective future as a patriarch," he said, nodding as another of his acquaintances came out of the room waving his papers, a civilian at last. "Why don't you come with me and go looting abandoned Gray settlements? We've worked together before, and I'm gonna need an engineer. We can share whatever profit we make out of it."

"Seriously?" The squinty-eyed blond lost his characteristic smirk, and for a moment there was an expression of real affection on his face, albeit fleeting. The moment passed. "You think you can be in close proximity with me for any length of time without hitting on me? I'm telling you here and now that I don't bat for your team."

"So that's a yes, right?" Jared resisted the urge to smack Chad again, used to him and his habit of shooting his mouth off at every possible opportunity, contenting himself with rolling his eyes as the line shuffled forward once more.

"That's a hell yes!" Chad beamed. "I'm so not ready to settle down, and certainly not with some chick that's been chosen for me just because she's got child-bearing hips."

"Well, all right!" Jared held his hand up, knuckles out for a fistbump, "Just one rule, okay? You are never to call me Chewie again, got it?"

"Sure thing, Sasquatch." Seemingly unrepentant, Chad stepped back out of Jared's range to avoid the chastisement that would surely follow, just as the door opened and Jared was summoned into the inner sanctum for his last act as a commissioned officer of Space Fleet.

In any event, becoming a civilian was a simple matter. There was a medal, a handshake, and a couple of signatures, and finally Jared found himself on the other side of the door clutching his severance papers, and a bank credit for far more money than he had ever expected to own in his life.

Chad followed him almost at once, looking somewhat solemn. “Well, howdy, Mr. Padalecki, he said, crossing to where Jared had leaned against the wall to wait. “How does it feel so far?”

“Right now? Pretty much the same.” Jared grinned at him as he pushed away from the wall and fell into step beside him. “C’mon. Let’s go and see about buying ourselves a cruiser, shall we?” Together they headed across to the shuttle that would take them down to Earth.

~~~~~oo(O)oo~~~~~

Disembarking down on the Earth for the first time in four years, the two friends booked into the transit barracks at Naval Airbase Atlanta. Jared had deposited his pay at the terminal in their room and rented a hovercar, and, after eating their first civilian meal, they decided to go and see what they could find. There was a used cruiser lot on the approach to the spaceport, just beyond the military base, and Jared, armed with his severance pay, was determinedly resisting the efforts of the salesman to sell him a showy, expensive runabout that was totally unsuitable for his purposes, but was obviously something that would attract the unwary. The salesman only gave up and left them to it after Chad, always direct to the point of rudeness, made a loud observation regarding ‘fucking gin palaces with as much spaceworthiness as the average tin can.’

After what seemed like hours of futile searching amongst the leisure craft on the forecourt, Jared gave a sigh and went to find the salesman. The man he'd been dealing with was assisting another customer, once more extolling the virtues of the ship Jared had rejected, and, after wandering into the showroom he at last found a salesperson who would listen to him as he painted the picture of what he was seeking.

The salesman led him out of the back of the showroom, to an area that hadn't been visible from the forecourt, and Jared began to relax as he surveyed the half a dozen or so little space cruisers that were more the type he was after. The craft he finally settled on had once been a runabout in one of the huge battle cruisers that Space Fleet still kept patrolling the borders of Gray space. Silvery and immaculate, the little ship was perfect for Jared's needs. She was sturdy and fast, designed for her maneuverability, and Jared knew right away that she was the one. He settled in to dicker while Chad inspected the jump drive engine and made the kind of sounds that could almost be construed as sexual ecstasy. It wasn't long before Jared had become the proud new owner of the little ship that had been christened “Ladybug” by its builders.

The Ladybug had been a bargain. She wasn't luxurious, but she was comfortable and above all serviceable. There was ample room for a crew of four. Her interior had been detailed, and there were no signs of the previous occupants. Jared inhaled deeply, breathing in the scent of machine oil and fresh polish and closing his eyes as it filled his lungs. He had his own ship at last.

The cost of Ladybug had been significantly less than Jared had budgeted for, and he instantly began to compile a list of the supplies and enhancements she would need before lift-off, excited to be able to kit her out with the best of everything.

~~~~~oo(O)oo~~~~~

As it happened, it was a further three weeks before that lift-off was to take place. Jared had been over the entire spacecraft with a fine-tooth comb, beefing up the shields while Chad stripped down and rebuilt first the auxiliary engines and then the jump drive. By the time they were done, Jared thought that they were prepared for any eventuality that might occur once they found themselves in the lawlessness that had once been Gray occupied space.

They'd added a third member to the crew, a tiny brunette pilot who had served with Jared on more than half of his missions. Quiet and competent, Lieutenant Sandra McCoy had impressed Jared on their first mission together. She had, in fact, assumed command of his ship after he and well over half of his crew had been rendered immobile by the random triggering of one of the psych ray bombs that the Grays were so fond of, and which had been adapted to penetrate the battle cruiser's shields. Sandy, born and bred on Venus, and with a resistance to psych rays that only Venusians possessed, had fought off the bomb's paralyzing effects and single handedly gotten them out of danger, before the Gray ship could attach its tractor beam and take the entire cruiser prisoner. Once back at Imbrium, she had merely grinned when Jared tried to thank her, and later that evening the three of them, Sandy, Chad and Jared had hit the Speakeasy and gotten magnificently, stinking drunk.

That particular evening had culminated in a climax where Sandy had decked Chad with a beautifully executed right cross, after he'd refused to stop hitting on her and gotten a little too familiar. Having learned his lesson, Chad had since treated the gorgeous little lieutenant as one of the boys.

Sandy's discharge from active service came two weeks after Chad and Jared's, and, when she'd emerged to find the two of them waiting for her, she'd given a huge squeal and launched herself at Jared, wrapping arms and legs around him as she clung to him like a little monkey.

In the days following their discharge, Jared had applied for, and been assigned the exploration rights to, a sector that held two solar systems that had been occupied by the Grays. The license had taken a lot of Jared's remaining credits, but he felt certain that he'd be able to recoup his initial outlay and then some once he got out to his sector. With

that in mind, he paid it happily, returning to the others brandishing the license plates that would be affixed to Ladybug with a kind of manic glee.

It was several weeks before they were ready to ship out. By the time their preparations were complete, Chad, with Sandy's assistance, had stripped down and totally rebuilt the little ship's engines. Jared, meanwhile, had ripped out the elderly navigation system and installed a new, up to the minute computer setup to do all the astrogation, inventory and life-support control they might need for their extended stay out in the far reaches of the galaxy.

The night before they were due to take off on their exploratory expedition, Jared moved the Ladybug to the moon in preparation for their departure. For the first time since their discharge, they found themselves back in Imbrium, heading for the Speakeasy, which was the bar they'd always favored when they'd still been members of Space Fleet. The brief walk over to the bar through the tunnel that linked the main dome to the entertainment district was something they'd done together many times, but this time, Jared couldn't help looking up through the thick plexiglass of the tunnel at the Earth as she hung, green and blue, an oasis in the blackness of space. It was night over North America, and he couldn't see San Antonio, his hometown, but the brightly lit globe, three quarters full, currently showed the Indian sub-continent and as he watched, transfixed, he could see dawn beginning to break on Africa's eastern coast.

It had been raining in Atlanta that morning as they had lifted off, and the air had been almost too humid to breathe. He'd not felt any separation pangs as he busied himself with the preparations for departure, but now, gazing up at the world of his birth as she hung sparkling against the backdrop of space, he felt a surge of love for his home, and, with it, the sweet ache that leaving the Earth gave him every time he headed out on a new mission.

Roused from introspection by Sandy, who had returned to find out why he'd stopped walking, he'd given himself a shake and followed Chad's footsteps through the air-locked doors of the Speakeasy bar and grill.

The bar was nothing like as packed as it used to be, back when the war against the Grays had been in full swing, and any serviceman on R and R had made it their home away from home, but there were still career servicemen, newly returned from patrolling Gray space, and the odd demobilized ex-marine taking their final farewell of Imbrium before heading home, or, like Jared and his crew, shipping out on private expeditions.

Chad, true to form, had wasted no time. He'd staked out a table and ordered a round of beers, a bottle of synthahol and three glasses. As they approached the table he was busily preparing shots for them all. Jared was about to sit down when Chad rose to his feet and raised his glass.

“Okay, bitches, I want to propose a toast, so get on your feet and let's drink to far stars and adventure.”

As the three of them knocked back their shots of synthahol, there was a whoop from the door of the bar, and a shout of, “Oh, my God! It’s the Sasquatch, surrounded by his tribe of timid, woodland creatures. Hey, Bigfoot, how come you ain’t down on Earth right now, sampling all the fleshly delights she has to offer?”

Turning to look at the newcomers, Jared beamed as he saw who it was that was threading his way between the tables towards him, dressed in his typical, sloppy fatigues, with his trademark woolly hat jammed on his head.

“Kane, you motherfucker! How the hell are you?” Rising to greet the newcomer, Jared grinned at the two who were following him. Kane he knew, but the other two were both strangers, one blond, whose eyes watched everything with an air of amusement, and one whose hair was as dark as his companion’s was fair, and who seemed to be quietly taking in the scene and filing it away for later dissection.

Introductions were soon made, and the rest of the evening was spent drinking and carousing with the newcomers. Carlson, the blond, was Chad's counterpart - an engineer who also seemed to be able to wring a tune out of pretty much anything, from the glasses and bottles on the table to the old piano in the corner of the bar. Once he'd spotted it, he zeroed in on it and began to play. Kane himself proved to have a powerful voice, and when he and Sandy began to harmonize with Carlson, the result was pleasant enough that they didn't need to buy another drink for themselves all evening.

The third member of the team was Collins, who proved to have an apparently inexhaustible supply of bawdy songs and who took great delight in sharing them. Jared had feared that Sandy might feel out of place with all the testosterone, but it soon became evident that she could hold her own, singing along with the most scurrilous lyrics in her rich contralto. Chad, who couldn't carry a tune in a bucket, and who was inordinately proud of that fact, became even more enamored of her after that.

It was close to dawn before Jared stood up and announced that he was retiring for what was left of the night. This led to a discussion about their prospective departure, and Jared's desire to go out and prospect in the sector that the Grays had vacated, and it was another hour before he finally managed to get away.

As he climbed into the narrow bed he'd been allocated in the Spacemen's Legion hall, he decided that they'd better defer their takeoff to the following day. He had no desire to end up a casualty before he'd even made it out of the solar system.

~~~~~oo(O)oo~~~~~

It was lunchtime when Kane knocked on the door to Jared's room and found Jared, unshaven and disheveled, blinking owlishly as he sipped on what passed for coffee from the room's food synthesizer.

"Me and the boys have been thinking," he said in greeting.

"You've got to be careful about that kind of thing, man." Jared raised one eyebrow. "It's thinking that gets you into trouble every time." Kane huffed impatiently, and Jared repressed a grin. "What's on your mind, man?"

"Been thinking that one ship with just the three of you won't be much of a party. Seems to me that you'd do better with company." Kane, always hard to read, was looking even more expressionless than usual.

"Are you guys offering to come along with us?" Jared's ready grin lit up his face, and a slow flush stained Kane's cheeks. "I thought, after last night, you and Steve were planning on opening up a honky-tonk out on Mars in the new dome there."

"Well, yeah, we will, sooner or later. Just don't think we're ready to throw in the towel and stay dirtside yet." Kane paused and fumbled out a plug of tobacco before continuing. "But, like I said, we've all been thinking that it might be nice to have one last trip before calling it a day, and we really want to take a good look at what the Grays left behind when they pulled out so suddenly. Call it curiosity or just plain nosiness, but I think it would be fun. So how about it? Can we come along? You'll be able to cover more area, and if there is any shit worth bringing back, you'll have more cubic in which to transport it. Besides, it'll be a blast. We'll get you all singing - even you, see if we don't."

Jared's grin had widened as he listened to what was, for Kane, a lengthy speech. "You wanna lay money down on that?" he asked.

"I don't see how I could possibly lose," smirked Kane. "We're fuckin' irresistible when we get going. You ain't heard nothin' yet."

"Well, all right. Put your money where your mouth is," said Jared, a laugh in his voice.

"Does that mean you want us along?" A rare smile cracked Kane's normally dour features.

"I'll check with the others, but I think they'll be cool with it, and it's certainly a yes from me." Jared extended his hand to his friend, and they shook. "How long will you need to get ready? We were aiming to ship out today, although I think tomorrow would be better considering the lack of sleep, and the hangover Chad's sure to be sporting this morning. I guess we could put it off for another day or two if you need more time to provision."

"Nah. We're good to go." Chris gave a little half smile at Jared's expression of surprise. "We were considering heading off out into the empty sector ourselves, and we're pretty much ready for anything. Just need to take on some more water, and we're good."

"Well, all right!" Jared clapped Kane's shoulder as his visitor rose to leave. "I'll be out in a few minutes. Just need to take a quick visit to the refresher. See you in the snack bar."

As Kane closed the door behind him, Jared considered the new perspective of his trip. There would certainly be far more cargo space available to him with the addition of Kane's rather larger space cruiser, and although Jared wasn't a greedy man, he really wanted to make full use of the license he'd bought. Alien technology was much in demand, and if he could find something as exciting as one of the stasis engines that had been brought back by Admiral Edlund from the negotiations, or even one of the smaller machines like the one Chris had brought back recently, he would be set for life. Not only that, but with a crew of only three he knew that there might be difficulties as nerves started to fray. Another ship meant more diversion and less friction, or at least, that's what Jared hoped. His stomach growled plaintively, and, smiling to himself, Jared set about making himself presentable and ready to go out in public and find something to eat.

~~~~~oo(O)oo~~~~~

He ran his crew to earth in the snack bar. Sandy was looking fresh and perky, while Chad was visibly propping up his eyelids with great difficulty. The two of them had apparently just finished eating, since there were empty plates in front of them, and they were sitting, deep in conversation with Misha Collins, Kane's Communications Officer. "Hey, guys," Jared called. "Guess what?"

All three of them turned to look at him, and he reached their table just as Chad mumbled something that might have been, "Do tell."

"Kane and his crew are going to join us in our expedition to boldly go where no man has gone before."

There was a pause, and then Sandy squealed, causing Chad to shudder and groan as he clutched his head. Clapping her hands together, she reached to grab hold of Collins and pull him forward, planting a smacker of a kiss on his cheek. Chad had watched the proceedings with a jaundiced eye, and suddenly smirked, grabbing for Collins just as Sandy let him go and repeating her actions, pressing a noisy kiss to Collins's astonished face amid assorted catcalls and jeers from the other occupants of the room.

