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***Too Much of Heaven***  
**Christopher J. Levinson**

This Earth is the honey of all beings; all beings the honey of this Earth.  
— *The Upanishads*

**1.**

Christine Duron was not particularly fond of her life, of the meager existence some said consisted of a life, she amended with more than a smidgen of bitterness.

Life on a starship was never pleasant, no matter whether the ship in question was a freighter or a luxury liner, and the circumstances accompanying the launch of the *Deliverance* were certainly not pleasant. And it was certainly *not* a freighter or a luxury liner.

Many people on Earth - and even those who had embarked on the voyage - had not been happy with the thought of sending ten thousand people on an ambitious colonisation mission to a Star System further than any previous recordings had shown. What kind of life would they all lead, separated from Earth indefinitely?

After two years on the voyage, Christine had found the simple answer - not much of one.

Nine thousand of the people onboard were Christians; the idea was to try and expand not only Earth's but also its religious and cultural influences out into the galaxy. Jewish and Buddhist settlements had already been established closer to Earth, so it seemed logical for Christians to take the next step.

And, naturally, they had to make an impression, do something more daring than the rest. So this mission into colonisation of uncharted areas of space had been planned. The *Deliverance* was a transport ship carrying ten thousand people - all with some kind of specialty for a colonisation mission.

Only a thousand people were non-Christian - and most of these non-religious - workers, and Christine, practically a heathen, belonged to this minority faction.

As the majority of the future settlers were religious, the ship was geared to their tastes, preferences and practices, and for the non-religious life was as boring and as painful as hell itself.

Swamped by beliefs and ideals she did not share, Christine retreated often to the holographic chambers to pass the time.

The two years had been interlaced with monthly periods of stasis, where a person would be cryogenically frozen to the point where time would have no meaning for them and they would not age - though time would pass all around them.

While she deeply valued these stages of blissful unawareness and escape, she detested the state itself. Stasis reminded Christine too much of death. Unlike sleep, she did not dream. With the brain not actively functioning, she couldn't sleep and all she saw was an encompassing, eternal veil of blackness.

Like death, she imagined.  
Or the inner torments of her soul.

Christine didn't believe in an afterlife, or even in God at all for that matter. The idea of a place without pain, torment, deceit and suffering seemed delectable but little more than an ideal fantasy for the weak minded. She found it easier to believe in a place of eternal torment than a place of continuous paradise, easier to believe in Hell than Heaven. Many of the atheists felt that way.

While not afraid of dying - not exactly, anyway -, the idea of oblivion was scary, she had to admit, a void of no life...

*You have to believe in something to keep sane, she had once thought. Religion takes the place of idealism in the weak-minded, those who find the need to believe in something other than themselves. I, on the other hand, have no problems when it comes to self-belief. Not any more, anyway.*

After two years away from one's home planet - more, actually, if one counted the endless, annoyingly thorough training lessons and the detestable genetic manipulations needed for the voyage -, one began to lose touch with what was once cherished. This had happened to Christine. She had lost faith not in herself, not in her homeworld, but in her motherworld - Earth itself.

Born on a distant colony world under a harsh sun that had given her rough skin a permanent tan, she had learned at a very early age to trust only one person - herself. While growing up, Christine had found herself forcing education and entertainment upon herself, an answer to boredom, she suspected.

Or maybe a cry for attention.

She had realized, after an examination of her state of mind, that she wanted to help her homeworld in its independence from Earth, the protective mother of all colonies. Slowly and surely she began to distinguish herself in her respective fields, and people on Earth had begun to take notice. For all the good it had done her and her dreams.

In just one moment her dreams had been dashed. Earth had greater uses for her talents than her homeworld apparently could, and despite her desperate protests, had been forced to conform to the more powerful - and aggressive - ways of Earth. She had been assigned to a colonisation task force.

Once assigned to it, there was no way to back out. Earth's wishes *always* came first, no matter the person's individual wishes. Sickening, but true nonetheless.

That was when an irreconcilable rift had emerged between her and the people of Earth; the so-called motherworld, the 'Planet of the Free', had not allowed Christine her freedom, to achieve opportunities and pursue her dreams. There had always been a rift, but never had it extended to this extent before.

This rift was still with her on the *Deliverance*, as the majority of the settlers - religious or otherwise - were born on Earth or were Earth-supporters.

She was a traitor in their eyes, a scoundrel who was to be used, robbed of her dignity and life and individualism, a person to be used for their purposes, not her own.

Christine liked that just fine. She could accomplish more if people overlooked her and thought her soft and weak when she was really anything but.

During the two years the *Deliverance* had spent hurtling through the void between the stars inside the mysterious realm of hyperspace - at speeds close to, but not quite those of, light - Christine Duron had grown to know her companions - and, unsurprisingly, she found she did not like them. She didn't care for their company.

Nor, she had been informed on occasions too numerous to mention, did they hers.

Despite fleeting attempts at peace and coexistence, they were always at odds, the other settlers and her. Something just made them clash; instinct maybe, mutual distrust and dislike, definitely. Despite similar genetics, they were all strangers to each other and that did not change.

Out of the many other people on the *Deliverance* whom she was forced to spend time with, there was only one person she really cared for - and that was her lover, John.

An ordinary type of man, unassuming and not overly attractive - except for hauntingly deep blue eyes and a hideous scar running down his left cheek which gave him a roguish charm; he could have had it removed, but he didn't believe in repairing physical damage when the mental damage was still dangerously painful. But, apart from this zestful charm, Christine found his arrogance and plain deviance a welcome change on this ship filled with perfect people with perfect beliefs - and perfect expectations.

And the fact that he was one of the thousand non-Christians probably helped things, as well; someone who shared her torment and understood her direction. And someone she could sleep with, and share her passions with.

Life was very different in the Earth Commonwealth to the ways of old, and that was true on planets as well as starships. Sex was now a way of life where acquaintances were loves, and friends the most common. In the space of a moment people could become embracers and lovers without any real meaning to it. There was little room for love anymore, and sex was so much easier.

Christine had only ever loved one person, and that had ended in disaster. She felt for John but nothing as complex as love. It was closer to lust in truth.

They had met only just before the launch of the *Deliverance*, just before it had begun its voyage, and were sleeping together by the end of the first week, out of a need for comfort and pleasure in a place they hated, to create a bit of beauty in a world of darkness. While both appreciated the other and had stayed together for the two years, they both knew their relationship was nothing serious, just a way of having some fun and passing the time.

At least, Christine thought he knew that. It appeared obvious to her, but describing it - their relationship and their expectations - was not the easiest of things to do. Neither were particularly good at expressing their feelings apart from when joined in passion, and approaching something as complicated as this was difficult and uncomfortable so it had never really been done. Regardless, Christine trusted him to know.

Right now they floated together in a holographic chamber, artificial gravity turned off. The feelings of total weightlessness, coupled together with the feelings of their movements, were electrifying.

Both naked and unashamed, they held each other close, kissing passionately every now and then with an emotional hunger and need for companionship, but neither took it beyond this; the night - decided by shifts on the *Deliverance* - was young and they had much time for pleasure. For now they simply enjoyed each other and the moment, bodies pressed together, slowly rotating sideways and upwards.

Christine rested her head lightly against John's shoulder, feeling the smooth muscles underneath contract as he moved to make her more comfortable. She sighed contentedly and playfully nibbled his arm with her mouth, pressing her body against his a little more forcefully without really realising it.

John looked down at her, eyes wide and luminous against the black and yellow walls of the holographic chamber. He kissed her on the head, pulling at her hair playfully with his teeth. His expression always seemed so placid, but she knew she excited him; she could feel his erection against her thigh and she welcomed the intimacy of their embrace. "I've got something to show you," he mumbled.