Scrubbing his face with the back of his hand, Collins glared at Chad in outrage, while Chad rose to his feet to take a bow. "And we're not even in space yet," growled Collins. "What's it going to be like after we've been out there for a week or two?"

"Take notes. We'll have enough material for a soapie." Carlson was making his way from the counter with a tray laden with food. "I'm guessing that he said yes, and we're going?" The last was addressed to Kane, who was following him, bearing a tray with six bottles of highly priced Three Planets lager.

Kane set his tray down on the table and took out a hip flask, which he raised to the assembled crew members. "Here's to us," he said. "We're going." Tipping his head back,

he poured the amber liquid from his flask down his throat and then reached for one of the beers.

"Fucking space opera, here we come!" yelled Chad, and at that moment the little band of adventurers raised their glasses and drank.

~~~~~oo(O)oo~~~~~



Lift off the following morning was almost an anti-climax. The lunar day was in full force, and the heat on the surface was such that Jared was relieved to close the airlock behind him and step into the comfortable environmentally controlled atmosphere of his little ship.

Sandy had been there overnight, programming in the parameters for the course they would take out of the solar system and checking the communication equipment over one last time. When the other two arrived she was happily replacing the cover plate to the comm deck, looking up briefly and smiling as Jared entered the cockpit to do his own final checks. Her hair had begun to grow in, and now covered her shapely cranium with a feathery cap of brownish black. She had a smudge of dark grease on her nose, and her coveralls were streaked and smeared with the evidence of her labors.

"She's ready to go, Captain Sasquatch, sir!" she said, bouncing in her seat. "Everything's in order, all systems are A-OK, FAB, Go!"

"What the fuck have you been drinking?" Chad aimed a punch at her biceps as he passed her, and, snake-fast, she grabbed at his hand, twisting easily to put him in a wrist-lock that had him howling for mercy.

"Want me to throw him in a storage locker, Jay?" she asked, her smile fierce as she applied enough pressure to take Chad down to his knees.

"Nah! I'm gonna need him at least 'til we get out far enough to twist. Take it up with him later." Jared turned away to make for the console, leaving Sandy to release the hapless engineer as and when she saw fit.

Taking his seat, Jared busied himself with the read-outs from Sandy's endeavors, carefully checking through her programming and finally giving an approving nod. "Okay, San, you done good. Wanna call up Chris and see how close he is to getting off the ground, and then flag Space Traffic Control to notify them of departure?"

"You got it, Jay." The little brunette reached for her communicator jackplug and inserted it into the port behind her ear, then fell into the brief, trance-like state that communicators used when actually locking onto their target. Seconds later, the face of Chris Kane appeared on the viewscreen.

"We're ready when you are, Chewie," he said.

Too excited to complain, Jared merely nodded, eyes on the console where Space Traffic Control had just locked in a countdown for him. "Okay, Christian. We've got T minus 5. See you on the flip side."

"T minus 4.46 and mark," repeated Chris, relaying the information to Collins, who murmured a soft acknowledgement.

"I have the clearance." Sandy's soft voice sounded in the background, and Chad's response was immediate.

"Engines are good to go."

"T minus 4." The computerized readout announced the countdown as Space Traffic Control took over the timing to synchronize it with the Kane ship.

The countdown progressed. At Jared's command, Chad brought the anti-grav field online, and the little ship trembled, poised on the brink of flight.

As the computer began its final countdown, checking off each second as it faded away, Jared felt a tingle of excitement shiver through him. Sure, he wasn't new to space, but this was different. This was adventure, pure and simple. This, to quote the words of the long-dead Captain Kirk as he often did, was 'boldly going where no man had gone before.' He and his companions were heading for an unknown, unexplored quadrant of space, which, until now, had only known an alien presence. This was exciting, and he couldn't wait!

As the computer called out the five second mark, Sandy called out, "All clear for take-off."

"Fire 'em up," called Jared, his eyes fixed on the view screen, and on the final count, Chad engaged the thrusters, so that the Ladybug rose lightly from its pad and began to arc gracefully up and away from the lunar surface.

Watching his charts, Jared painstakingly negotiated his way out of the gravity field until he could park in the pre-arranged orbit that would permit him to head out in the direction they needed to go.

A few seconds later, Kane's face appeared once more. "Got you in my visuals, Jay. Give us the word when you're ready to go."

"Space Traffic Control says 13.2, Jay." Sandy, still fully tranced, began calling out the orders from STC center, and at the thirteen minute marker, the computer voice kicked in and Sandy sat forward, opened her eyes and shook herself. "Looks like we're really doing it, Jay."

"Oh, ye of little faith." Chad had been watching her, eyes intent on her pretty face as she communed with STC. He was still plugged into his own neural net, effectively a part of the space drive, able to monitor every part of the engine's function and ready to kick the space drive in at a moment's notice.

"I have faith," grinned Sandy. "Just not so much in you."

"Rude! My engines love me. Come listen. They purr like kittens." Chad looked outraged, although there was a softness in his eyes as he looked at her that belied the harshness of his words.

"Don't fight, children, or I'll make you stay home while I go on my own." Jared, plugged into the sensors that allowed him to pilot the Ladybug, sounded remote. "Don't have time to spank you right now."

"Okay, but later I'll hold you to it." Chad always had to have the last word, but then that was who he was. "And I'd happily pay for a ticket to watch you spank Sandy."

"Bitch!" Sandy's contralto cut through his verbiage.

"You started it." Chad would have said more, but Jared's glare finally quelled him.

"Steve's got you on a tight beam, Jay." Chris called his attention to the overhead screen. "We're going to piggyback out of here if that's okay."

"Easiest way of keeping together," agreed Jared, frowningly consulting the time. "Less than five minutes. Stand by for my command."

The trio in the ship waited, breathless with anticipation, for the moment that they would twist for the first time. 5... 4... 3... 2... 1...

As the computer called zero, Jared engaged the jump drive and, as swift as thought, the Earth winked out of existence, leaving them hanging in space, the solar system a distant spot somewhere behind them.

"You still with me, Kane?" Jared's voice sounded over Chad's whoop of glee at the jump.

"Once Steve locks you into his sights, he doesn't ever let go," was the cheerful reply, and Chad whooped again.

"Okay, next one is the big one. You've got the coordinates, just in case the jump goes pear-shaped?" Jared was setting in the parameters as he spoke, long, slanted eyes staring into his astrogation charts as he set up the jump. "Twist in one minute. Last one through buys the booze."

"You wish!" Kane's voice was accompanied by the sound of cheers from his crew, followed rapidly by applause from Chad and Sandy.

"Come on; settle down." Jared was grinning too, but he knew that the most complex part of their journey was still to come. "Okay, children, we're going for one big jump. We'll twist in 10... 9... 8..."

Again, as zero was called, the view winked out from their screens, and there was a long, breathless moment of dislocation, the sense of falling, before the heavens righted themselves again, and they could see a new solar system ahead.

"Four planets, Jay." Sandy was back in trance again as she communed with the ship's sensors. "Two with breathable atmosphere. Both with gravity of slightly less than one G."

"Thanks, San. What kind of temperature?" The little brunette paused, and Jared, who had set in a course to approach the system, turned to Chad. "Ready the thrusters."

"Third planet out looks the most likely. Temp of 75F by day, around 50F at night, no excess radiation detected." Sandy sounded enthusiastic despite her trance state, and Jared nodded.

"That sounds like the one to start with then." He quickly charted his path to the planet they'd selected and relayed the information to the other ship floating alongside them in the black void. "Gimme the thrusters then, Chadwick." Chad, all business now that his moment had arrived, jumped to comply, and less than half an hour later, the pair of ships were parked in orbit around the new world.

It was a beautiful sight. The planet spread below them, green and red and gold. There were seas below, although not as extensive as those of the Earth. There were polar ice

caps too, and several mountain ranges that looked to be significantly higher than those of their home planet.

Sandy, who had been busily scanning the surface, had earmarked a couple of sites of interest. One of them appeared to be a city, and the other, some distance from it, was a very large structure of some kind. Making a snap decision, Jared opted to start with the structure, purely because there was apparently an electrical storm currently raging over the city, making it more difficult to land there.

For several hours following their arrival into orbit the crews of both ships were preparing for landfall. Each item of equipment had to be made ready and then tested yet again, and it was close to bedtime when the two ships finally touched down, each of them settled onto herbage that had a blue-green tinge to it, and which looked remarkably like grass.

"Okay." Jared frowned as he studied the readouts Sandy had sent him. "Suits on if you want to go out for a half hour to explore. The air may be breathable, but we still don't know if there are any toxins present, and we won't know until we get the analysis of the ground and the vegetation done." He glared round at the other two. "So don't go touching anything with your bare hands."

Sandy had been busy collecting samples for analysis with a set of Waldoes she'd extruded from the belly of the Ladybug, but with the promise of a trip outside she straightened up and set the computer on auto before unplugging herself from the console.

The door to the airlock opened at Chad's silent command, and he too uncoupled himself from his controls, rising to his feet to reach for his gloves and pull them on. Jared was quivering with excitement at the thought of exploring his new planet.

"Are you going to name it?" asked Sandy, as Jared strolled over to peer out at the terrain. Cobalt sky gave a backdrop to the fiercely white sun. It hung low on the horizon since the day was almost done, but the warmth it gave off was still noticeable. Reddish purple mountains could be seen in the distance, and here and there across the blue-green sward could be seen tiny red and white flowers. The air smelled a little damp - as if it had recently rained.

"Name it? I don't know." Jared frowned. "I have no clue what to call a planet," he said, shrugging helplessly. "Why don't you do it for me?" he said, finally, and Sandy squealed in excitement.

"Jesus, woman!" Chad moved to stand behind her. "Any higher and you'll be audible only to bats. Come to think of it, that would be kind of appropriate."

"Shut up," she hissed, aiming a kick at the shins so conveniently close to her booted foot. Her face screwed up ferociously as she thought, and finally she beamed. "I've got it. I'm gonna call it Paddywhack," she announced, and at that both Jared and Chad began to laugh.

"Okay, San, Paddywhack it is." Jared nodded and stepped down onto his new planet, face alight with the joy of being there.

The three in the Piñata Novia had obviously been waiting for Jared, because first Collins, then Kane popped down out of their ship, followed by a grouchy looking Carlson. "I can't explain it, but the sensors just aren't working. They were fine before we left, and there's nothing I can find wrong with them, but the calibration is all off, and I don't know what's going on," he growled. "I don't know what the hell's going on with it."

"It'll be okay, Steve. Take a look at it in the morning." Chris was staring at the distant building as he was speaking. "Guess we don't have time to go investigate this evening, do we?"

"It'll be best to wait until the readings are all complete and the analysis is done, so we can go without wearing the suits." Jared smiled. "First thing after breakfast we'll head out, all right?"

"You think it's some kind of hanger?" Chad was taking readings as they studied it. "There's definitely some kind of energy coming from inside it. Can't tell you what it's doing yet, but it's definitely going to be worth exploring. Could be a stasis field generator - maybe even more than one."

"What do you think, Misha?" Chris turned to his communications officer, and the other man nodded. "I haven't had too much experience with stasis field generators, but the frequencies certainly look as if it's something of that nature."

"Well, let's plan on finding out about it tomorrow. For now, we should eat and catch some sleep." Jared yawned ostentatiously. "Tomorrow's going to be busy."

~~~~~oo(O)oo~~~~~

The following morning the six of them set out after breakfast to go and explore the building they'd earmarked the night before. The tests on the local terrain had shown that there were no toxins present, and Jared relaxed enough to permit them to dispense with their suits as long as they wore gloves to handle anything unfamiliar. The slightly lower gravity made the short walk over the springy grass a pleasant outing, and soon they were standing at the gateway to the structure, gazing up at the lintel over the doorway. The portal to the building was ornamented with carvings in a relief that depicted a landscape filled with strange animals.

"Anyone read Gray?" Chad had found a plaque affixed to one side of the doorway. There was a general hubbub as each of them denied being able to read it. Finally they left it behind after taking photographs to send back to Earth for translation and made their way inside.

The lighting seemed to be automatic, and as they progressed down each new corridor, illumination seemed to start up, lighting the specimens that were ranged in alcoves along the passageways.

It seemed to be some kind of museum of natural history, and the creatures on display were astonishing in their variety, each one affording a glimpse of otherworldly fauna and making Jared wish that he'd taken a course in the Grays' written language prior to setting off.

He almost missed it. Chad and Chris were making their way towards a big hall that seemed dominated by something that looked uncommonly like a tyrannosaurus rex, and the others were trailing after them. Jared never knew just exactly what it was that made him turn when he did, but as he turned he caught sight of something that took his breath away.

In an alcove alone, behind a purple, horse-like creature with wicked looking claws on all four limbs, stood a boy - a young man just on the brink of maturity. He was tall and well-made and was dressed in clothing the like of which Jared had only ever seen in period feelies, jeans and a T-shirt that proclaimed his love of Metallica, although Jared had no idea what Metallica might have been.

The figure was so well sculpted that he might almost have been real. Behind him, under transparent paneling were anatomical details - holographs of the same figure naked alongside beautifully rendered line drawings depicting vital organs and vascular system.

It was the boy's face that stopped Jared cold. He'd never seen anyone quite that beautiful. The eyes that stared blindly into whatever dimension only he could see were a brilliant green, thickly fringed with sooty lashes. The nose was fine and thin, but slightly crooked as if it had once been broken and set a little askew. There were high cheekbones, stained with the dark beginnings of a five o' clock shadow, and a lush, full-lipped mouth, lips slightly parted as if waiting for a kiss. Whoever had been the model for this amazingly lifelike statue would have been the man of his dreams.

Jared stood, transfixed, gazing at the handsome statue, feeling a little stupid but nevertheless wondering if it would be possible to bring it home with him, paying no mind to any of the others, who had by this time all moved past and into the great hall.

A shout from Chad called his attention back from his rapt contemplation of the work of art before him. "Jay, come and look what I've found."

Reluctantly turning away, Jared moved out into the hall and saw that Chad had unlatched a small panel that seemed to lead into the wall. Peering in past his engineer's shoulder, he saw that there was a room behind the wall.

"Do you know what these are?" Chad was virtually hopping with excitement. "It's a whole room full of them. Stasis generators! Check it out!"

"They're coded." Collins had stepped up beside Chad and was now peering down at the panels on the largest of the pieces of machinery in the room. "Look. Each one of them's labeled."

"You know what I think?" Chad was eagerly inspecting the way each item seemed to be hooked into its neighbor. "I don't think those things out there are statues at all. I think they're the real deal. They're like exhibits in this weird, intergalactic museum, and they're being held in stasis for God only knows who or what to come and look at them."

"You mean that's a real T-Rex in there?" Sandy had made her way over to see what the others were up to, and she shuddered. "I don't know how I feel about that."

"Oh, my God! That means he's real." Jared felt a trickle of excitement pool low in his belly. "Unh... Chad? Come with me?"

"But..."

"No buts. Come on; I need you."

Chad reluctantly peeled himself away from his inspection of the alien technology and followed Jared back to where the young man still stood on his pedestal, gazing into forever.

"If... if he's real, does that mean you can free him from the field? Make him come to life?" asked Jared, his voice a little shaky. Chad cast a sideways glance at him, obviously catching onto the unspoken need in Jared's request. He smirked but knelt to examine the pedestal itself without saying anything, rapidly working his way around it.

"Give me a few minutes, and I'm sure I'll be able to give it a shot." He gave Jared an old fashioned look. "Pretty, ain't he?"

"Yes. Yes, he is." The response came with an unspoken warning to let the topic drop, and the smirk broadened into a grin as Chad saluted and turned to go back to the control room. He was not to make it. Chris's voice was suddenly heard, yelling, "Jesus wept!" and then several things happened at once. There was a sudden roar, and the sound of running feet. A weird, grunting hiss sounded from behind them, and the horse-like thing suddenly launched itself at Chad, while the young man Jared had been admiring suddenly staggered back and tumbled off the side of the plinth where he'd been standing.

The thing with the claws had drawn back its lips to reveal several rows of needle-like teeth, and Jared didn't think twice. He yanked out his laser and fired, disintegrating the creature within inches of his hapless engineer.

"Run!" At that moment, Sandy pattered past them, followed rapidly by Steve, then Chris.

"Where's Misha?"

"I bet he's still in that control chamber," growled Chad. "What did he do? It's like he turned off the stasis field, and everything is waking up."

"Shit!" Jared turned to Chad. "That means there's a fucking dinosaur out in the hall there, doesn't it?" He'd totally forgotten about the young man who had so fascinated him earlier, and he almost leapt out of his skin when a hand touched his shoulder."

"What's going on? Where am I?"

"Tell you later." There was a spine-chilling moan from the direction of the hall, and a muffled, "Oh, God!" from their newly liberated companion, and then they ran, full out, heels pounding the marble floor. Behind them, the huge, lizard-like animal had squeezed itself through the opening to the corridor and was beginning to pick up speed as it lumbered in pursuit of them.

The others were no longer visible, and it seemed as if they were about to meet their demise, when Chad, a few feet in front of them, disappeared from view and a second or so later stuck his head back around the corner. "This way!" Jared was dragging the erstwhile statue along with him, and the two of them were barely ten feet in front of the charging monster. The young man from the exhibit veered across to tuck in at Jared's elbow as the pair of them hurtled into the crevice where Chad had been concealed. Seconds later, the whole building seemed to shake as the dinosaur reached it and crashed against the entrance to their refuge.

The narrow corridor was evidently the entryway to some kind of storage facility. There was a metal rail set into the floor, and a few feet further along, the passage opened out into a sizeable room. Inside the room were a number of containers and storage lockers, each bearing notices filled with the now familiar alien script.

Jared turned to face the monstrous lizard, just as it abandoned its attempts to force its shoulders through into the narrow space in favor of starting to bite and chew at the walls to the sides in an attempt to widen the passageway. "I always wanted to see one of these things for real when I was a kid."

He lifted his disruptor and then hesitated for a moment. "It seems a shame to kill it when it's probably the only one left in the entire fucking universe."

"Hold on," called Chad from behind him. Jared turned back in time to see his engineer holding up a small, black instrument. "Get behind me."

Approaching the gigantic creature, Chad did something to the object in his hand, and a flood of violet light emerged from the Tyrannosaur. As the two onlookers watched, the creature stiffened and stilled, in just a matter of seconds frozen back into immobility.

"What...?" The young man spread his hands, his face reflecting terror and bafflement in equal amounts.

"Shit! I'd forgotten about you." Jared turned to him, hands spread in apology. "It's okay. You're safe. We'll take care of you."

"Where the hell am I? Who are you, and what the hell is that?" The kid pointed one trembling finger at the frozen lizard. Jared felt suddenly ashamed.

"I'm sorry, man. My name is Jared, and that reprobate over there is Chad, my engineer. What's your name?"

"I'm Jensen, Jensen Ackles, and if it's all the same to you, exciting as this is, I'd love to go home to my family now. It's my birthday, and my sister wouldn't tell me what she'd got me for a present." The young man had been stunning as a silent statue, but now, alive and mobile, he was incredible. Jared felt a frisson of lust warm him as he gazed at the man in front of him. He wanted to trace the plump lips, lick along his cheekbones and kiss the words from the succulent mouth. He swallowed, mentally berating himself for the inappropriateness of his thoughts.

"Okay, Jensen, we'll drop you back home once the mission is complete. We won't be here too long. I think there's enough cargo here for half a dozen trips. Where is home, anyway?"

"Dallas," murmured Jensen. "Richardson, actually. It's a suburb."

"What's a suburb?" Chad had wandered back to eavesdrop. "Dallas? Wasn't that a part of the Lone Star Republic? Got trashed in the TexMex uprising? How long have you been here?" He frowned at Jensen. "Most of Lone Star went up in smoke seventy five years ago. You been in stasis that long?"

"Jensen...?" Jared spoke softly, beginning to realize that the young man might well be further from his home than anyone had suspected. "Just what year do you think it is?"

"It's 1999 - March 1st, 1999." Jensen looked at Jared as if imploring him to agree with him, and Jared felt a pang of sympathy as he suddenly realized what Jensen's predicament actually was.

"Actually, dude," he began, and then paused as Chad suddenly let fly a string of profanities. "Chad, what the hell?"

"I didn't think, Jay." Chad turned to Jared. "The fucking lizard is filling the whole doorway, not to mention the stasis ray is blocking the corridor. How are we going to get out?"

~~~~~oo(O)oo~~~~~



# 500 Light Years From Home story by candygramma

If he's real...

Give me a few minutes, and I'm sure I'll be able to give it a shot.

Does that mean you can free him from the field? Make him come to life?

Yes. Yes he is.

Pretty, ain't he?

Jesus wept!

CRASH!

**ROARR**

Oh God!

This way!

THUMP!

FLOP!

What's going on? Where am I?

Tell you later

**RUN!**



The question was enough to drive all other thoughts from their heads. There didn't appear to be any other doorways, and the one window was high above their heads. A swift look around the storeroom revealed no other doorway, and nothing that spoke of escape. Sighing, Jared fumbled for his communicator and plugged it into his comm port, aware as he did so that the kid - Jensen - was watching, eyes wide and a little horrified. Shrugging, he allowed himself to fall into the trance that would hook him to Sandy if she were anywhere close by.

*<i>"Where are you, San? Did you get away?"*

*"Oh, God, Jay! Where are you? There were things coming alive all around. There was a dinosaur. What happened...?" </i>*

Jared cut across her babbled thoughts. *<i>"We'll discuss things later. I need your help right now. Did Chris make it out? Can you patch me in to him?"</i>*

There were a few seconds of silence, and then Sandy responded. *<i>"Okay, he's here with me now. Misha's still missing though, so I can't do a direct link through the comm. Better tell me now what you need, and I'll relay it to him."</i>*

Swiftly, Jared explained the situation to Sandy, and Chris was fast to propose a solution. Signing off, Jared disconnected and turned to his two companions to relay the information.

"You... you have a..." Jensen was apparently hyperventilating, his face white and shocked, his entire body poised for a flight that would be impossible in their current circumstances. "Where is this place? What are you? What's happening?"

Chad had been ransacking storage lockers in search of anything that might help them to get out of their predicament, but at that he looked up and smirked. "You're the skipper, Jay. Over to you."

Biting his lip, Jared ignored Chad and reached for the horrified kid. He really did not want to be the one that had to break the news to this young man. "Listen, man, it's okay. Let's get away from this wall, shall we, and I'll try and explain things to you."

Putting a firm hand on Jensen's shoulder, Jared managed to steer the two of them over into a corner of the room and took a deep breath. There was no time like the present. "I don't know how you got here, Jensen, but there's no easy way to tell you this. The year is 2299, and you've been an exhibit in this place since... since I don't know when."

If Jensen had seemed pale before, now he appeared absolutely ghostlike. His freckles stood out like dirty marks, and his eyes were wide and shocky. "I don't understand. You mean I can't go home?"

"I mean that we just found you here, and this isn't the Earth. It's a planet that's almost 500 light years away from the Earth, and..." At that moment there was a loud rumble, overlaid by a high pitched whining sound, and Chad gave a whoop.

"Pack your suitcase, children, it's time to go."

Any further conversation that might have taken place was lost amidst the sounds of masonry disintegrating, and within a minute there was a gaping hole in the wall of the storeroom, through which they could see the nose of the Piñata Novia as Chris maneuvered her away to allow them to exit their erstwhile prison.

A swift glance at Jensen showed that he was having some kind of meltdown. Grabbing hold of him, Jared hoisted him up into a fireman's carry and followed Chad out through the new portal. Seconds later, Sandy was swarming down the ladder from the Piñata Novia and rushing to hug them.

"Oh, my goodness," she said, hanging from Chad's neck. "I thought you were dead. I thought that huge dinosaur thing had eaten you."

"See, she doubts me all the time," murmured Chad turning towards Jared with an aggrieved expression. "I always come through. This lack of trust unmans me."

"Keep at it, big boy." Sandy giggled as she followed Chad's gaze. "Who is that?" she asked. "I don't remember him being on board."

"This is Jensen." Jared bent his head to study Jensen's pale face. "He's had a bit of a shock, all told, and I think we need to get him somewhere quiet and give him a tranquilizer or something."

Chris and Steve had followed Sandy out of their ship, and Chris gave Jensen a cursory once over, and then indicated that Jared should take him into the cabin. "We've got some stuff that'll help," he said. "Where's Misha? He's the one that knows what all the drugs and shit are for."

Indeed, Misha did seem to be missing. As Jared climbed into the main cabin of the Piñata Novia, the others all tried to recall when he'd last been seen.

"He was in that control room with me, but I never saw him after that." Chad frowned ferociously as he wracked his brain in an attempt to remember if Misha had followed him out. "You don't suppose one of the creatures got him, do you? There were other things with teeth in there, not just the dinosaur."

"We need to go back and find him if we can. We can't just abandon him. We need to get him out." Steve was quietly arming himself, stun gun at his hip and laser rifle slung over his shoulder. "I'll bring the disintegrator, just in case."

"Right. Jay, stay with the kid, and make sure he's okay. We'll go back in and see if we can rescue Misha." Chris didn't wait for a response, merely turning to lead the way back around to the front door of the building.

There were a number of creatures grazing around the entrance, and several that appeared to be unconscious or maybe even dead. In the distance, something that looked vaguely elephantine was shuddering and screaming as if it were in pain. Jared and his charge watched as the three men passed it by and went back into the museum, ignoring the T-Rex's hindquarters protruding across the corridor. As they made their way back into the hall, Misha appeared, looking somewhat battered. "Oh, my God!" he mumbled and staggered a little before toppling forward and collapsing against Steve.

Between the three of them, they managed to get Misha back to the Piñata Novia, and laid him down on the small table in the alcove that doubled as their sick bay. There was a gash on his forehead at the center of a blossoming bruise that spoke of a blow that had prevented him from escaping along with the others. Steve had set his guns aside and begun to rummage through the first aid kit, when Chad stepped in, carrying the small instrument that he'd found.

"Hold on. I worked out how to use this thing." He offered no further explanation, merely pointed the glass-like lens at the front of the device towards the wound on Misha's forehead, and, despite Misha's attempt to back away, he turned it on, bathing the injury in a soft, green light. "It's a healing ray. I'd read about it, but I didn't think I'd ever find one. Do you know how much money we'll make on this one item alone? We'll be able to buy our own planet... each!"

Jared had been sitting quietly in the main cabin, holding the young exhibit in his arms as he began to try and understand what had happened to him. As he heard Chad's cocky statement, he called, "Better make sure you didn't addle Misha's brains first. If he starts clucking like a chicken, you're grounded."

The ray had shut itself off, and Misha reached up to prod at his forehead, which now bore no vestige of bruising. "You idiot!" he rasped, glaring at Chad. "You experimented on me. What if it had been some kind of death ray?"

"I knew it wasn't." Chad smirked. "I tried it on the screaming heffalump out there, and it got frisky and trotted away, so I knew it would work."

Misha didn't seem to be much mollified by Chad's confession, but he grunted and rolled to sit on the edge of the table without saying anything more.

After a while, the crew of the Ladybug took their leave and headed back to their own ship, taking with them the young man named Jensen. Sandy had left a little earlier and as they clambered up the ladder into Ladybug, the rich scent of stewed beef in wine tantalized their senses.

"Why, Sandy, baby, you cooked for me. You love me." It was Chad, of course, and Sandy gave him a winning smile as she spooned out portions for each of them.

"Of course I love you, Chad. How wrong of me would it be to hate the mentally handicapped?" She beamed at him as she handed him a bowl and spoon.

Jensen appeared to have recovered a little, and thanked Sandy gravely when she handed him his portion. "Thank you, ma'am," he murmured, and she giggled.

"Well, aren't you precious," she said, reaching up to pat his cheek. "Too bad that certain engineers can't take a leaf out of your book."

The snort that was heard from Chad was echoed by that of Jensen himself.

~~~~~oo(O)oo~~~~~

The fourth bunk had been made up for Jensen, and they'd all headed to bed, when Jared, never a sound sleeper, first heard the noise. Sitting up to listen more carefully, he waited, and after a moment he heard it again - muffled sobs - and he bit his lip.

Rising to his feet, he padded across the passageway to the bunk where Jensen was and tapped on the door to announce his presence before pushing the panel open and going in.

Jensen was sitting up in his narrow bed, rocking as his eyes ran with tears, and Jared didn't think that there was anything he could say that would make the youngster feel any better. Sitting himself down on the edge of the bed, he reached to pull Jensen into his arms and held him, murmuring wordless comfort sounds as he tried to calm him.

"I was at a party," mumbled Jensen, sniffing as his weeping subsided, and he finally became able to talk. "It was my birthday."