He drifted away from her gradually and, once he reached a wall, pressed a button on a control panel.

When a program in a holographic chamber is initiated, usually a pattern appeared, indicating some kind of change to the surroundings.

Most programs were participatory literary works. Others allowed people to live out their fantasies, interacting with artificial recreations of celebrities. But this one had Christine baffled. As far as she could tell there was no change to anything at all. It all seemed dark, lifeless.

Like death, Christine thought again.

John himself was a designer of holochamber programs as well as other things, and he often showed her his newest works like this, using her as a trial. She didn't mind, and found it a little... alluring, actually; he seemed to trust her judgments and that pleased her.

"Sorry to disappoint, but I don't see anything," she said with a sly smile.

John just gestured and nodded at the walls, where the program's functions and creations should appear like a scrolling picture. "It's still loading, Chris. Just wait," he said. "And watch."

"If you say so, tiger."

Christine focused on the walls, glancing from one to the other, waiting patiently. John, meanwhile, floated back towards her and placed an arm around her neck gently, pulling her back against him. He rested his head on her shoulder and she could hear his raspy breathing hissing in her ear, and could feel his sweaty chest between her shoulderblades.

It took her a full minute before she noticed the first glimmering of pale light breaking through the shroud, like sunlight streaking through unassailable fog and mist. Angular, small and shaped roughly like a diamond, it glowed bright white suddenly, as if it had suddenly, inexplicably, blossomed to life. Brilliance and wonder seemed to radiate from it in waves of motion.

Soon enough, Christine recognised it. "A star," she breathed hesitantly. "How beautiful."

"Ssh. It's not over yet."

Christine watched as, just as the first had appeared, thousands of millions more glimmered spectacularly to life, casting a golden vibrancy over everything. Reflected off walls, ceiling and floor, it looked like a gigantic black blanket interlaced with billions of sprinklings of gold, a wonderful cake of pure gold shavings.

Then, like a flower blooming from a bud in Spring, a purple mass appeared, stretching in a penannular arc across half the room. It almost looked like a long serpent, coiled around a vast, inseparable distance, interwinding upon itself with complexity.

It was a nebula.

Like the space it surrounded, the nebula too was splashed with formations of arcing light, stars shining brightly with an ethereal quality which made Christine feel almost unworthy.

Streaks of light blue and white and grey curled throughout everything. These thousands of dark globules - as small as ants, and as insignificant as them - were probably Earth starships scouring areas of space, furthering knowledge.

Christine halfheartedly wondered which was the *Deliverance*. The one furthest from civilisation, naturally.

The whole scene was stretched out all around her and seemed to hold a savage beauty, an unspeakable splendor. Dazzled by light, the blackness of space no longer seemed as uninviting and cold as it once had.

"Wow. I'm speechless," Christine said, gazing around with her mouth hanging open in awe.

"I'm glad you like it," John said warmly, smiling; she could see him reflected in the darkness of space and the two of them, bodies joined, revolving in the wonder of zero-gravity, looked like two gigantic, all powerful deities within the blankness of the universe.

"It's unlike anything I've ever seen before." She pursed her lips for a moment, lost in

thought. "But seeing all this really puts us in perspective, doesn't it? We think we're exploring the galaxy, when really we can have no comprehension of its wonders."

"Some people believe we're a part of the universe and our exploration of it is really the way it learns about itself," John said.

"Hmm." Christine looked around again. "When you see this you can understand why. How did you get this?"

"I integrated our star maps together and scanned the results into the holochamber," John replied with a nonchalant, almost uninterested shrug of his shoulders. "It was simple, nothing really deserving of praise."

Christine turned around, hugged him and pulled him closer, their bodies pressing more intimately together. "Thank you for sharing it, tiger," she said, her voice a whisper of anticipation.

"You're welcome. We live in a world where experience is everything, Chris. I know this sounds cliché but, I wanted to show you galaxies."

He kissed her passionately and she returned the kiss hungrily. Their tongues joined and soon their bodies were coiled together as one. The magnificence surrounding them was forgotten as they made their own kind of beauty and magic.

They made love frantically, needing the compassion one offered the other and reverse more than anything, their bodies writhing in passion and belief. But their motions were little more than conduits for their feelings and joys reaching out and relishing the experience, sharing their enthusiasm with an almost spiritual need.

Put another way, a billion candles of starlight shone brilliantly as they made love, but none were as bright or as luminous as their two souls experiencing timeless, stretching moments of joy and pleasure in their otherwise sordid lives.

It takes two to speak the truth - one to speak, and another to hear.  
— Henry David Thoreau

## **2.**

The *Deliverance* is a gigantic ship, spreading over 1.2 kilometers. An awe-inspiring mixture of an angular wedge and a sphere, despite its size, it is not a warship. In fact, it has no shielding or weaponry of any kind, protected only by its metal skin, a strong but woefully inadequate hull.

A transport and colonisation vessel, it has more in common with a pleasure cruiser or luxury liner than a military ship. Almost all the needs of its religious denizens have been catered for, technology used unsparingly for comfort and for more traditional uses.

Anton Vatu, the ship's *capitaine*, encourages diversity and equality amongst his crew and is rewarded with their admiration and respect. Leaning back in his Captain's chair in the Operations (also called Ops) section of the Control Deck, located directly

in the heart of the *Deliverance*, historically the soul and life of the ship, Vatu ran a hand over his face and pulled on the ends of a thin, curling mustache and goatee to stop himself from dozing off. Although there were always a thousand and one tasks to be done at any one time, captaining the ship had become a bit tiresome lately.

His attempts to keep himself from falling asleep were apparently unsuccessful for the female voice of his first officer, Julia Hayes, brought him out of a light slumber.

"Damn, I hate it when I do that," Vatu said mostly to himself in crisp, precise English, with just a hint of his Mexican accent he should probably have lost decades ago when he was younger, much younger...

"You hate it? What about us, Anton? You snore..." Julia teased him in good jest. Vatu could tell; he knew her almost as well as he knew himself.

"I meant sleeping, thank you very much. I don't snore," he said heatedly.

"Yes, you do," Julia replied simply, definitively.

Vatu sighed despondently and changed the subject. "So, why did you wake me?"

Julia Hayes turned to face him, her face an impassive veil. As usual, nothing flustered her.

"We've got a small hull rupture from hyperstrain again," she said. "We need to revert to realspace to conduct repairs."

Vatu nodded. "Do it; deploy a gate. I take it you've already isolated the area?"

"I have," Julia confirmed and placed a firm hand on a nearby rail encircling her station as the *Deliverance* dropped out of hyperspace, returning to the crepuscular darkness of realspace.

Julia continued as if nothing had happened, brushing a stray strand of hair away from her face as she spoke. "Level one force-fields are in place. And everyone in adjacent sections have been evacuated. It just needs repairing. Otherwise the forces of hyperspace will rip the *Deliverance* apart when it -"

"I'm quite aware of the physics of hyperspace," Vatu said. "No offense, but I don't need a recap, Julia."

"Sorry, Anton."

"Ah, don't worry about it. I'll get about contacting a Walker to get on it right away."

Hyperspace, rather than a speed faster than that of light, is really another realm of life and space and matter entirely, possible to enter because of devices called jump-gates, devices deployed by a ship when it wants to enter or leave hyperspace.

Jump-gates create rifts in space-time which link the two types of space - hyper and real space - together. When a ship moves in to the realm of hyperspace, it automatically travels at speeds just minimally slower than those of light via a slipstream vortex, allowing them to still exist in time but for the time of stars to

speed by all around them though they could not see them.