"And somehow you got hijacked by a Gray spaceship?" Jared was running his fingers through Jensen's hair, ignoring the fact that his sleep suit was soaked through. The pain that his young passenger was experiencing was something Jared couldn't even imagine. To be so alone and divorced from everything he knew would probably have sent him screaming. Finally, he realized what he could say to Jensen - the only thing that he could think of that might reassure him.

"You're gonna have to trade one family for another," he murmured. "But I promise you, you're not alone. We won't let you be alone."

For a few moments he didn't think that his words had been heard, but then Jensen whispered, "Thank you," and gave a sigh. Moments later it became evident that he'd fallen asleep.

Easing him back onto his pillows, Jared laid Jensen down and pulled the blankets up over him. Jensen was beautiful even red eyed and puffy, with his mouth open as he snored. Jared felt the tug of desire again as he gazed down at him. Bending, he pressed a gentle kiss to Jensen's forehead and then turned and went back to his own bunk to pass the night in sleepless fantasy.

~~~~~oo(O)oo~~~~~

The morning brought with it a lightning storm, and Jared, who had wanted to go and take a look at the city they'd seen prior to landing, was forced to declare that they would have to stay put for the day. "We can't risk damaging the ships. We've not only got a whole stash of good plunder, we've got a civilian on board, and it's not good to risk him. He didn't sign on for this expedition the way we did, and we owe it to him to bring him home safely."

"We should really load up all the stuff we've found and get it back to Earth before we go prospecting around the city anyway," said Sandy, frowning.

"San's right. We've got enough shit to fill both holds without actually looking for more," agreed Chad. "And I'm sure there's going to be stuff in the city. We should take Sleeping Beauty here back to old terra firma, and then come back." He paused to do things to the box-like gadget he was playing with. "Look at this. I don't know what its function is, but this part emits a ray, and it sure as hell doesn't induce a stasis field."

"You've got a point, both of you." Jared nodded, considering. "Sandy, patch me through to Chris, okay? And Chad, just don't point that gizmo at anyone until you're absolutely sure of what it does."

"You got it, Jay." Reaching for her com interface, Sandy attached it and fell into her calling trance. Nothing happened for a moment or two, and then she came out of it, her face ashen. "Jay... I can't raise them. I've got no signal."

"Perhaps they're out of the ship?" Chad looked up from the alien unit he was tinkering with. He'd been dismantling what he'd thought was a stasis field inducer that seemed to be malfunctioning, but given up when it seemed that it just wasn't going to work and snapped it back together before setting it aside. Now he was tinkering with a strange looking device made from some very light alloy, and covered in a psychedelic paisley pattern that seemed incongruous in the plain interior of the Ladybug. "They'll be back soon, I'm sure."

"No, you don't understand," said Sandy, looking panicked. "I can't even raise the Piñata. Even if there was nobody on board, I should still be able to get in touch with the ship and leave a message. I'm just getting dead air."

"Jesus!" Chad was already up and out of his seat, alien technology forgotten as he groped around for weapons and safety gear. Jared was swift to follow his example, and Sandy,

who had dropped back into her trance for a moment to make sure that the Piñata really was silent, shook her head and uncoupled herself from the comm unit.

"Nothing."

"We need to go over there and make sure they're okay." Jared pulled on his helmet and turned to the door, ready to unfasten the hatch. "Could be anything from some weird animal, to alien microbes to a computer malfunction. Suit up."

There were no complaints from the others. Jensen had watched what was happening without comment and sat, wide eyed, afraid to say anything.

"It'll be okay, sweetie." Sandy reached to squeeze his hand. "Just stay here while we go check out the others, and then we'll talk about getting you back home."

"If what you say is right, then I don't have a home any more," murmured Jensen, somewhat acidly. "I could go with you if you want. Give me a gun, and I'll shoot anything that looks like it's about to eat you."

All three crew members eyed him sadly.

"I'm sorry," said Jared. "We don't have an extra pressure suit, or I would let you. Just wait here for now. We'll be back in a few, and then we can talk about things."

"You'll be fine," said Sandy, taking pity on the forlorn young man. "Look, there's a lot of things you could be learning about the world you're in now. Let me hook you up to the library." Deftly booting up one of the auxiliary terminals, she loaded in some travelogues and a documentary about the Gray invasion with its subsequent defeat. "Here. Watch this, and keep an eye on the ship for me. If you need me, just press this button, and I'll come running."

Defeated, the young man hung his head and turned away, resigned to being treated as unwanted baggage. "Yeah, okay," he sighed as the others headed out of the ship to go and find out what had become of the Piñata Novia. Turning back to the console, he settled down gloomily to start watching the feelies that Sandy had programmed for him.

Outside, the lightning was constant and eerie. Greenish clouds hung low overhead as the trio made their way across the blue green sward, and great, crimson flashes split and tore at the sky. There was a smell of ozone, and the three hurried, not wanting to be struck, even if they were wearing protective gear.

The door to the Piñata Novia stood open, and Chris and Steve were both in their seats, but neither of them looked up as Jared called for permission to come on board, and after a minute or two, he climbed in anyway. "Chris, what's happened to your ship? Sandy says it isn't receiving messages. Are you... Son of a bitch!"

Reaching forward, Jared passed his hand in front of Chris's face, and frowned when he realized that he might as well have been back on Earth for all the notice Chris took of it. He was evidently still alive; his breathing was visible, but there was no life in his eyes, and when Jared shook him he didn't respond.

He was plugged into the ship's computer jack, and Jared reached to disconnect him, then turned to Sandy. "Should I be pulling this out?" he asked her.

"I would," she nodded. "If he's got trance sickness, you'll never get him back unless you disconnect him, and it looks like Steve's in the same condition." Her nimble fingers were busily unplugging Carlson from the engine console and running her fingers over his scalp, carding through the soft yellow curls, searching for anything that might give a clue to his current condition. Blue eyes gazed, glassy and unfocused, and when she moved one of his hands to raise it into the air, it remained there as if held by some invisible string. "I've never seen trance sickness that looked quite like this," she said.

Chad had been back into the sleeping quarters before returning to watch the others, but now he reached for Jared's elbow, shaking it to attract his attention. "Where's Misha?" he asked. "He was okay. The ray healed him, so he should be here."

"Well, he isn't." Sandy shook her head. "I don't see any sign of him."

"What are we going to do with Chris and Steve?" Chad was peering anxiously at Steve, who was the engineer for the Piñata. "I don't like this at all."

"If it's trance sickness, it's just a matter of disconnecting them from the computer with the virus, and then waiting for them to come back." Sandy still looked worried. "I've never heard of two people at once being affected though. I wish I knew what had happened to the Piñata."

"We need to find Collins." Jared rose to his feet. "I guess he may have gone back into the building to see if he could find anything to fix these two. We should go and check. We can't let him poke around in there without backup; it's too dangerous. I don't think it's a good idea to be prowling around alone in there at all."

Chad and Jared were busily moving the two stricken spacemen into their sleeping quarters and making them comfortable, while Sandy, frowning, unclipped the fascia from the comm unit where Misha would usually sit. Crouching down to access the keypad, which was the backup means of access, she began to run a sequence of diagnostic tests.

Once the stricken crew were in their bunks, Jared and Chad headed back to the museum to see if they could locate Collins, leaving Sandy to carry on with her repairs. All was quiet in the little control room, and when the nanobot she'd sent into the computer to begin diagnosis suddenly beeped and started to print out information on her portable PDA, she jumped. A brief study of the printout showed her that for some reason, one of the ship's batteries had malfunctioned, and because of it the whole Comm system had

crashed, taking down the NavDeck and most of the engine monitors in a kind of cascade effect. Rapidly cutting power Sandy traced the connection to the culprit and headed to the drive bay to bring a reserve battery online. Once she'd isolated the afflicted battery, she powered the new one up and then hurried back to the flight deck to reboot the ship's system. She was just metaphorically dusting her hands and sitting back to wait for the computers to come on line again when there was a stirring from the sleeping quarters, and Christian stumbled onto the bridge, clutching his head, hair sticking out in wild tangles, putting Sandy in mind of a dandelion puffball.

"What the hell happened? Feels like I was kicked in the head by one of those zebra striped kangaroo things that escaped yesterday."

"Battery malfunctioned." Sandy gave him an encouraging smile. "I switched it over and rebooted everything. She'll be purring like a kitten in a few more minutes."

"Where's Steve? And Misha?" Kane looked around, eyes red-rimmed and watering.

"Steve's in his bunk. He had the same problem you did. Don't know about Misha. He wasn't in the ship when we came in to see what the problem was. Jay and Chad are out looking for him right now, because, chances are, he's wandering around in a fog following the crash." Sandy looked a little worried. "I hope he doesn't get completely lost and come to harm."

Just then Steve poked a bleary head around the door, and just as he was about to ask what was going on. Sandy's portable comm unit beeped; Jensen was on the line, sounding worried.

"Sandy? There's a guy at the door. I don't know who he is. He wants the captain, but when I told him to go to your ship he didn't go. He's being a little strange." Jensen sounded a little stressed, and Sandy smiled in relief.

"It's okay, Jensen. There's been an accident here, and he's probably disoriented. Let him in and hang tight. We'll come and get him." Disconnecting, she swiftly dialed Jared and told him where to find Misha and then went to find analgesics for Steve and Kane, who were both reporting killer headaches.

~~~~~oo(O)oo~~~~~

Back at the Ladybug, Chad and Jared were faced with a scene of chaos. Jensen had allowed Misha to enter on Sandy's instructions, and the Piñata Novia's communication officer had stumbled into the flight deck and promptly fallen against the controls, knocking loose the cover plate to the navigation computer, spilling a nearby half empty cup of coffee into the comm unit and sending a stack of printouts flying. As Jared stepped into the room, Jensen was just helping the fallen man back to his feet and leading him over to slump into a chair. Misha seemed to be completely disoriented, and had at first resisted Jensen's help, arms flailing and body rigid, almost as if he were having a

seizure. It took several minutes for the three of them to calm him down and help him get his bearings, but at last he appeared to be grounded once again, although still a little shaky on his feet.

"Okay, guys." Jared eyed the mess around him. "Chad and Jensen, would you try and sort this place out for me. I'm gonna go take Misha back to the Piñata. If he has any further motor problems, I can just carry him, okay?"

What Jared was saying seemed to be reasonable, although it meant cleaning, which was not something Chad enjoyed. Sighing, the two men began to restore order to the chaos while Jared helped Misha back to his feet to accompany him over to his own ship.

~~~~~oo(O)oo~~~~~

Much later, Misha had been returned to the Piñata Novia, and the crews had begun loading their precious cargo, prior to ferrying it back to earth. Jensen, who had helped Chad load in several of the valuable stasis machines, had excused himself, and now sat on the step outside the main door of the Ladybug, watching the sky slowly turn purple as the dusk crept inexorably towards full dark.

There were tiny fireflies skimming the herbage, and several of the dark, green-blue plants that dotted the sward had put forth creamy white blossoms that gave off a heady, spicy scent. Thunder still rolled in the distance, and the red, angry spikes of lightning could still be seen from time to time, stabbing across the darkness like knives of fire.

Jared watched Jensen through the open hatchway for a while, his heart heavy as he gauged his young passenger's thoughts. It was obvious from Jensen's body language that he was unhappy, and Jared had no idea what he could do to take his pain away. Finally, he rose to his feet and went to join him, sitting down wordlessly beside him and nudging against him with one well muscled shoulder.

Jensen said nothing at first, but he shifted a little, moved closer to Jared, and gave a heavy sigh. They sat watching the fireflies for a long time. When Jensen finally began to speak, it was in a low voice, almost as if he were talking to himself.

"I had a family," he said, softly. "I had a big brother and a little sister. I had a mom and a dad, and a grandma and grandpa. I had friends." He shook his head. "Now what have I got?"

It took a moment for Jared to acknowledge the question, but finally he looked over at Jensen. "I guess it depends on what you want, doesn't it?" He reached to put a hand on Jensen's knee and give it a friendly squeeze. "I don't know how it must feel to be isolated from your own time like that. It must be awful." He gave a shudder. "But you aren't alone in being alone. When I was 14, the Grays came to Antares 2. My family were part of the advance guard sent to evaluate the potential for mining certain elements there. Earth was running out of some of the more exotic elements, and Antares had a whole lot

of magnesium. I was in school that day, and they hustled us down to an underground shelter, but my mom and dad and my older brother were out doing readings on the resources Earth needed, and when the Grays blew the offices up, they took my family too. Meggie was only 8, and of course I was way too young to take care of her. I still remember her crying as they took her off to board a ship for Earth to be fostered. I decided then that I was gonna be a pilot and go after the Gray bastards that had done this to me. That's how I got my start. You need to decide what's gonna give you your start, Jen."

Jensen's eyes had widened as Jared talked, and now he blinked hard, trying to resist the tears that pooled in the corners and failing completely as they spilled over to trickle down his freckled cheek. Sliding his arm around the young man, Jared held him once again and let him grieve for what he'd lost, murmuring soft words of encouragement as he rocked him gently.

When Jensen finally lifted his head and rubbed at eyes that were red and puffy, Jared lifted his fingers to wipe away some of the moisture from his cheek. "You're strong. You're young, and we'll help you; I'll help you. You don't have to worry about not fitting in."

Jensen offered him a watery smile, and Jared smiled back. "What is this?" he asked, indicating the logo on the black T-shirt that was stretched across Jensen's chest.

"Metallica?" Jensen gave him a stunned look. "Metallica is a band. They play really awesome music."

"I never heard of them. Don't think I even know what the music was like three hundred years ago." Jared smirked, and Jensen, suddenly animated, rose to his feet and hurried into the ship to find the jacket he'd been wearing and rooting through the pockets to pull out a small, circular item with a cable attached.

"Here," he said. "This is Metallica." He handed Jared the object and indicated that he should put the end of the cable on his head. Puzzled, Jared looked for the plug that would interface with his nervous system, and Jensen snickered before showing him that the disk-like things at the end of the cable should cover his ears. Baffled, Jared did as he was bidden, and Jensen pressed a button.

Jared nearly leaped out of his skin as the metal intro of "Enter Sandman" began to play. He sat motionless as the song unfolded, and then raised his eyes to where Jensen stood watching him, a grin on his face. "You used to listen to this?" he asked. "It's so... primitive."

Jensen's face fell, and Jared was swift to correct his turn of phrase. "I didn't mean that in a bad way. I meant... earthy... uh... makes me want to dance."

"You like?" The handsome face broke into a blinding smile, the first that Jared had seen from Jensen, and, all of a sudden, Jared felt Jensen's presence like a punch to the gut, his heart stuttering, and the air too thick for him to breathe. He gazed at Jensen, eyes wide and stunned and slowly leaned in towards him.

"I... I think I do," he murmured. "I'd like to hear more."

Jensen nodded, smiling still. He turned to meet Jared's eyes and froze. "Jared?" he said, white teeth biting into his full lower lip as the smile faded, replaced by a frown.

"I just... It's..." Jared didn't quite know what to say next. He'd thought Jensen beautiful back when he'd believed the young man to be a sculpture devised by alien hands to represent human physiology. When he'd first seen the boy standing there on his plinth, he'd had a moment's thought that he'd have loved to have a boyfriend like that. The thought had been forgotten in the events of the past day or so, but now they returned with a vengeance. Everything about Jensen made Jared shiver with lust. The beauty of the young man's face was enhanced by the intelligence that lurked behind it, and Jared suddenly realized that he'd fallen for him hook, line and sinker. It was too late to back away.

He drew a deep breath. "I... uh... I'd love you to teach me more about your era. I bet there's all kinds of cool stuff that you know, that I don't. I'm shocked at the stuff we seem to have forgotten about the past.

"You bet." Jensen's smile made a reappearance. "And it'd be good if you would tell me about some of the weird shit you guys are doing that I've never seen before."

"You got it!" Jared idly toyed with the idea of convincing Jensen that all men had boyfriends in his time, but realized that Chad would knock that on the head as soon as he found out. Sighing, he put a hand on Jensen's shoulder and squeezed it. "Don't worry. You'll be a member of my crew before much longer. You'll see."

The eye roll that Jensen gave at that made Jared determined to make sure that Jensen found a place to belong, and preferably with him. He watched as the young man rose to go back inside the ship and wished he could find the words to give Jensen some hope.