But the realm of hyperspace is peculiar and whilst inside it, a ship contorts around itself while the people inside the ship are protected and continue their lives, oblivious to change. Meanwhile, the stresses inside hyperspace are forced upon the ship. They can cause a ship's hull to buckle and rupture. If not repaired, the rupture allows hyperspace itself to enter the ship and the forces of hyperspace rip the ship apart.

A ship reverts to realspace to conduct repairs by tearing through hyperspace with a deployed jump-gate. The *Deliverance* had done this and now Vatu needed to get a Walker to fix the damage from the outside.

Walkers by nature are temperamental and volatile and do not like authority figures much, but are highly respected in the *Deliverance's* separated society.

Vatu had a Walker in mind for this job, and she fit the bill of a Walker description perfectly, unfortunately.

With a hand Vatu fingered the communications device on the side of his Captain's Chair. The call was immediately transferred along several chains of communication to the *Deliverance's* commboard, which would put him in touch with the desired individual.

"Can I help you, Captain?" a bored voice asked from the device.

"Yes. Put me in touch with Christine Duron," he said.

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Christine was in a hydroponics bay with John when Vatu's call arrived. The hydroponics bay was one gigantic, circular habitat refinery - this one one of four on the *Deliverance*, actually. Inside it was humid and muggy, set to artificial temperatures designed for the plant life's comfort rather than for the human's.

The hydroponics bays were habitats from Earth containing plants and wildlife native to Earth, which the settlers hoped they would be able to transplant and later grow on the planet when they arrived. While giving the planet a distinctive taste of home, the plants would also speed up the creation of oxygen.

Animals, though, were just for show.

The plants and animals - like the settlers themselves - had either been genetically tweaked or created so they could survive in an alien planet's atmosphere. Just their genetic makeup had been changed; their functions and overall appearances were still the same.

The human versions of the tweakings had been horrible, invasive procedures that Christine remembered all too well. Painful needles placed deep into the body, bombardments of radiation to mutate cells to certain desired configurations.

While no outside features had been noticeably changed other than skin - making it thicker and more like plastic to touch, and, because it was only minor, allowing the 'sin' of disfigurement to be overlooked by the settlers -, the interior had been changed dramatically. Amongst the changes, blood had been made self-regulating so

that a person could survive in cold or warm environments, and as a result the Hemoglobin had been altered to give the blood a rich blue-green tinge rather than the traditional red. A second set of lungs which could breathe multiple gases, including carbon-dioxide, had been cloned and grafted inside her and the others. Vision was enhanced, food and drink could be fed intravenously, bodily wastes could be recycled inside the body if necessary...

Though grotesque, these things were necessary and had made the settlers all but superhuman.

All for Earth's advancement, Christine thought bitterly.

The plants and animals currently residing in the hydroponics bays - as well as the bays themselves - were the closest things the 10,000 future settlers had to a park and its accompaniments, so many people frequented them when they wanted to relax.

They had become a notorious romantic spot for couples and Christine and John came here often.

Arm in arm, they strolled briskly, pausing at places of interest. A cool breeze, created by fans, wafted down from above and hit them as they walked. Though it was quite nippy, Christine didn't really feel any of its effects.

The ceiling of the bay was heavily reinforced glass, tinted a rich blue to simulate a sky. An artificial light burned, and served - however inadequately - as a sun.

A flock of birds flew by, flapping their wings loudly. Christine watched them fly by, studying them with an arbitrary interest. As they left her line of sight, she sighed heavily.

John, concerned, pulled to an abrupt stop. "What?"

They had been walking for several minutes in a comfortable silence neither of them had really wanted to break, and the sound of his voice sounded strange now, callous and loud.

"Oh, nothing really," Christine said. "It's just that all this seems detached from reality. It's too beautiful, too elegant."

"Too perfect?" he ventured.

She nodded. "Exactly. It's like somewhere along the way we've gone too far; we've lost touch with ourselves and what was once important to us. Centuries ago we created beauty by art, or music or literature or through many other ways. Now we just clone beauty to life. Science is our art. It's more effective, but it loses something in the translation."

"Is that so bad?" John asked. "Science and technology has created much of the good stuff in our society, too, you know. We couldn't have created the *Deliverance* without it."

Christine laughed harshly and wiped a tear away from her eye. "Yeah, but I'm

beginning to think that may not have been such a good thing. You may have just made my point for me, tiger."

John frowned. "You resent this mission, don't you? Having been chosen for it, I mean."

"It is a privilege, I know that, but that's just it, John - we weren't chosen for this, or rather, we didn't choose it. We were all but conscripted. Christ, I think I've got a reason to be unhappy. I'm not even in control of my own life out here."

Several people passing by frowned sternly at her casual use of blasphemy and she sneered at them until they hurried away. "God, I hate Christians," she said quietly, her blasphemy more intentional this time. "They always act so high and mighty, like they know what's better for you than you do. Honestly, I know more goddamn atheists true to Christian morals than I do Christians."

John didn't blink an eye. "That's a bit harsh, isn't it?"

"I don't think so. There are so many Christians around, it's hard not to notice what they do and how they act."

"I meant about the conscription comments."

"No, not really," Christine replied smoothly, hiding the fact she had been caught off-guard; she hadn't expected this from John of all people. "I am entitled to my opinion, tiger. It's your right as an individual to disagree with me."

"But," she went on without giving him a chance to say anything, "I do mean what I said about science. I acknowledge that it has done some good things, but just look around you. It's like you said - it's too perfect. It is so obvious it's all been genetically tweaked, it's almost funny. Only I'm not laughing."

She was right. The scene was full of lush green grass, drooping trees and colourful flowers, a collage of colour. But it was too vibrant, too beautiful, too colourful.

"Look. Even the bird's can't escape it," Christine said. Indeed, even they couldn't escape the effects of this advanced culture, flying in concentric, planned circles.

"Sometimes, tiger, I find myself wishing just one bird would break routine, do something out of the ordinary," Christine confided. "But, of course, they never do."

*What does this say about us, she wondered privately, us who have created these abominations? We played God and became Frankenstein, unwillingly unleashing our monster of technology upon the world...*

*But who is the real monster, it or us, its creators?*

*Who is more stupid, the fool or the fool that follows him?*

"It just doesn't seem real to me," she concluded finally.

John reached up to stroke her face. His hand felt rough, but she didn't push him away. "You seem real enough to me," he said and reached down to kiss her.

"What you see it what you get, tiger," Christine said with a coy smile, then she reached up and their lips touched for a fleeting second. The result was mesmerizing, like the energy of one was passed to the other.

As Christine wrapped her arms around his back and made ready to return the kiss, she became aware of a vibration in her pocket and a faint chirping sound. All too aware of what it was, she withdrew from the kiss and hung her head. "I'm sorry. I have to take this." The words sounded bitter and she spat them out vehemently.

She turned away and reached into her pocket to withdraw a communication microphone. The chirping sound generated by the commphone intensified as she retrieved it, uncoiled it, and placed it firmly in her ear.

A brief moment of delectable - but, having said that, the more it was used the more *detestable* it became, too - pain coursed through her as a neural connection was made, then dissipated. The commphone activated, the chirping stopped and a voice replaced it in her ear. "Please hold for the Captain," the voice said.

Christine sighed. She knew all too well where this was going. Vatu's voice resonated over the connection a moment later; though he used an antiquated communication system, they could still communicate through their various devices. "Chris. I haven't interrupted something, have I?"

"Yes," she flatly replied. "What do you want, Anton?" She flatly refused to call him Captain; he had not earned her respect.

"We've reverted to realspace," he said, "because of a rupture. We need a Walker to repair it."

"And you thought of me... I'm touched, I think."

"Don't be," Vatu said. "It's over a dangerous area and that's what made me think of you."

"Why? Because I'm the best there is?"

"No. Because you're expendable."

Christine laughed. "Yeah, I guess I am. Okay, where is it?"

"On the aft side, I think, above the sleeping quarters," Vatu answered. "It's been sealed off so the damage has been limited, but to get there you have to get past engineering, or rather, all the pipes leading off it."

"Don't patronize me," Christine snapped. "I've Walked a hundred times. I know where it is and where the dangers are."

"Can the attitude. Talk to me like that again, Ms. Duron, and I'll personally throw you out the nearest airlock. Are we clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. How long until you can be ready?" Vatu asked.

"I can be suited up in fifteen minutes," she said.

"Get on it, then. Vatu out." He cut the connection.

"Fucking asshole," Christine muttered under her breath as she disengaged the commphone's neural connection.

"You don't learn, Chris. Talk like that will soon get you court-martialed," John warned.

She flashed him a nasty glare. "I'll just have to make sure nobody hears it, then, won't I? Besides, he needs everyone he's got. He can't afford to court-martialed me." Her voice, all too noticeably, lacked conviction.

With a sigh of apology, she kissed him quickly, lip-tugging, then offered a feeble smile that didn't fool anyone. "Look, I've got a job to do, tiger. I'll have to see you later."

"I understand," John said. "Go. I'll wait for you."

Only silence is great; all else is weakness.  
— *Alfred de Vigny*

### **3.**

In order for a Walker - or a normal human, for that matter - to survive outside in an area without air or gravity, he or she had to be suited up in a specially designed suit with numerous gadgets providing air, warmth and a communication system to speak to the ship.

Christine was no different.

Walking was the only thing she took seriously. And well she should. One screw up and her life would be in the balance.

The suit was not all that much to look at, just an expanded design of an astronauts' traditional white suit from over three centuries in the past; these things didn't change much, respect for history and all that. Minor changes made it more comfortable than the older, more cumbersome models, though. They were closer fitting, more like a heavy piece of clothing or an extension of the body. Also, the colour had evolved to a dark grey, bordering on black, making the person look as if they blended into space.

Christine had finished fastening the suit over a layer of body protection a few moments ago, though she had yet to put the helmet on. She glanced down at it now. The whole thing was small and compact, made from a thick combination of rubber and plastic and glass; the faceplate was wide and angled, allowing a hundred-eighty degree rotation.

For all the world it looked like a dark fishbowl.

She sighed, then secured the helmet on over the top of her spacesuit. It clicked in place resolutely, and the sound distracted her from the anxiety churning in her stomach.

Christine held up a gloved left hand, flexed her fingers to ease the tightness within them, heard the satisfying crack of bones, and then tapped her helmet to activate the communit inside. A neural connection was made with the usual delicious stab of pain and she was connected to Ops a moment later.

"Okay, move it; let's get this over with. I'm missin' dinner."

"I agree wholeheartedly," Vatu shot back coldly. Though it sounded distorted because of the distance, his voice was still a direct contrast to Christine's. "Please begin at your earliest convenience, Chris. We rely on you from here on in."

Christine bit back a sarcastic comment and reached instead for a coiled black plastic rope with metal tipped ends. "I'm attaching the tether," she said. "Do me a favour and make sure it doesn't disconnect. I don't want to find myself floating aimlessly in space." She attached it to her belt firmly, tugging on it once to make sure it was locked in place.

"Don't worry, Chris. We're sending someone down, but we can't get him in there until you're out," Vatu said. "Decompression protocols and all that. Well, you're an experienced Walker, as I believe you said to me earlier. You should know all this."

Christine grunted. "Yeah, I do," she said. "It's just more reassuring hearing it from somebody else."

She reached down to a small control pad on her thigh and touched it lightly. Immediately, a blue light indicator flashed three times before settling to a constant line. "Magboots engaged," she said into the comm. "Ready to rock and roll."

Christine's feet suddenly felt as heavy as lead as the magnetic soles strongly gripped the metal hull of the airlock. The boots would stop her from drifting away from the hull - more a secondary measure, after the tether -, and would also allow her to move a little more easily, with more control. But if her boots faltered for just the barest of moments and the tether snapped under the sudden strain, or if she accidentally pressed the wrong control, she would drift off into the expanse of space, one of the loneliest and longest deaths possible...

It was every Walker's nightmare, but at the same time, a dream. Most Walkers were loners and lived for what they did and the idea of dying the way they lived, alone and amongst the stars, was appealing to many.

Christine wasn't of the same breed of Walker as those sick bastards and she had no desire to die that way; a flirtation with death was not high on her list of priorities. She'd rather open herself to hard vacuum and be done with it if she found herself in that position, a quick decompression...

Of course, she would rather live.

All her thoughts and fears were pushed from her mind as she reached for the controls to the airlock door and fingered them active, no easy feat in thick gloves.

But the airlock door opened nonetheless with an almost inaudible whiz and Christine looked out onto an amazing sight. Indeed, it was impressive no matter how many times you looked out upon it. A cascade of overlapping shapes and forms of metal jutted out in all directions, gleaming a golden hue fiercely, spectacularly vibrant because of the darkness contrasting it.

The *Deliverance*, like all Earth starships, had been created not just to explore and colonise, but to also be a living history of humanity - an arc of life. The whole ship was one massive work of art, images depicted through engravings and indentations intricately etched into the golden hull.

It was like one living mass of sculpture, stretching out as far as the eye could see, arching upwards in never-beginning and never-ending spirals of majesty and colour and magnificence.

The *Deliverance* was not just a ship. It was a collection, a collage, a culmination of ideas and passions and imaginations, a monument to all that humanity believed and had achieved.

Though wondrous, it had always annoyed Christine that none of their mistakes had been depicted on this moving art gallery.

Christine tore herself away from the sight. "It's really quite spectacular, isn't it?" Vatu was saying into her comm, providing her with something to focus on. "Our lives, our entire existence, depicted into a fleet of ships like this, ensuring we will never die..."

"It's nice," said Christine.

"I don't think 'nice' quite describes it, my dear."

*No, you wouldn't*, Christine thought sourly. Starship captains were fiercely proud of their ships, their babies, and were always boastful of them. Instead of accepting the challenge and commenting, she changed the subject. "Okay, I'm leaving now."

Christine stepped out. The tether coiled behind her as she moved; it almost felt like she was dragging her feet, they felt so heavy. She clutched a rail leading out of the airlock for as long as she could, slightly overwhelmed by the infinitely vast backdrop of space.

When she let go of it, a moment of terrifying panic coursed through her like a physical shock. For an all-petrifying second she was floating free of everything, evoking an instinctive instant of panic and - dare she think it - claustrophobia; locked away in her small suit she felt small and unimportant, and space seemed like an inimical and hostile, overpowering foe.

It passed as her boots grabbed hold of the *Deliverance's* hull, but she was nevertheless unsettled when the normally comforting thud of boot on carpet or metal was replaced with a resonating vibration; the outer-plating was so thick and there was no sound in space.

No matter how many times she Walked, it did it to her every time.

Composing herself, she began her journey by pushing off from the hull firmly,

skipping a few steps in the air with no gravity propelling and assisting her, then landing again and repeating the process.

It was called Walking, but it was almost impossible to really walk; it was more like bobbing or swimming with gigantic leaps, brushing off the surface firmly and catapulting forwards.

The tether trailed behind her, imitating and mocking her precise movements like a slithering snake. Without magnets to pull it to the ground, it floated slightly askew in no-gravity, bobbing up and down repetitively.

She traveled like this in silence for several minutes, keeping her eye on the hull before her, until Vatu broke it with, "How are you doing up there, Chris?"