~~~~~oo(O)oo~~~~~

"We'll leave the rest here and come back to take a look at whatever else there might be, once we get this back to Earth," murmured Jared the next morning as the seven of them sat around the control room of the Ladybug, eating breakfast. Steve, who loved to cook, had made them a celebratory meal that had Jared groaning with pleasure, although now he felt as if he was weighted to the spot.

"The Piñata won't be able to make it straight back to earth with just one twist," murmured Misha. "Because the gravity well is gonna fuck with our computer. When it crashed

yesterday, something happened to the NavDeck, and I suspect we'll need to break the journey into at least three separate jumps to allow the deck to cool down between twists."

"You decided on the stops yet?" Chad leaned over to inspect the star chart that Misha was pulling up. "Looks like the best route would be via Rigel 4 and then Proxima 1. That would give you a comfortable spiral down into the solar system while avoiding Neptune."

"Are you sure?" Jared frowned and rose to come and inspect the printout. "I thought Sandy managed to get everything back on line again."

Misha nodded. "Yeah, she did, but it's like there's a patch of code in there that seems to be masking the error, and I can't get in past it. We'll need to spend a day down on Earth getting it wiped and reinstalling the software. I don't know what happened to it."

"It's not something I ever saw before, either." Chad nodded his agreement, a ferocious scowl on his face. "It's like there's a virus embedded in there, and it's there specifically to mess with the NavDeck and send everything haywire if a jump is longer than about 150 light years."

Jared had been listening intently, and now he shook his head. "Rigel 4 is dangerously close to Gray Space, Misha. You sure you know what you're doing?" He raised an eyebrow at Kane as he spoke, and Christian smirked at him.

"Misha knows what he's doing, Jay, and besides, there's only Rigel 4 within the range we need. We'll be okay, and you'll see us on the flipside."

"Are you kidding, man? We'll come with you. You need someone to watch your back when the ship's playing games like that. Suppose the NavDeck packed up completely? You need us along for insurance." As he was speaking, Chad, Sandy and even Jensen all made sounds of agreement, and Chris held up a hand. "You don't need to persuade me, you guys," he said. "I'll admit that I was a little concerned about the trip back for those very reasons."

"We should probably think about setting up some more advanced weaponry than we have," murmured Steve, who until then had remained silent. "I bet me and Chad could put a disruptor together from some of that stuff in the museum. It'd just be like amplifying the stasis ray and raising it to a higher frequency."

"That's a great idea!" Chad rubbed his hands together in glee. "Wouldn't take long either. That way we'd be protected from the Grays by their own technology. Hell of a deal!"

"How long will it take?" Chris looked over to his engineer with a hopeful expression. "If it won't take too long, I think we should do it."

"We could get something like that organized this morning with luck. I think I've got something that might do that. I was trying to make it work as a stasis ray, but it's slightly

different. Come on over to the Ladybug, and we'll check it out." Chad was very definite in his opinion, and Jared nodded.

"Make it so," he said with a grin, and both Sandy and Jensen snickered.

"I see Star Trek is still in reruns," smirked Jensen.

~~~~~oo(O)oo~~~~~

Chad and Steve worked very swiftly, and the others gave them what help they could. Chad was gleeful as they began to dismantle the alien technology, and was soon lost in contemplation of the inner workings of the generator, while Steve, with help from Sandy, began to work on modifying the software.

They were making good progress, although Sandy apparently had been bitten by something, and had started to feel unwell. She soon developed what promised to be a severe migraine and ended up making for her bunk to try and sleep off the effects of it with the aid of the medication that Misha offered her. It was almost lunchtime when Chad laid down his screwdriver, told Steve to load the new software, and rose to his feet, arching his neck to get the kinks out of it. "I guess we're good," he announced. "Or we will be, once Steve here finishes loading his masterpiece of coding into the control unit."

Jensen and Kane had been packing the hold of each vessel with as much alien tech as would fit, while Misha had gone over the Piñata's jump drive with a fine tooth comb, hoping that there would be no other problems that would stop them from reaching home.

Lunch was sandwiches and beer, and Jared, who had spent the morning checking over his own control equipment, brought out a cheesecake he'd saved for a special occasion.

"Too bad Sandy won't get any," said Chad, reaching for a second slice. "Sucks to be her."

"You're kind of a brat, aren't you?" said Jensen, eyebrows almost hitting his hairline as he heard the engineer's words.

"You'd best believe it, bro," nodded Chad. "She wouldn't eat it anyway. She'd say that it would make her fat. It hasn't made me fat, so what's her problem? Do women have some kind of fat making machinery we guys lack, or something? I don't get it."

"Yeah, I know what you mean." Steve was finishing the last piece of his dessert, and he smiled as he pondered the question. "Can't remember any girl I ever knew actually eating a complete meal. They all pick at good food. Makes me want to smack 'em, sometimes."

"Hey! No smacking any women on my ship!" Kane aimed a punch at Steve's bicep that made him yelp. "Not that we've got any. You can send Sandy over to replace this big idiot any time you like!" he said to Jared, indicating Misha. He shook back his plentiful shock of hair, pulling out a bandana that would leave his interface socket free to plug in

the controls to the NavDeck array. "Let's get cleaned up. Jay wants us to lift off in 45 minutes."

~~~~~oo(O)oo~~~~~

Rigel 4 loomed beneath them as they fell into orbit. There had been no apparent problems from the jump, and both Jared and Chris were keen to move on as soon as possible.

"I hate the fact that we have to land here at all," said Christian for what seemed like the hundredth time. "How long do we need to let the NavDeck cool down?"

"At least an hour, or it's going to go squirrely again," said Steve, taking a quick look at the readings that were flashing at him. "Let's just do it and get it done. Sooner we bite the bullet, the sooner we can be on our way to Proxima."

Nodding, Christian checked his own readings, and Misha, who had been listening, flicked on Christian's view screen revealing Jared's face. Jared grinned. "Ready to go down?" he asked.

"Wish we didn't have to," muttered Chris in reply. "But yeah. I guess we must, so let's do it."

The planet was a little smaller than Earth, and the gravity was somewhat less. Their touchdowns went without hazard, and the little group settled in to await the cooling off of Chris's beleaguered navigation system. Sandy had risen from her bunk, announcing that she felt better, although she was still looking a little pale. As the clock ticked away the hour they'd decided to wait, and the time to depart approached, the crew of the Ladybug readied themselves for the liftoff. Jared had been trying to take some of the load off Sandy, and when he suddenly thought of something he wanted to ask Kane, he buzzed the other captain from his communication board. There was no reply.

"Jesus, San, did I do something wrong? I can't raise Chris, and I was talking to him a minute ago."

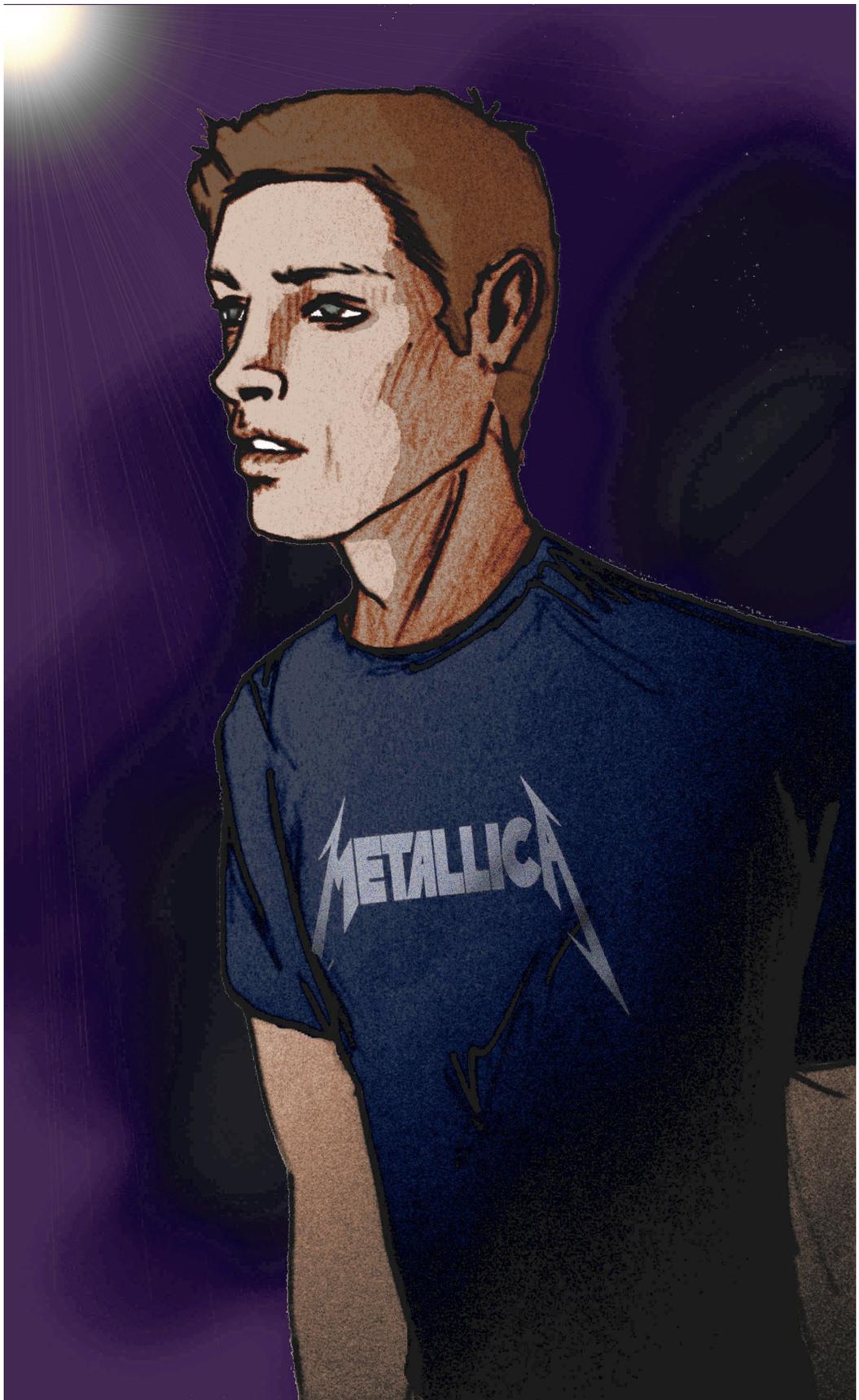
"Oh, come here," said Sandy, the ghost of a smile on her face. "Men are helpless, I swear." Taking her seat at the Comm Unit, she plugged her interface in and flicked on the connection.

That was the moment when everything began to turn pear-shaped. Sandy gave a strange little cry and seemed to slump, and at that second the ship went dead, and the lights went out, leaving only the small emergency light casting a blue glow that made the surroundings eerie.

"What's going on?" Chad scrambled for his own interface. "There's something weird happening." He plugged in the communication cord as Jared swung back to his control panel.

There was a sputter of light along the NavDeck control panel, and then both Jared and Chad joined Sandy in unconsciousness.

~~~~~oo(O)oo~~~~~



Jensen Ackles had been feeling under the weather all day. He was still trying to come to terms with the fact that everything he'd ever known was gone for good. Like Sandy, he'd felt the beginnings of a migraine coming on, and had gone to lie down. When the lights went out he didn't think too much of it, but after a few minutes, he began to feel anxious since there was absolute silence on the ship. Rolling out of his resting space, he padded out to investigate.

The emergency light was still on, and it showed the silent forms of the three crew members. Filled with dismay, he dropped down on his knees beside Jared, remembering that Sandy had told them Kane and Carlson needed to be disconnected from their ship when this had happened to them.

He gazed at Jared for a long moment, willing the man to open those slanted eyes and grin at him as he told him he was only kidding. It didn't happen, of course. The beautiful eyes remained obstinately closed, and the slack mouth refused to be bracketed by the ubiquitous dimples. Jensen felt cold, his stomach lined with lead. He was terrified that the one thing he needed - the one person who had been able to give him comfort, might be gone too.

Gritting his teeth, he pulled the jack free from its socket and brushed Jared's soft, chestnut hair back over the place to disguise it. He was about to go and do the same thing for Chad and Sandy, when the airlock door slid open, and Misha Collins stepped inside.

"Oh, God, help. Something happened, and they've passed out. We have to get them disconnect..."

"Well, if it isn't the monkey-boy from way back before civilization." Misha raised a cylindrical object and pointed it at Jensen's head. "I forgot you don't have the direct route into your brain, but that's okay, we'll get there. It'll just take a little longer; that's all."

"What do you mean?" Jensen's eyes were wide, and although he had no idea what the thing was that was being pointed at him, it looked enough like a weapon for Jensen to know it was nothing good.

"You think this all happened by accident, kid?" Misha's grin widened until he looked vaguely deranged. "Not so. It was me."

"But why? I don't understand. Chad thinks you're all going to get rich, and Jared thinks you're amazing, and..."

"Much as the prospect of getting rich might appeal, I find that I'd rather reclaim my race's superiority. Padalecki is the one responsible for destroying the ship that contained my hive-mates, and I made a sacred vow to destroy him and those he holds dear in return. Watching his adoring glances at you and reading between the lines, I suspect that you might well qualify under those terms, so I intend to suck your life force out in much the

same way as I've done to these... pathetic individuals." Misha gestured around at the fallen crew of the Ladybug. "But first, they're going to take me back home to Gray Space and stand before the council to be ridiculed. The device I installed beneath the main console in each ship has made sure of that."

"You're... an alien?" The realization that this man that everyone had believed was a colleague had turned out to one of his race's enemies made Jensen's brain race. "It was you that set the dinosaur after us, wasn't it?"

"Very good, monkey-boy. It was, and how it didn't get you, I have no notion. It doesn't matter though, because my psych ray will finish the job. In just a few minutes, you'll be a mindless idiot, and subject to my control like all the others in here." Misha gestured with the silvery tube in his hand and then gave him a nod. "You might want to sit down or something - leave a good looking corpse." He didn't wait for a response, but pressed some invisible button on the device, and a purple ray shot out to tingle across Jensen's skin.

Nothing seemed to happen, and Misha spat out a curse, then tossed his device to the side and drew something else from his belt. "If that won't work, I'll just have to improvise," he growled and fired the thing he was holding. A silvery globe appeared at the muzzle, and shot, swift as thought, to strike Jensen's forehead.

There was a buzzing in Jensen's ears that rose to a shriek, and as the young man found himself bathed in an impossibly bright light, he crumpled and folded to the ground.