"Peachy, I guess," she replied. "I always feel a bit queasy when I do this, so nothing other than the norm."

"That's the zero gravity," Vatu said. "It does that to people no matter their experience. You'll be fine. Just don't look up - or down - at the stars."

As usual, when somebody said that, it sparked an instant reaction of looking at them. Golden light gleamed off the *Deliverance's* surface, her shadow from numerous lighting fixtures leading the way, casting darkness over part of the hull.

*God, I hate it when people say that,* Christine thought as she felt her stomach heave. "Ooh, shit," she groaned. The idea of little yellow globules of vomit floating around inside her helmet until they attached themselves to something - most likely her face - wasn't particularly attractive to her, so she swallowed hard and repulsed the urge successfully.

"Thanks a lot, Anton."

"You looked, didn't you?" He almost sounded pleased.

*Asshole.* "My immediate reaction," she said, straining to keep bitterness from her voice.

"Ah, don't worry. You're doing fine."

Christine said, without belief or conviction - that seemed, in turn, to be a reflection of her soul -, "If you say so, tiger."

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Christine skipped briskly across the *Deliverance's* surface, her expression within her helmet tranquil, at peace. Ahead of her, out of the magnificent hull, arose the dull grey towers and pipes of engineering, stretching beyond her vision for at least a kilometer or more.

It had taken her half an hour to reach this far, a tedious and tense journey along the ship's splendid underbelly, along the crest of Ops and down over more seemingly never-ending stretches of gold hull, and the prospect of just this - reaching engineering - had been haunting her throughout her periods of silence.

She would usually divert around the pipes as the lethal gases expelled from them could burn through the all too limited protection she wore, but it sounded like Vatu needed the rupture repaired in a hurry and it would take too long to detour around it.

An idea, albeit a dangerous one, suddenly entered her mind. Not sure what to do - whether the risk was worth the gain -, she decided to contact Vatu. "I've reached engineering," she said flatly.

"The rupture's beyond it," Vatu said. "About five or ten minutes more, straight ahead."

"You can add another ten at least to that if I have to detour."

"Yes, well, it can't be helped, Chris." He suddenly paused, realising what she had said. "What do you mean 'if'? There's no other option, damn it."

"There is," said Christine, "I can float -"

He interrupted. "Surely you're joking? You can't seriously think you can get the height to clear the stacks."

"Whoever said anything about height?"

"What are you suggesting?" he growled, sounding resigned and helpless... and maybe a little desperate. On the ship, he had control of her. Out here, he didn't and he knew it.

"I'm not suggesting anything, Captain," Christine said innocently, his nervous questioning answer enough for her in a twisted reasoning. "I just think it's time this bird spread her wings."

Vatu objected in her headset, but Christine filtered it out and took a couple of cautious steps back, then reached down and hit the magnetic control on her spacesuit's thigh. The blue light instantly went dark and she drifted free, her feet no longer heavy; her whole body felt as light as a feather as she drifted blissfully.

She used her legs to maneuver herself in to the right position and she slowly began to float both upwards and forwards. The sensation of freedom in zero-gravity was not unpleasant, enormously exhilarating, in fact. It was not unlike swimming in air and she used breaststroke movements and heavy kicks to guide her along.

Soon she was immersed in curling smokestacks and pipes, sinuously curving upwards, some curving together like double-helices. Christine floated above some, under others, avoiding getting too close.

She moved slowly, deftly swinging suddenly right or left to avoid hazards. It was a dangerous maneuver and required many superfluous but also precise movements to just steer oneself, but she knew she was up to the challenge, using all her experiences and her lightning-fast reflexes in zero-gravity just to survive.

And before too long she was past the danger.

Christine, taking a deep breath, secretly pleased with herself, reached down and activated her magboots again. As she resettled back down on the hull with a stomach-lurching jarring she only just stopped herself from vomiting again.

"Okay, I'm down," she said into her comm. "Safely," she added.

"Damn it, Chris," Vatu shot back. "Don't ever do that. You don't have to be impulsive just to impress us."

"I never said I wanted to impress you," Christine snapped, annoyed. "I didn't even want to be on this bloody mission. I'm just doing my job and impulsiveness comes with the territory. Risk is my middle name."

"And Too Much are your others, Chris," Vatu said violently.

She smiled, happy that she had flustered the notorious ice-king. "Maybe. But it's done now."

"Yes. And if you do it again, you'll be court-martialed faster than -"

"It's always threats with you, isn't it, tiger?" Christine said. "All that worry can't be good for you. When was the last time your blood-pressure was checked?"

"Shut up, Chris. I'll worry about my own well-being, you just get back to your work."

"Yes sir," Christine replied crisply, formally.

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It - the rupture - ended up being much more than ten minutes away. Oh, she got to the coordinates all right, but she couldn't find it. Not even a trace of it. Which was unusual, but not uncommon; some were so small they were hard to detect.

These were the more dangerous ones. A large and wide rupture would allow a large circumference for the forces of hyperspace to enter, but a smaller one would compress the forces into a tight and steady stream which would be like a laser; it would burn straight through sections of hull, increasing chances of striking a vital system and this, though smaller, seemed much more deadly.

"Well, this ain't looking good, tiger," Christine said over the comm. "If I can't find it, then it's pretty bloody small."

"Hmm. And pretty damn deadly," Vatu agreed.

"All the etching on the hull isn't making it any easier. It's like looking for a needle in a haystack, Anton."

"Should we release the foam?" Vatu asked.

"I think we'd better," Christine said. "I can't see a thing."

"Okay. Stand by. We're sending the foam up."

The foam was a nifty little invention created especially for tracking down hard to find hull ruptures - this one certainly qualified for that category. A kind of gelatinous paint or foam was released into the sealed off area. The foam was then sucked straight out through the rupture, painting it as it went.

Usually a bright colour, the foam was visible against the darkness of space - though not yellow as it couldn't be seen against the hull - and a Walker could see it and track it back to the rupture.

Christine turned in a slow circle, looking for the foam. On her third rotation she found it. What had been a thick liquid inside the *Deliverance* had stretched out into pink-red globules, spinning and expanding in the zero-gravity, like little vibrant, growing organisms.

"Okay, guys, I've got it. Moving towards it now."

She skipped hesitantly across the surface, careful to keep her eye on her objective. Christine reached it and whistled sharply. "Wow, now *that's* a doozy."

"What?" Vatu asked.

"I can see it clearly enough," she told him, " but it's so small I don't know if any repair could grip it securely. It'll have to be grafted on to the hull surrounding it, but that'll leave a weakness in the middle. We'll have to reinforce it from inside rather than outside, but even that might not work. I think we should strip back and replace the hull entirely."

He was quiet for a moment. "Ideally, that's what I would rather do," he said slowly, "but I don't think we have that kind of time. Or the resources. We're still years away from our destination; already we've traveled further than any other humans... We have to go on, fix it later."

"Anton, we won't get there if it collapses on us," Christine said.

"I know, I know, but I don't think we really have all that much of a choice," Vatu said. "We need to keep on schedule."

*Goddamn you, Anton. You'll cost us all our lives.* "I must recommend -" Christine began, before he cut her off.

"Chris, just shut up and damn well do it, okay?"

"Yes, but be it on your head should something go wrong. And your conscience."

"It's not your job to be my conscience - or to question my decisions," Vatu snapped. "Now get on it and stop giving me hell."

"Yes, Anton," said she with reluctance.

"Good."

Christine cut the connection, the pain of the moment of disconnection - while usually enjoyable - only fueled the savage bitterness she felt. *You're an asshole, Anton, really you are. You didn't even listen to me, goddamn you.*

*Christ, you're a politician, not a Captain, who will do anything to adhere to regulations. Well, space doesn't work that way; we are on our own out here now, many star systems away from the nearest human settlement - we can't stick to those same rules. Who is going to know if we break the rules and are a little late because of it? At least we wouldn't be risking our lives. Fuck you!*

Despite her concerns, Christine did as she had been instructed and began to work on patching the rupture. An hour later it was done and she took her time getting back to the airlock, bypassing engineering pointedly this time.

As she moved along the hull she read the inscriptions with annoyance. Most this side were religious, and those which weren't were all happy, unrealistic verses documenting humanities good qualities - with none of the bad ones included.

*Damn deluded Christians.*

Christine, now truly sick of everything on the starship, hurried towards the airlock.

A man who fears suffering is already suffering from what he fears.  
— *Montaigne*

#### **4.**

Having received confirmation from Christine when she entered the airlock that her mission was accomplished, Anton Vatu ordered the *Deliverance* to enter hyperspace again; he didn't order any internal repairs first to reinforce it.

A jump-gate was deployed, a small modified science probe or buoy, and a tear in the wall of hyperspace appeared with its usual momentary flash of vibrancy.

The *Deliverance* moved through the tear and was soon swallowed by the pulsating colours and dimensions many found amazing, but Vatu - who had spent so much of the last two years studying them when they exited, to repair common ruptures found tedious, not even mildly interesting.

He squirmed in his chair, bored beyond belief - at times like this there wasn't much for a Captain to do -, and finally reached for a tumbler of hot coffee and a datapad to read.

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Christine had shrugged off her spacesuit over an hour ago with great relief; it was heavy and cumbersome, annoying in every sense of the word. All that Walking had made her even more hungry than she should have been and she yearned for a roast.

But on a starship, only foods which could be grown and replaced could be consumed, so she carried a tray of disgusting-looking vegetables into the messhall.

As usual, the messhall was half-full and the rowdy background noise assaulted her as she entered. As large as one of the hydroponics bays, the messhall was square and filled with hundreds of wooden and metal tables. Couples and friends sat,

chatting amongst themselves, enjoying each other's company. More individuals were keeping to themselves, using their off-time to grab a quick bite and relax.

Christine spotted Julia Hayes eating alone.

Evidently, Julia had spotted her, too. "Chris, over here." She kicked a chair out opposite her and waved her over.

Christine did not care for Julia much; she found her obnoxious and often aggressive. Though their natures were similar, the two women often clashed when they came in contact.

Or maybe it was because of that...

Still, Christine had to admit she did have a grudging respect and admiration for the woman - she knew how hard it was to work one's way up the chain of command - and, besides, she couldn't just reject her as callously as she might want to.

So she accepted her offer, pointedly pulling out a chair other than the one Julia had offered. Julia chuckled to herself as Christine slunk into it and slammed the tray down. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it. I hear you went for a Walk earlier."

"You weren't on duty?"

She shook her head. "To be honest, I was sleeping," she said almost dramatically. "I'm just about to go back now."

Christine poked at the food on her tray and put a piece in her mouth. She tried to stop from gagging.

"Not very appetising, is it?" Julia commented, sipping some kind of hot liquid from a darkly tinted glass.

"It's not that bad," Christine said back and forced herself to take another bite. She grunted as she swallowed. "No, it's worse, actually. Oh, God, water. I need water."

Julia reached forward and handed her a glass from Christine's tray, and Christine drank gratefully. Putting the glass down, she stifled a belch.

"You know," said Julia, "I always thought that for all our manipulating of these things so that they could grow in space, it was peculiar that we could never get the taste right. Imagine, sprouts tasting like chocolate..."

"That's what we used to do centuries ago, deceiving ourselves by making foods we didn't like taste better," Christine said. "I don't think we've evolved a long way from then, socially or technologically."

"Come now, Chris. You can't seriously believe that." Julia said with indignation. "We've moved forwards. Just look at this mission, for example."

"Maybe. But we're all fools for following so blindly. And I am one of the biggest ones. I just do as I am told, fool that I am."

"I detect a hint of bitterness there," Julia said.

"Oh. You don't say," Christine shot back sarcastically.

"You want to talk about it?"

"No, and even if I did it wouldn't be with you," Christine said with just a hint of truculence. "You're not the ship's counselor, tiger."

"I'm not, but then again I don't have to be," Julia said, not taking offense. "It's Anton, isn't it? He has a habit of annoying you, getting under your skin. And mine for that matter."

Christine poked at her meal without enthusiasm. "It's not just him."

"Then what else is it?"

"It's everything," she said, "this whole goddamn ship. This isn't a life, drifting between the stars..."

"We're hardly drifting, Chris. We've got a direction, a purpose--"

"Ah, yes, the fucking mission. I never asked to come aboard this ship, you know. I was happy where I was. Then I was conscripted - and before you deny it, that's what it was. I have, we all have, been robbed of our lives."

"Hardly," Julia said. "There's plenty to do on the ship, work to be done, people to meet. There's the prospect of a life at the very least."

"Don't give me that shit. There's nothing here to do, and you know it."

"There are holochambers, observatories, restaurants, religious levels, music halls... But I suspect it goes deeper than that, am I right?"

"You just don't get it, do you?" Christine said, exasperated. "You've forced us to do things we don't want to do. Like others on this ship, I'm not religious. All we've got are the holochambers and, let's face it, you can only do a certain program so many times. And the rest are religious."

"Obviously," Julia said. "But what do you expect? There are 9,000 Christians on this ship, Chris; you are in the minority. And it is called the *Deliverance*, after all. It is very much a religious ship."

Christine poked a finger at her. "What you are forgetting is there are a thousand people here who aren't religious at all. Science is our God, Julia, not a supernatural being whom we've never found any substantial evidence of."

"All right, Chris, you say Science is your God. We believe that God gave you your science and created our society based on that gift of technology."

"Yes, *you* believe. But what about what *I* believe?"

"Okay, what do you believe?"

Christine looked away, focusing her thoughts, then turned back. "Your whole religion is based on faith, I can respect that. I have faith in science. We can create machines that clone parts of people to *help* people, grow new hearts in hours. Hell, we can create whole people. We've eliminated disease. We can colonise worlds to live on. That's what I believe in, tiger: I believe in us, I believe in what we create."

Julia smiled. "You know, I believe in us as well. But in a different way. Technology has healed physical pain, but what of the emotional? Faith and belief in something other than ourselves gives us that, Chris. Technology can't."

"What is your problem, Julia?" Christine barked gruffly. "You don't listen to what I say, you discount my theories -"

"I'm a scientist, Chris," Julia interrupted. "I do listen, it's my job to listen. If there is concrete proof that God doesn't exist, then I will listen and examine it. But until that day, I shall believe. And my problem is that I feel sorry for you."

Christine's eyes narrowed to slits. "Well don't," Christine snapped as Julia stood to leave. "Because I don't feel sorry for you."

"No. I wouldn't expect that you would. And that's why I feel sorry for you. Because if you live in a world without hope, then you are truly alone."

With that Julia left Christine to her almost inedible meal and her bitter mood. She poked at her food, turbulent thoughts raging through her head, wondering how much longer it was until she had to meet John in a holochamber.

Her thoughts drifted back to Julia like a yoyo being tugged up and down the string. "Christ," she muttered and didn't give a damn about the disapproving looks from the people around her.

Order leads to all the virtues! But what leads to order?!  
— *George Christoph Lichtenberg*

## **5.**

Julia hurried to get to Ops. The originally suggested turbolifts or transport tubes had been bypassed for the more classic design of stairs and ladders - in space there wasn't much time for exercise - and Julia had to pause every now and then to catch her breath.

She hadn't bothered to secure a harness around herself, deciding to trust in her abilities instead.