~~~~~oo(O)oo~~~~~

Jensen floated in a place where nothing made sense. He could hear something pounding, a deep, steady double-beat that made him sleepy, wanting to drift along with the sound. It took him a few minutes to realize that it was his own heartbeat, steady and strong, and for a moment more he wondered why it was so loud.

Slowly, images of the crew - of Jared - slumped over the terminals of the spacecraft, came back to him, and he remembered. He listened, and could hear shuffling footsteps moving around the cabin. Cautiously, he opened his eyes a little. He was still where he had fallen, and the alien spy hadn't bothered to restrain him, leaving him lying awkwardly to one side of Jared's chair. Jared's big feet blocked his view of the rest of the cabin, but almost beside him he could see the edges of the blocky device that Chad and Steve had been building earlier. What had they called it? A matter disruptor? That sounded somewhat lethal, and Jensen wondered if he'd have an opportunity to use it.

The ship seemed to be back to normal now - the faint hum of the fans in the computer were somehow soothing, and the lights had returned to normal, driving the shadows back and washing the small room with gold.

Jensen couldn't see Misha, although he could hear him talking. "You'll fly this ship into Gray Space to the following co-ordinates," he said, his voice a curious monotone as he began to reel off figures. He heard Jared's voice mumble an affirmative and risked a closer look. Jared was no longer slumped against his console. He was sitting up, ramrod straight, and Misha was training the purple light on his forehead as he recited the co-ordinates to him.

Thinking swiftly, Jensen slowly reached for the gizmo that the two engineers had crafted earlier, hoping against hope that it would work, and that he could find the right direction to point it in.

It resembled an old, box brownie, blocky, with a lens on one side, and Jensen assumed that the lens was the business end of the device. Misha suddenly turned towards him, and he froze. For a moment it seemed that he would be discovered, but Misha was only going to help himself to a coffee from the carafe that Chad had made, moments before they were struck down.

"You're going to face Gray justice," said Misha, "And once I have you safely inside our solar system, yours will be destroyed. I've got psych rays deployed all over the moon's surface, just waiting for my command, and once I set the timer to trigger the master ray on Deimos, they'll all fire at once. Mars, Venus and Earth will be wiped clean of you scavengers, and we'll colonize it at our leisure once it's been sterilized."

Jensen had heard enough. It seemed to him that if the ship actually took off and jumped into Gray Space, they would be lost, along with any chance of saving the Earth. He slid his hands around the disruptor and sent up a silent prayer that he would be able to make it do what he wanted it to.

He rose to his feet, the device in his hand, and raised it to point at Misha. The alien spy looked aghast. "How did you...?" he muttered. "Goddamned monkey!" His hand flashed out to strike a button on Sandy's console, and he gave Jensen a grin. "Doesn't matter anyway. The psych ray has been triggered now, and it will fire, cleansing the Earth, in about 12 hours from now. You can't stop it; I've got defenses in place that would fry the typical human's brain. You'll have to sit here and watch as your planet is wiped clean of humanity. My people will have their revenge."

"I guess if that's the way it is, we don't need you any more!" Jensen gritted his teeth and pushed the button on the top of the device hoping against hope that Chad and Steve had got it right. For a moment nothing happened, and he was about to throw the thing against the wall, but then there was a high pitched whine from it, and Misha went rigid, cried out and simply faded away as if he'd been erased, leaving his metal belt, and the purple ray gun to fall, clattering, to the ground.

Hurrying over to gather the ray gun Misha had used, Jensen picked it up and examined it. It seemed logical enough to work, so he turned it on Jared, who was methodically programming in the coordinates that Misha had given him, aiming the ray the way he'd

seen the alien spy do it. "Wake up, Jared," he commanded. "Come on, forget those coordinates and wake up. We need to get back to Earth, quickly."

~~~~~oo(O)oo~~~~~

Opening his eyes wide, Jared Padalecki, scourge of the spaceways, looked around himself in fright. His heart sank, because before him, aiming a ray gun at him, was Jensen, the man of his dreams. "What...? Jensen, why have you done this to me?" he asked, reaching to try and take the gun from him.

"No, Jay, hold on a minute. You don't understand!" Whirling, he pointed the ray at Chad, who was closest to him. "Come on, Chad, wake up. Forget anything Misha told you to do and be just who you were."

He wasn't a moment too soon. Jared hit him low and took him to the ground, rolling on top of him as he struggled to reach the gun.

"Dude!" Chad's voice was suddenly audible above their fight. "I take a nap, and you bring your gayness right into my control room. I need to wash my eyeballs with bleach now, you guys do realize that?"

Jared froze, lifted his eyes to Chad for a long moment, and then slowly lowered them back down to where Jensen was suddenly grinning. "You did something to save us?" he asked softly.

"Sure did," smirked Jensen. "What're you gonna do about it?"

There was only one thing to do, and Jared did it. Lowering his head to Jensen, he captured the young man's pretty mouth in a soft, gentle kiss that soon escalated into something rather more passionate as Jensen responded wholeheartedly, leaving Chad to continue whining that he hoped their gay wasn't going to be catching.

"Been wanting to do that since we got stuck in that cupboard with the dinosaur trying to eat us," whispered Jensen.

"I beat you then." Jared's voice was husky with emotion. "It was when I first saw you up on that pedestal that I wanted you. I thought you were a statue, and found myself wishing that you were real."

"Excuse me! Hello..." Chad's aggrieved tones distracted them. "I'm really happy that you're plighting your troth and all that, but may I remind you that Sandy's still a zombie here, and I don't want to watch you two having sex. That's her gig, not mine."

Reluctantly, Jared rolled away from Jensen and glanced over to where Sandy was still slumped over her terminal. "What do we do to help her?" he asked Jensen, even as the

young man was busily unplugging her interface and employing the purple rays the way he had on the other two.

"She'll be okay now, but we should go make sure Chris and Steve don't need any help," murmured Jensen, and Chad nodded, taking the ray gun from him and swiftly hopping to his feet to suit up and go see what the situation was on the Piñata Novia.

It took Sandy a while to come around. Chad was back leading Chris and Steve with him by the time that the little Venusian opened her eyes.

Jensen quickly explained what had happened, and described what Misha had told them about their predicament. "We've only got 12 hours to get to Deimos and that psych ray, or we're all going to become homeless vagabonds real quick," he said as he completed his account.

"How are we gonna do that?" Chris sounded dubious. "We're a crew member light, and that turncoat put something in my ship to mess with the NavDeck."

"He told me that he'd installed a device beneath the main console on both ships." Jensen said. "Don't know if that will help with the NavDeck, but that's what he said."

As he finished talking, Jared was already unfastening the panel that covered the console, and Chad had thrown up a holographic image of the circuit boards for him on the monitor above. Settling down on the floor, the two men began to trace the circuitry, looking for any anomaly that might have affected the ship. It was Steve who finally spotted it. He had picked up the panel to move it out of the way so he could join the search, and as he moved it, a tiny, silvery patch adhering to the grey plastic of the panel, no bigger than a dime, caught the light.

"That's it," yelled Chris, making for the door, followed by Steve. "Hang on, and I'll go get rid of the one he put in the Piñata." He dashed out, and a few seconds later the viewscreen showed his excited face. "Yup. There are two of 'em in here. Maybe we'll be able to jump further with them out of the way."

"That's a start," said Jared, who had been watching Chad disable the little device and flush it away into the disposal unit to be broken down into its component atoms and used as fuel for the replicator. "I guess we should head for Deimos, if that's where Collins has actually stashed the triggering device for his psych bombs."

A yell from Steve sounded through the monitor at that moment, and as Chris turned away from the view screen to find out what was going on, Sandy elbowed Jared. "Do we have an hour to spare? I could show Jensen how to operate the comm systems. He won't be able to do it by thought - he'll have to use the manual override, but he'll be able to get enough done to get us to Deimos, and that way I can go sit in on the Piñata, so Kane and his ship can make it too."

"Do it," said Jared, tersely, as Chris suddenly came back into view, followed by a grinning Steve.

As Sandy reached to pull Jensen over towards the comm console, Jared was already listening to what Chris was telling him.

"Steve decided to search through Misha's bunk," Chris said. "He found a couple of charts that might be interesting - one is the surface of Deimos, and the other is of Callisto. Seems that he's booby trapped Deimos. Anyone trying to get to the trigger on Deimos is going to be mindwiped by rays from Callisto, so it looks like we're going to need to go there first. It's a drag, but at least we know where the traps are located."

"That's good." Jared was typing rapidly as he calculated the route they must take to reach their goal. "Send the charts through, will you? We'll lift off in twenty. I'm gonna send Sandy over to you on loan, and Jensen will be acting comm officer here."

"Are you kidding?" Chris was silent, but Steve's voice was plainly heard over the relay. "He's not been engineered. How..."

"Sandy says he can do it, and anyway we don't have a choice, so just get ready to go, all right?" As the first chart spread over the NavDeck, Jared hit the button that would lock in their destination and began feverishly calculating their course." The others nodded grimly, and Chris said, "Okay, we'll wait for Sandy. Hopefully we're still gonna be there in time."

<center>~~~~~oo(O)oo~~~~~</center>

Chad had taken the headphones from the Diskman Jensen was carrying in his pocket, and was jury-rigging a connection into the comm unit, even as Sandy explained the commands and codes and Jensen made notes. The time seemed to fly by as they made their preparations, and Jared was twitching by the time Chad had nodded his approval and switched on the relay, signaling to Sandy that it was working.

It took only a few more minutes to set Sandy up in the Piñata Novia, and for Jensen and her to set up the link between the ships. Five minutes after that they were lifting off from Rigel 4, making for a safe distance from the planet's gravity well so they could make the jump.

Jensen seemed to be handling the communications system reasonably competently, and Jared found himself gazing at the young man again, admiring the little frown that marred the pale brow, and relishing the way the expressive eyes focused on the task in hand. He yearned for all of this to be over and for time to really get to know this young, brave, beautiful man away from all the drama and the pressure they were going through. He hoped that there would be a future for them once this mad dash was done, but he knew that, with the little time that was left for them to stop the destruction of humanity, he was

going to have to come up with some extremely unorthodox piloting. Sighing, he checked his star charts again, crossed his fingers and turned back to the console.

The jump from Rigel 4 brought them back to Proxima, where they were scheduled to pause for five minutes while Jared locked in the course for their final twist back to the solar system and their first hurdle, Callisto. They didn't bother to land, because they would be jumping as soon as they were in sync. Jensen had been attempting to lock onto the Piñata's calling signal, but it was nowhere to be found, and he was close to tears, appearing to be increasingly frantic in the belief that it was his own lack of skill that was preventing him from achieving contact.

With shaking hands, he went through the routine Sandy had shown him, repeating it over and over again, but still there was no response.

For a desperate hour, which was all the time they could afford, it looked as if they'd lost the Piñata, and Jared was convinced that the Grays had spotted the little vessel and shot it out of jumpspace in mid twist. Chad, normally laconic, had started to panic, when at last Jensen heard something. He held up his hand as his headphones finally crackled into life, and he found himself listening to Sandy's faint and distorted voice. "It's okay; it's okay! They're lagging. Sandy says they hit debris as they materialized and had to take evasive action before stopping to patch a couple of holes." All three of them were just rediscovering how to breathe, when, seconds later, Chris's little ship materialized alongside.

Jared winced. The delay, short though it was, had cost them valuable time, and now he was going to have to take extreme measures to get them where they needed to be in time to make a difference. He was pulling up his navigation aids when the view screen blinked, and showed Chris's frowning face. "I thought we were goners then," he growled. "Let's hurry up and get down to Deimos, while we're still in possession of all our faculties."

"Listen, Chris." Jared was still calculating the course he needed to take. "We don't have time to do this the conventional way and take out Callisto first. You've got the chart that shows where the booby trap is. Can you go in and destroy that from this side? I think that my next jump is going to have to put the Ladybug inside the asteroid belt," said Jared, a big smile showing off his dimples in an attempt to act nonchalant about the course he was going to try and follow.

"Jesus, Jay!" Chad was frowning in earnest as he suddenly realized what Jared was intending to do. "You know there's a good reason why nobody jumps that far into the solar system, don't you?"

"Can't be helped. We've got very little time left to stop that ray from taking out every human on Earth, Mars, Venus and the moon." Jared cast a glance over to where Jensen was watching the Chad with concern in his eyes. "Jen, you're going to be my ears. On my command, take action as fast as you can. You've got the guns, and if I yell, it means

there's something in the way. Just shoot the fuck out of it." Jensen turned back to face Jared and nodded, intent on the console in front of him as Jared turned to his engineer.

"Chad, my man, you'll give me as much speed as you can right up 'til I yell stop. Then throw her into reverse so we can stop as short as possible. I'm gonna bring her right in beside Hygeia, since that gives us the closest shot at Deimos. We're going to have to land as close to the booby trap as we can and take the thing out manually, because we don't have the ammo to blast Deimos out of the skies, worst luck, so we're doing this the hard way, okay?"

Chad had said nothing during Jared's speech, his face grave as he considered their predicament. For a few seconds he said nothing, but then he shrugged and gave Jared a thumbs up, his face spreading into a grin. "I came along on this trip, because I didn't want to live forever anyway, so what the hell! Let's go be heroes," was all he said, before turning back to his console to monitor his controls.

There had been silence from the other ship as Jared had briefed his crew, but now Kane cleared his throat. "Jay, I don't know..."

"Listen, Chris, you don't need to come through the asteroid belt with us, in fact it might be better if you didn't. If we fail to get there because we hit some lump of rock we didn't smash on time, you'll be backup to make sure the job gets done. Sandy might be able to get through the defenses and disarm the damned thing, so that's what I want you to do, okay?"

Nodding, his face expressionless, Chris turned to relay Jared's words to Sandy and Steve. It wasn't long before he'd returned to the screen. "Okay, Jay, we'll do it your way, but I'm kinda thinking that we've got about one chance in a million." He gave a little shake of his head. "You always was a maniac, bubba. Take care of yourself and go prove me wrong, please."

"Okay, man. You need to come in between Jupiter and the belt and take the easy way around to Callisto. I'll catch you on the flip-side, okay?" He checked the chronometer on his console. "No point in putting things off any longer. We twist in thirty seconds. Catch you later, Kane! It's been a slice!"

~~~~~oo(O)oo~~~~~

At first, the jump seemed like any other - the same sense of disorientation, the same sickening pull at their bodies, as if the act was a prelude to dispersing their atoms all over the universe. Jared had done the calculations over and over, well aware that even the slight pull of gravity that the many asteroids exerted could distort their path and pull them into disaster. He hoped that they would be safe, but the facts were that it was totally impossible to make sure they wouldn't wind up materializing in the same space as one of the rocks that whirled perpetually in their orbit around the sun.

It was as they began to translate into regular space that the fun began. Jensen, eyes wide and straining, had only seconds to deal with the huge lump of rock that was hurtling towards them as they emerged from hyperspace. Jared was sweating as he held their course steady and tried to prevent them from veering into the gravity well created by the multitudes of rocks that formed the asteroid belt. Jensen hit the button that would fire the disintegrators more out of reflex as he fought off the urge to duck and reflected that the time he'd spent playing Space Invaders and Super Mario was well spent, no matter what his mom used to tell him.

As the menace burst and faded from existence, Chad called out encouragement to him. Another, smaller piece was destroyed as Jensen began to enjoy himself. "Hey, this is like playing 'Counterstrike.' I can do this," he crowed, dispatching yet a third jagged fragment as Jared managed to hold steady, steering the Ladybug into clear space.

"Jesus," murmured Chad, rising from his seat to go and look at the view through the monitor. Arching above them was the asteroid belt, with countless thousands of fragments of ice and rock all performing their own elegant dance through the cosmos. "Will you look at that? I never thought you'd make it, Jay. You're improving. Maybe you'll make a pilot some day; what do you think?"

"I think you'd better get back to your position before I lock you up for insubordination," growled Jared, who, now that they were within reach of Deimos, was finding himself trembling from the reaction caused by the stress of his foolhardy jump. Jensen snorted with laughter as Chad froze, for once at a loss for words.

"We'll be on Deimos in time, I think," said Jared, opening the chart that Steve had found in Misha's quarters. "I'm going to take us in close before I land and try to get some idea of how the location is defended. I'm guessing that it'll have booby traps all around it."

"You never know." Chad had once more taken his seat, but he swiveled around to give Jared a reassuring grin. "He was relying on a surprise attack, wasn't he? He might not have bothered. It isn't like people actually visit Deimos that often - all it is, is a jagged little chunk of rock. It's not like it's a holiday resort or anything."

It was a further 25 minutes before Jared pulled the Ladybug into a tight orbit around the irregularly shaped rock that was Deimos. Jensen scrambled to find the controls that would operate the ship's exterior cameras, and Chad, glued to the scanners and detection devices, called out directions that the young man tried desperately to follow.

"Fucker's got psych rays trained on the gate, and some kind of tangler field to slow down whoever is trying to get through. Whoever goes in to shut off the trigger is going to end up dead as a dodo." Chad sounded really cranky as he catalogued the defenses that Misha had apparently put into place.

"I wasn't affected by that ray," murmured Jensen, wondering if what he'd survived was in fact the same thing. When both Chad and Jared swiveled their heads to look at him, he

smiled nervously. "Well, I wasn't," he said, apologetically. "Collins called me a monkey-boy."

It took three circuits before they had the information they needed, and as Jared brought the little ship in to land a few hundred feet from the site of Misha's death ray, the other two began to pore over the photographs, unable to wait until Jared was free to feed them into the NavDeck and create a chart. They'd already decided that it would be Jensen who would disarm the device, because hopefully he'd proven to be immune to the psych rays with which Misha had overcome the rest of them so easily.

By the time Jared set the Ladybug down on the little moon, Chad and Jensen had pretty much determined the lie of the land. As he cut the thrusters and settled to the ground with a little jolt, he was already pulling himself free of his implant and rushing over to grab the photos and feed them into the NavDeck.

"He's got psych ray projectors mounted around the site. I'm betting they're motion activated." Chad indicated the areas. "And there's a pig of a locking mechanism on the structure he's built around the ray gun itself; it looks like it's on a timer. The shield wall will only go down when the timer gives the direction." He sighed. "Nothing's ever convenient, is it? Someone is going to have to go interface with it and work out a way to drop the shields so the device can be deactivated."

"Jensen isn't going to be able to do that. He doesn't have the implant we need, and there's no way to get him fitted with one in time." Jared put his head in his hands. "I can go, I guess."

"You don't have the engineering experience," said Chad. "And you're going to be needed to get the 'Bug home to give them the Disruptor we invented. I'll do it."

"Why can't we just blow the whole moon to bits like we did the asteroids?" Jensen sounded hopeful, and Chad flashed him a grin.

"If only we could," he muttered. "The guns we have are good for the small stuff, but it would take hours of chipping away at this rock to blast it to pieces. Not only that, but he's got the damned thing reflector shielded. Anything we aim at it will bounce back at us." Chad rolled his eyes. "That would be bad."

"No kidding," said Jared, tracing the image of the site with one long finger. "You up for this, Jen?" he asked the young man beside him. "Can't guarantee that the beams won't have an effect on you. It's just that you're our best chance to get this shut down. Neither Chad or I will be able to go within range of those psych rays."

"Yeah, I'm good." Jensen gave him a lopsided smile that sent a flood of heat down to his belly. "Just tell me what you want me to do, and I'll do it if I can." He laid his hand on Jared's arm, and Jared couldn't hold back any more. If this was the last time he would get to hold Jensen in his arms, then he couldn't pass it up. He pulled the young man close

and pressed their lips together. Jensen went willingly, lips parting to enable the kiss, allowing Jared's tongue entry and sighing softly.

"Tick tock," murmured Chad, after a moment or two. "Not to stand in the way of your big gay love, but we've got a very limited window of opportunity. We need to get suited up and out there on this fucking rock to defeat the evil overlord and save the world."

There was a muffled snicker from Jensen as the two of them separated, and then Jared was pulling out his pressure suit and breathing apparatus, since Sandy's would most definitely not fit the young man who needed it. It didn't take long for Chad and Jensen to get suited up. Chad was jaunty, laughing and joking as they pulled on the pressure suits, and Jared, who knew him well, could tell that his engineer was nervous. He'd plugged a small device into his interface, one that Jared recognized as a thing he'd been working on earlier. It had a readout panel that he put inside the helmet he would wear before putting the thing on, and he didn't say anything about it as he inserted it into his suit. It was evident that he was sweating, but as Jensen announced that he was ready, he gave the young man a high five.

They'd taken a moment or two to sort through the armory to decide how best to deal with the tangler field. Jensen's plan was to make his way over to the projectors and demolish them using what he called 'brute force and ignorance,' and after a few moments' thought, Chad agreed that this seemed to be the best plan. If Jensen actually did prove to be immune to the psych rays, then he'd be able to get to the tanglers and kill the beams for Chad. Then he would turn his attention to the psych ray projectors and try to destroy them to make it safe for Chad to get to the gate and open it.

Setting foot onto the little moonlet's rocky surface was the kind of experience that Jensen had only felt in dreams. The gravity was so low that he'd been warned by Jared not to run, in case he might achieve escape velocity and end up orbiting Mars on his own behalf. So warned, he was very cautious as he crept across the rocky terrain towards the tangler machines. It was slow going. Sudden movements didn't work well, and after succeeding in spinning himself around a couple of times he finally managed to find a way of creeping forward on hands and knees that worked well enough for him to make progress.

His initial approach was reasonably fast, but then he managed to step inside the tangler field, and it seemed as if every move he made sent him in random directions and that none of those directions were the way he wanted to go.

"There's only one way to deal with a tangler field, Jen." Jared's voice sounded tinny inside the pressure suit helmet. "You need to creep really slowly, and stay low to the ground."

Dropping to his belly, Jensen dug his gloved fingers into the rock and crawled, holding onto any irregularities he could find on his way to his first stopping point. As he finally arrived at the first projector, he rose to his feet, holding tightly onto the leg of the

projector. He had been going to shoot out the lens, but on examination, he found that he didn't need to do anything more than wrench the business end off and then use his strong right arm to hurl it off the moonlet and into space while hanging on to the legs of the thing to prevent himself from being launched after it. With the first tangler out of the way, it became slightly easier to make his way over to where the second one was hammered into the rock, held to it by large metal nails. It received the same treatment as the first, and Jensen raised his hands in acknowledgement as he heard both Chad and Jared call out their approval.

"Now for the psych rays, Jen. The first one is on the roof of the structure, see it?" Jared sounded excited. Maybe they would be able to do this after all.

"I see it." It didn't take long for Jensen to reach the offending machine, and disable it. He examined the gate behind which lay the device that was set to destroy his race. He could see one projector, and leveling the laser he'd been given, he trained it on the device until it collapsed into debris. "Is that all?" he asked, peering into the gloomy depths of the shielding. "I can't see any others."

"Good work." Chad's voice was soft. "I'm coming out now. We've got less than twenty minutes before the stupid thing goes off, and we've still got to get through the gate."

Jensen turned to look back at the Ladybug and watched as Chad climbed down and began to make his way over to him. He waved his hand, and was about to turn back toward their target, when he paused, gasped, and then gaped. The Ladybug was resting jauntily on a small raised portion of rock, and, behind the little ship was the horizon, impossibly close. Below it was Mars, red and grey, spread like a blanket, and to one side, just appearing over the edge of the great disk, was Phobos. For a moment he was transfixed, and jumped as Chad drew close enough to give him a shrewd poke in the ribs.

"Save the sightseeing for after we've turned this fucking thing off," said Chad as he reached the gate and dropped to his knees to examine the locking mechanism. "Yeah, this thing is booby-trapped seven ways from Sunday," he growled. "It'll take a minute or two..." Jensen watched as Chad took a cable from a pocket in the side of his helmet and plugged it into the interface on the gate.

The seconds ticked by, slow and sweaty. Back in the ship, Jared could only watch as Chad probed delicately at the gate, pausing to listen from time to time to whatever the mechanism was telling him. He wanted to scream out to Chad to hurry up, make the damned gate open and put an end to the threat of Gray invasion once and for all. Instead, he watched in silence.

At last, Chad gave a grunt of satisfaction, and slowly reached to unlock the gate. "Looks like we're home free," he crowed. "Who's your daddy! The Chadster, that's..."

As Chad rose to his feet to enter the chamber he'd revealed, there was a glow from inside, and a purple beam hit him. He stiffened, and then very slowly crumpled to the ground.

Watching, helpless, Jared could only call out to Jensen as the young man dropped to his knees to try and help Chad. "Leave him until you've disabled that trigger, Jen. There's no time left."

For a moment it seemed that Jensen hadn't understood, but then he grunted assent and turned to enter the chamber himself, disappearing into the darkness of the cavity despite the purple ray that lit up his white pressure suit in garish color.

It was bright inside the gate - the purple ray spread its light to throw everything inside into relief, sharp shadows black and menacing at his feet. The mechanism he was there to disable had been sunk into the rock, bolted to the surface of the moonlet with huge pieces of metal. Jensen studied them for a moment, and then drew the laser gun he had brought with him from the holster on the leg of his pressure suit. Swiftly using it to cut through the bolts that held the machine in place, he began to move it back to the gateway, hauling it with him despite its bulk. His efforts were rewarded as the thing scraped over the rock, rattling the metal of the shield that had protected it.

The gravity, low as it was, made it difficult for Jensen to slide the projector. As he strained he found himself rising from the rock, and was grateful that the shield above him prevented him from forcing himself off the moonlet's surface and into space.

Arriving at the gate with it, he had to move Chad out of the way before continuing to drag the mechanism, which was now looking rather battered and worse for wear, out of the enclosure, to empty ground where he began to tilt it over .

As the seconds ticked away to the launching of the signal, Jared typed furiously, trying to calculate whether or not the beam would have been moved off course sufficiently to miss its mark. Outside the ship, Jensen had succeeded in tipping the machinery over so that it was lying on its side, and as he drew out his laser to take out the lens, a tight, white beam lashed out from the toppled projector. Jared breathed a sigh of relief as he watched Phobos, which had rounded Mars and was now racing across the surface of Mars on its endless journey, intercept it.

Jensen had turned away as the beam launched itself, and had headed back to bring Chad in. Jared watched, afraid of what he would find once Chad was back inside the ship. It didn't take long, and as the airlock cycled through to admit Jensen and his burden, Jared found himself pacing back and forth through the little control room.

As he tugged Chad's body out of the airlock, Jensen was sweating, unsure if he'd brought back a live man or a corpse. As soon as the airlock was closed, the two of them tore at Chad's helmet, and it was with horror and misery that they found their engineer was not breathing.

"Stasis," snapped Jared as Jensen began CPR. "Keep it up for a few minutes, Jen. There's at least one stasis machine in the hold." He took off at high speed, leaving Jensen

to continue his efforts and soon returned bearing the little box that would freeze Chad, until he could be taken to a medical facility,

They had barely managed to get Chad into his bunk and into a stasis pod with the machine turned on to preserve him, when the comm deck burst into crackling life, and Sandy's chirpy voice filled the room.