Her conversation with Christine flashed across her mind. That woman - little more than a girl in terms of age, but a woman in terms of experience and hardship - had made a habit of infuriating her and of treading heavily on large egos, squashing people, like insects, without a care.

Julia had always wondered if she did this because she had a fragile ego herself.

Now she had her answer.

She shook her head. She didn't know what she could do to help her - particularly when she pissed her off so much. She could pray for her, she supposed, ask for guidance from God but she wasn't sure if that would work. Christine was just such a spirited individual, and she doubted any amount of prayer would help her.

There was an added complexity, as well. The sweepings of the conduits were completed and there was no sign of Blake; he had somehow managed to avoid them at all turns, and was still loose and ready to wreck havoc on them, no doubt.

Suddenly, inexplicably, Julia's world lurched upside down, swirling dizzily, and she lost her grip on the ladder. For a half-moment she was airborne, not touching anything, frantically scrambling for any kind of hold on the ladder, floating and rolling from side to side, legs kicking madly, suspended without the aid of gravity...

Then the world swam before her eyes as the whole ship lurched violently in hyperspace and she twirled in the air and tumbled against the ladder with a body-jarring impact.

"Ahh," Julia groaned as pain flared through her side like a thousand serrated knives. Instinctively she grabbed hold of the ladder to stop from falling again, and waited for the world to stop spinning like a kaleidoscope.

Recovering quickly, a thousand indefinable possibilities flashing through her mind as to the cause of the disaster, she took the rungs two at a time, thoughts of Christine lost in the past.

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Down far below the ladder-tube to Ops, an entire deck was writhing in pain. As Christine had predicted, the protective covering had not held and, before force-fields could be activated to contain the damage, hyperspace was allowed a deadly entrance.

The destruction was quickly over, but was no less devastating. The destructive forces had burnt through and scorched the entire deck. Fire in zero-gravity is a spectacular sight, and under any other circumstances anyone witnessing it would think it beautiful; it widens and shrinks into and unto itself, flowing and expanding forwards and backwards.

And when this beatific, deadly fury strikes in the areas of the ship housing chemicals, the effect is magnified beyond human comprehension. Thousands of small explosions rocked the ship's hull, blowing holes, causing losses of power -

- And death.

The damage was astronomical, smoke clouded people's vision, hampering the attempts to extinguish the flames with sprinklers and extinguishers. No part of the ship was safe. Not even Operations, where two people had been badly injured and

many crucial instruments destroyed. But through all this, the people were working together as a team.

Julia emerged, her black hair disheveled, streaked with soot, a nasty gash dripping dark green-blue blood on her forehead, clutching an arm which may or may not have been dislocated, yet her eyes gleaming intelligently as she took in the chaos of the ladder-tube, voices shouting over the din of endless explosions and fizzing electronics.

"Damage report." snapped Vatu.

Reports flooded in.

"Life-support system is off-line."

"Gravity and partial power loss on most decks."

"Explosions and fires everywhere. Suppression systems are mostly ineffective."

"Casualty reports coming in. Twelve reported dead, twenty six wounded seriously."

"Power is off-line to cryostasis labs and chambers."

*Oh, great, that's just what we need, Julia thought heatedly. On top of all this damage several thousand people suddenly wake up, after a month of sleep, with a million and one questions.*

Julia shouted over the din, "Captain, what can I do?"

Vatu turned. "Julia. Good. I wasn't sure what had happened to you." Concern echoed in his voice. "Make sure the containment force-fields are still active. If we're losing power, they might be down."

Julia hurried to a console and stepped over the unconscious form of a man, little more than twenty judging by his youthful complexion. Without pausing to see if he was seriously injured, she activated the console. Blue light washed across her face and she blinked to focus on the information scrolling across the screen before her.

"No, they've still got power," said she, "thank God, but I can't guarantee it'll stay that way for long. It's fluctuating wildly."

"Damn. We'll have to take her out of hyperspace again."

"With all due respect, Anton, I think that's the least of our problems. I don't think this kind of damage is repairable."

"All because of one mistake," Vatu breathed. "Well, we shall have to worry about that later. Just get us out of here."

Julia's fingers flashed across her console, the combination of intermittent hissing of air and flashing lighting and blaring damage reports made it hard to concentrate, but she knew her job and easily filtered it out. "Launching jump-gate," she said.

Static glazed over the viewscreen in Ops and no one could see the jump-gate form the tear, but soon the *Deliverance* passed through it and returned to real space.

Vatu suddenly laughed.

Julia frowned, finding the sound inappropriate. "What?"

"Oh, nothing. I just realised that I'm going to have to kill Chris if she says I told you so."

Julia smiled. More likely it would be the other way round.

"Okay, recommendations?" Vatu asked.

"I say we make our way to a planet and send a distress signal," Julia said. "I don't think we can do anything else, Anton."

"Can we make it?"

"Sensors weren't damaged and they show we are about a day away from the nearest system. We'll be all but limping there, but I believe we can make it."

"All right," Vatu said with a reluctant sigh. "I don't think we have any other real choice. We have to at least try. Do it."

"Yes, Captain."

There was a long and uncomfortable silence as the *Deliverance* began its journey at an awfully slow speed. Vatu broke it finally with, "Even I couldn't have anticipated this."

"It's always the way, isn't it?" Julia said. "It's the small things which bring your world crashing down."

"Yes, I suppose it is," Vatu said.

Where they make a desert they call it peace.

— *Tacitus*

## **6.**

There was little chance of the *Deliverance* living up to its name as it could do little more than limp into the star system, bleeding and belching dangerous gases and fuel, like an animal which had barely escaped with its life after a short, but nonetheless vicious conflict with a predator.

There were times when Vatu wondered if the *Deliverance* would get there at all.

But it did. That it made it there in one piece - more or less - was a miracle.

Suddenly, a chance for survival beckoned, though only a slim one, it was still better than what they had a day ago, when the rupture had occurred.

Vatu evaluated their chances as he surveyed the alien solar system ahead. The system was not dissimilar to Earth's, with a similarly aged and classified star. But it had five planets encircling the sun in a wider orbit than Sol's nine.

Two of the planets were gaseous and consisted mostly of helium and hydrogen, still forming. Big, glassy looking balls of light, they seemed like two gigantic welcoming lanterns.

Another two planets were exact opposites. One was covered in lush green forests and surrounded by deep, meandering oceans. The other was a rocky, desert planet not unlike Mars in colour and size - and lack of life.

But the fifth one, this was something spectacular which blew Vatu's mind; it was unlike anything he had ever seen before, let alone dared to imagine. A third of it was a deep, rocky red desert without any specks of water; a third was forest, rich and magnificent, with waterfalls churning and frothing; and the final third was all ocean, a brilliant blue. It had intermixed areas, of course, but the three major land masses were separate, water and different types of land - sand and forest - and these were the main areas attracting attention.

Still, it was a combination of everything they needed. Then it struck Vatu sharply, and all his doubts about his mistakes melted away.

*What if... what if I hadn't actually made a mistake, he asked himself, but instead that the rupture was meant to happen, to bring us here, to a place where possibilities were endless, a world untouched by sin, the opportunity for us to become a part of perfection...*

Vatu swallowed hard, forcing himself not to jump to conclusions - although, in truth, in his mind he was already down on the planet, kissing rocks and ground, celebrating, praying, beginning to live. "Take us down," he said.

"Anton, once we land, we're there permanently, thanks to our current predicament. Are you sure?" Julia asked.

"Perfectly," he purred. "I've never been more sure of anything in my entire life. Can't you feel it, Julia? The climax of our adventure is upon us. We were meant to come here. So take us down. To the fifth planet," he said. "To paradise."