"Ladybug, we have you in our sights, and Callisto has been neutralized. Did you manage to destroy Misha's evil plan?"

Rushing over to his station, Jensen explained what had happened, and that they were going to head for Earth's moon. "We need to get Chad into treatment as soon as possible."

There was a brief pause, and then Sandy gasped. "Chad? What happened to Chad?" she asked, softly.

"We don't have time for gossip." Jared cut across their conversation as Jensen was about to reply. "We need to get to Imbrium as fast as we can, and we're missing an engineer. Let's go."

~~~~~oo(O)oo~~~~~

In any event, the Piñata Novia made it to the moon before the Ladybug, and by the time Jared had jockeyed his ship into the dock, medics were standing by, along with Christian, Steve and Sandy. As Chad, still in his stasis pod, was carried away, Jared sagged. The efforts he'd expended to try and get them to Deimos in time to avert tragedy, not to mention the subsequent events, had finally proven too much, and he felt as if he'd never be able to make another decision in his life.

Jensen had stayed at his side through all the questions the medics had asked, and now he slid in close, putting an arm around his shoulders. "You need rest," he said. "Tell me where. Do we go back to the ship, or is there somewhere else?"

"I'll show you." Christian had been watching, and now he came forward. "Jay, where's your interface?" he asked, and Jared fumbled in his coverall pocket to find a fine cable with the now familiar plugs on either end. "Okay, Jen, take that corridor there, and any door that's showing a green light, plug him in. He's a veteran. He's entitled to a bunk here whenever he needs one."

Nodding, Jensen led his emotionally exhausted captain away.

There was a room almost at the start of the corridor, and as he was helping Jared to open the door, Chris and Steve appeared, taking the room next door to them although nobody actually said a word just then.

Inside the small room, Jensen looked lost. It was perfectly cube shaped, and there appeared to be no furniture, only a monitor on the wall, currently showing some weird, three dimensional cartoon that looked to be a commercial for something called J-Juice, that promised to give the drinker super-powers.

"Jay, you have to help me. Come on now, dude. I don't know how this shit works."

Jared had seemed to be functioning on automatic, but at Jensen's plea he raised his head and gave a little smile, a mere shadow of the wide, dimpled grin Jensen was used to. "It's okay, Jen. All you have to do is ask," he said. He looked around himself and nodded. "Queen bed, extra long," he called out, and Jensen's eyes were as round as saucers as a bed rose up out of the surrounding walls to meet the description.

"Wow," he muttered. "Okay. Shower cubicle big enough for two, with... with soap and towels and..." as the wall began to bulge out, Jared chuckled. "Just ask for the refresher unit. That'll come with everything we need."

Still round eyed, Jensen amended his request, and the refresher unit materialized to order. Turning to Jared, he shook his head. "This is totally not something that used to happen back in my day, but I can see the benefits." He reached to start unzipping Jared's uniform. "And I think that a shower and a good sleep is what you need right now."

Jared smiled at him, dimples flashing once again, and Jensen lifted his hand to press his finger into one of them. "There they are. I thought they'd gone away." He slid his hand around the back of Jared's neck and pulled him down until their foreheads touched. "Come on, dude. Let's get you clean and into bed. You can't help Chad right now, but if you get some rest you'll be around for him when he's been fixed up."

Sliding his arms around Jensen, Jared stooped to brush his mouth over the youngster's full lips and then laid his head on Jensen's shoulder. "He's been my crew ever since I got a command. I don't want to see him die just because of some bastard alien spy megalomaniac."

"You got him home. They can help him here," murmured Jensen. "And you should sleep, or you'll be unconscious when they come to tell us he's awake."

Nodding, Jared allowed himself to be bundled into the refresher and showered, shaved and toweled dry, and then helped into bed. Jensen seemed to be hesitating about joining him, but Jared tugged him forward, pulling him down and into his arms before wrapping himself around Jensen's sturdy body and falling instantly asleep.

Sleep didn't come so easily for Jensen. He was well aware that his home and everything he'd ever known was gone, and that he really had no place in this strange new world where furniture could be produced from a smooth surface just by calling for it, and where men interfaced directly with machines and thought nothing of it.

He lay awake, sifting through his memories, remembering the lazy, inebriated contentment he'd been feeling on that last walk home, and the party they'd thrown for him earlier, with kisses, a birthday spanking and music that now was hundreds of years old. He remembered his sister that morning, shyly giving him the friendship bracelet she'd knotted for him, with their names tied into the string, and his mom's cheery 'happy birthday, baby'." He didn't cry for their loss this time. He didn't think he would be able to cry ever again, but grief was a hard knot in his chest that stayed with him as he finally dozed.

He awoke to the feeling of lips grazing over his chest and down to his belly, and shivered as firm fingers took hold of him and began to caress.

"Jared?" He struggled to climb out of his muzzy, drowsy state as roving fingers circled the head of his dick and stroked, while a warm, wet mouth found and began to toy with one of his nipples.

Jared didn't speak, merely bit down on the little nub he'd appropriated and chuckled deep in his throat, sending tingles through Jensen.

All of Jensen's introspection and melancholy faded as Jared began to slide his mouth over the planes of his chest and then down over his stomach.

"Want you, Jen." The hissed whisper sent a sudden pool of heat slithering down Jensen's spine to lie low in his belly. He started to speak, and found that all that would come out of his mouth was a little keening sound as Jared's mouth closed around the head of his cock, and his large hands settled on his hipbones to hold him steady.

His body tightened, his hips straining up against Jared's controlling hands as he tried his damndest to get deeper, feel more of the moist wet heat. Clearing his throat, he managed to force out a voice that sounded more manly than his previous effort. "Oh, God, do that!"

More dirty sounding laughter vibrated against his cock, and along with it, Jared's tongue began to do filthy, delicious things to it, sending him back into incoherent moaning, although not as distressingly highly pitched as the earlier sounds he'd managed.

Spreading his thighs, he strained against the pressure Jared was exerting, low-voiced curses growling out without his conscious thought. Jared took him deep, sucking on him and sending stabs of pleasure from his cock to join with the sly tendrils building at the base of his spine. Gasping, he reached down to wrap his fingers around Jared's head and try to push in deeper, harder, faster.

He cried out when Jared pulled away, wanting, needing more, and Jared slid up against his body to cover him, mouth seeking to capture his, tongue delving roughly as they ground together.

"Want you," Jared murmured again. "Can I...?"

"Fuck, yes." Jensen was amazed that he could manage anything coherent, but he reached for Jared's cock, exploring it, discovering it to be long, and firm and uncut, the tip moist, dripping with the sticky signs of his arousal. He lifted his knees, wrapping his legs around Jared and surprising a groan out of the big pilot. "Gonna need a bit of prep to get that monster inside of me," he husked, and that laugh erupted from Jared once more. Jared called for lube, and it was delivered from a drawer in the nightstand that had made its appearance sometime during the previous evening at Jared's command. He began to coat his fingers with it, and Jensen, momentarily breaking out of his haze of arousal, frowned up at him.

"What about a condom?" he asked, hopefully.

"What's a condom?" Jensen wasn't sure what answer he'd been expecting, but that certainly wasn't it.

"Uh... it's to prevent any STDs from being transmitted. You put it on your cock, and..."

Jared started to snicker. "Oh, sweetie, don't worry. These days we have substances in the lube we use that will take care of that. There aren't too many sexually transmitted diseases left now. Chad went with one of the waitresses in the main bar at Marsport, and got a bad case of scroggs, but he's not your typical..."

"What the fuck is a scrogg?" Jensen wasn't sure whether to laugh or run away. He was almost sure that modern technology would be able to control germs that had been prevalent in his time, but the sound of Chad's affliction was making him uneasy.

"It's a Martian sand beetle larva," said Jared, snickering. "They itch worse than crabs, and you have to do some pretty humiliating things to get rid of them."

"So you don't have those?" Jensen found himself itching in sympathy with Chad, despite the fact that Chad wasn't present.

"Hell, no. I take care of myself, and I wouldn't dream of getting it on with someone from Mars - too much untamed nature there." He cupped Jensen's face and lay gazing down at him. "When I first saw you, I thought you were the most beautiful thing I ever saw. Now you're here with me, and I can't believe how lucky I am."

"Lucky?" Jensen frowned again. "Just shut up and fuck me, will you?"

And Jared gave his filthy chuckle again as he dipped his head and took command of Jensen's soft, plush lips.

Jensen's erection had wilted during their discussion of Martian insects, but as Jared's clever fingers found and prepared him, it rose to attention again, and before long he

found Jared easing his way inside him, stretching him to the limit as he slowly but surely pushed his cock inside.

Jared couldn't take his eyes off him; that was evident. Jensen watched as his new lover's slanted eyes darkened, pupils widening until there was no color left, and his mouth turned slack with the pleasure he was experiencing. He lifted his thighs high, so that Jared could scoop them up and place them over his shoulders, and sobbed as Jared's cock began to slide to and fro over his sweet spot.

Maybe they were both lucky, he thought. If he hadn't been taken by aliens, he never would have met Jared, never would have had this. Jared was holding him, kissing him, *loving him,* and he could lose himself in Jared's eyes as the sensations began to grow inside him again. Careful fingers circled his cock and tugged, once, twice and Jensen whimpered.

"I love you," whispered Jared, and Jensen couldn't hold on any more. He came with Jared's words caressing his ears, Jared's arms tight around him, and Jared's cock stuttering to its own climax inside him as Jensen's muscles tensed and rippled through the sweet seizure of orgasm.

Sweaty and sated, they lay together afterwards, not speaking, just trading caresses without particular urgency, lips growing swollen and numb as they explored each other's body. It was almost morning when they dozed off again, and it seemed like only a few minutes before they heard Christian banging on the door of their room, yelling at them to quit fucking and get up now, right now!

Dragging himself to his feet, Jensen stumbled over to the door and peered around it, eyes screwed up against the brightness of the light in the corridor.

"What?" he mumbled.

"Come on. Get up. Sandy called from the sick bay. We gotta go see what's happening as soon as we can." Chris smirked as he took in Jensen's nudity, but he said nothing.

"Is it about Chad?" Jensen frowned.

"Dunno. She didn't say, but she sounded pretty excitable." Steve, standing behind Chris's right shoulder, gave Jensen a saturnine smile, and Jensen's eyes widened, then he retreated into the room and went to shake Jared until he woke up.

~~~~~oo(O)oo~~~~~



The infirmary was half empty when the four men finally arrived to try and find out what was happening with Chad. A ward orderly led them back through the facility to the fallen engineer's room and the little group entered, half afraid of what they would find.

Sandy sat in the corner, her tiny body curled into the depths of an armchair, fast asleep, the blue smudges under her eyes indicating just how exhausted she was. Jared gazed down at her fondly and then returned to the corridor for one of the extra blankets that were stacked neatly on a trolley outside. Tucking it around her tenderly, he transferred his attention to his engineer.

Chad was most definitely alive. His color was good, and as the four of them watched, he stretched, smacked his lips and opened his eyes.

"Chad, my man! How are you doing?" Jared felt a surge of hope inside his chest as Chad gave him an appraising look.

"Dunno yet," was Chad's response. "Can't remember a whole lot. I've seen you before, I know that. I just can't remember where. Hey, wait! Aren't you the asshole that let me get out of a secure environment on a hostile moon to go saving the earth and all its population?"

"That would be me," said Jared, his dimples appearing. "So it seems as though your brain hasn't been wiped clean after all."

"It'd take industrial grade chemicals to achieve a state of cleanliness in there, man," smirked Chris, and he snickered as he backed out of reach of Chad's flailing arms.

"Do you remember how to drain the accelerant from the core of a positron engine?" That was Steve asking the question, and Chad's brow wrinkled in thought.

"Yeah. Yeah, I do. First you open the perimeter valves and..." There was astonishment in Chad's voice as he launched into the technicalities of the question. "Hey! Quit messing with me, man; I can remember just fine!"

"He's gonna be okay," grinned Steve, cutting across Chad's answer. "He's still a jerk, but if he can remember his trade he'll be good to go."

"Course I'll be okay!" Chad grinned. "Me and my girl are gonna get married and set up a business developing new technology. I've got the spec for a gadget that will block these damned psych rays, and San is going to help me with marketing it. She's the one that gave me the idea for the test device I used when Jen and I went out onto Deimos. She's a bright lady, and way too valuable to let get away."

"Thank you for those few kind words." Sandy had awoken, and now she was uncurling herself from the chair and moving quietly over to climb on the bed with Chad and snuggle up close. "The prototype was almost perfect. The only problem with it is the fact that when it blocked the psych ray it sent a surge of static into Chad that interfered with his nerve impulses and shut down his vital organs. I'm glad you managed to get him back here where they could fix him."

"Me too." Jared bent to give Sandy a hug. "Seriously? You and the Chadster here...?"

"Yeah. He needs to be housebroken, and I think I'm strong enough to get it done. Besides, he's got a really good patent in his head for a defense against psych rays. When I inherit his millions after someone kills him for being a complete perv, I'll be wealthy in my own right."

"Aw, come on, San. Don't be like that." Chad gave Sandy a plaintive expression and she melted against him.

"You love me anyway; you know you do," she murmured, and kissed him.

Chris coughed and shuffled his feet. "Well, I think that's our cue to love you and leave you," he growled, backing towards the door with Steve at his heels.

"Yeah. Us too." Jared grabbed Jensen's hand and turned to leave, as Jensen snorted with ill-concealed laughter. "Come on. We have to go and register a new citizen of Earth. Baby, you're gonna be in the Guinness Book of Records as the world's oldest man."

~~~~~oo(O)oo~~~~~

Much later, Jared sat with Jensen in a quiet booth in one of the restaurants that Imbrium boasted in its entertainment dome. They'd eaten well and were now sipping their coffee. Jared leaned forward to put his hand over Jensen's as the young man gave a sigh. "We can look into finding ways to get you back home, if you want, sweetheart. I don't want you to have lost everything you ever valued."

Jensen frowned for a minute, and then turned his hand palm up so he could lace his fingers with Jared's. "I don't know if that's what I really want," he said softly. "Sure, it hurts that my family are gone. But if I went back, I wouldn't have you, and that would hurt too." He gave Jared a heated glance. "And besides, I'm looking forward to introducing the 23<sup>rd</sup> Century to Deep Purple and Metallica."

As Jared tightened his hand around Jensen's, Jensen grinned. "So all in all, I think I'll stay," he said.

~~~~~oo(O)oo~~~~~