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Christine was one of the first people allowed off the *Deliverance* once it had landed (that landing, coincidentally, had not been particularly pleasant; the upper atmosphere was dark and lightning and thunder had been a nasty welcome). She stepped off into a shower of rain and within moments, her clothes were soaked and her hair matted to her face.

Not that she really cared.

After two years on a cramped starship full of the putrid smell of unwashed bodies and recycled air, the freshness and cleanliness of this world was more than welcome; the clean, unpolluted air seemed heavenly to breathe - made possible by the second

set of lungs grafted inside her.

But the world, while distinctly alien, was similar to Earth - while at the same time, so unique and unlike it and, in fact, any other planet she had ever encountered. The air, while sweet, was heavy and thick with moisture; but at the same time the soil was dry underfoot.

The temperature was only about 5 degrees Celsius, but there was no snow, only a thick layer of frost. She walked for a little while and entered the desert part of the planet. Here it was much warmer, almost 32 degrees Celsius; how it could be so radically different within such a small radius was startling.

In the distance, Christine could see the beginning of the ocean swelling over a third of the planet; a deep blue tinged with green, it was unlike any ocean she had seen before, lapping onto a golden sandy beach. It looked heavenly.

Far to her right was the forest part of the planet, where she had begun, a blend of greens and browns. Framed beyond this were mountain ranges taller than Everest - and maybe even Olympus Mons on Mars, the highest point in the Sol Solar System. Dark and foreboding, their peaks were covered with the only snow and ice on the planet, apart from the polar caps.

Across the rocky plain from where she now stood, Christine was captivated by brown rocky outcroppings and sand dunes. Though no geologist by any measure, even Christine could tell their formations were different to anything else she had seen so far.

What struck her most about all this was that the planet was alive, like Earth, Mars and other colony worlds. Unlike the moon, which was classified a dead world without anything defining it, this world was so definitely real, so *alive*, so *enchanting*.

And, perhaps most importantly and surprising of all, there was life here. Not intelligent life, of course, but instinctual survivors and scavengers, created to survive on this world and none other.

For a moment, Christine found herself wondering whether humanity was really supposed to leave Earth and go to other planets, her devotion in her beliefs shaken by this magnificence. No matter how life was created it was usually suited to its environment. But humanity as a collective whole had forced itself upon other worlds, found them unsuitable and reshaped them accordingly.

Effectively they had destroyed ecosystems, and any chance of developing - or developed but undiscovered - life, so that they could live there.

She had to wonder, was this right?

Christine did not know, but she knew that in order for them to survive on this world for however long needed until they could be rescued, they would need to work as a team, putting their differences aside.

But already divisions were forming. Some believed coming here was for the best, while others disagreed. And there were divisions in faith as well. Some believed God separated them from the rest of sinful humanity, while others wondered why a

supposedly just God would forsake them and had lost faith entirely.

In fact, it was almost as if the 10,000 settlers had splintered into two castes of belief, a Science Caste and a Religious Caste.

And then there were the people like herself who didn't take a side, did not join a caste. Not because they did not believe in either, but because they chose not to.

Christine found neither side particularly attractive and would rather be on her own, despite her grievances towards Christianity.

But at the moment, they were still one collective whole, marveling at life on a new planet.

She wondered how long that would last.

Do well and do right, and let the world sink.  
— *George Herbert*

## **Z.**

About three days after first stepping out onto the strange planet, Christine again left the sanctuary of the *Deliverance* and its resting place - but this time harboring even worse feelings of fear and dread.

Everything had happened so quickly; the division between the religious and the rest of the people that she had anticipated was now obviously taking effect and she feared that dramatic changes might lie ahead.

Anton Vatu had not publicly taken a stance.

Christine feared he might be the instigator of change.

Vatu had called a meeting for all ten thousand people to attend. He claimed it was to mark the beginning of settlement - we may as well live in comfort while we await rescue -, but Christine feared something much more insidious was afoot.

What, she did not know, but the feeling was there nonetheless.

The planet was still as magical and indescribable as it had been when first encountered, but somehow it didn't seem quite as special.

The bitter division amongst the 10,000 people had somehow tarnished the beauty of the place.

She marched through trees, then across sand and rock to the designated meeting place, enjoying the fresh air and sunshine, though only too aware of the worries festering inside her.

Eventually she came to the meeting place where a large crowd were talking loudly, a sea of heads and faces and bodies. In front of the crowd was a podium and, upon it,

a commphone - Vatu would no doubt use it to communicate to each individual, also to the group as a whole.

Christine wrapped her arms around herself tightly - more to dispel a shiver of revulsion at the general conversation, than a feeling of cold, *if* a feeling of cold was even possible - and joined the crowd, becoming one of many in an intertwining sea of nameless people.

Without excusing herself she moved forwards, and soon spotted John. She joined him and as they waited for the spectacle to begin, they had to all but shout so that they could hear each other.

Ten, fifteen minutes passed before Julia Hayes and Vatu confidently swaggered into the crowd, which parted like Jesus himself had commanded it.

Pursing her lips, Christine defiantly kept her place. *God, they've got a lot of nerve,* she thought. *Acting like King and Queen walking through their troops. What chance is there for an assassination...*

As Vatu stepped up to the podium and reached for the commphone Christine found herself dreading what he was going to say.

The crowd turned on their commphones as one, Christine no exception, hiding a grimace of pain at the connection.

His words broadcast to each and every one of them, Vatu began to speak. "My friends, it is good to see you all together again," he said warmly. "It has been too long a separation; from cryogenic suspension to simple sleep, being apart is hell.

"Now, look, I was never one to be good at speeches, so I'll be brief. And I think an action can explain more to you than words ever can." With that, he shrugged off his Captain's uniform. Underneath was a priest's tunic. Julia's action revealed the same.

Murmurs arose from the crowd. Christine felt John stiffen beside her. "I don't like where this is going, Chris," he said.

"I agree. But let's hear him out," Christine replied.

Vatu waited for the murmurs to die down, then he continued. "You may not be aware that I trained to be a priest before becoming a captain," he said. "I finished my training, then was assigned to the *Deliverance*; even the religious can't escape Earth's wishes. Now I am ending my captaincy to concentrate on my religious duties.

"Everyone, I want you to look around. Just glance around this world." As Christine, John and the rest of the crowd did this a stiff wind stirred sand and rocks, trees and plants, beach and ocean, all three planetary divisions. As one, the crowd turned back.

"I wonder what you see. I'll tell you what I see. Beauty. Majesty. Harmony. Where some see desecration and scorched land, I see opportunity and life. What I see is perfection."

"This world is free in every sense of the word, free from pollution - and free from

human interference. It's free from sin and wrong doing," Vatu said. "I say this because I think we may have been put here for a reason, separated from the rest of sinful humanity and from their interference." He all but spat 'sinful'.

"So I say we embrace this world and its offerings, stay here in our heaven."

John fidgeted. "Christ, I can't take any more of this," he exclaimed. "He's talking like a madman."

"No, he's talking with conviction, a man entrenched in his belief," Christine said. "Perhaps what happened has got to him, but I do agree. He's not making logical sense."

"Jesus, Chris, he's talking about abandoning us to this world, separating us indefinitely from all that we know. Somebody's got to talk him out of it, before he's convinced everyone his way is the only way."

He had a determined look in his eyes that Christine had never seen before, a grimness etched into his face. It scared her, she realised. "And you're that someone, I suppose?"

"Yeah. Maybe I am."

"What makes you think your way is better than his?"

"Damn it, Chris, I can't believe it - you're actually defending him."

"No, I'm just making sure you don't do anything foolish," Christine shot back.

"All right, I'll accept that," he said, though he sounded anything but accepting. "I don't have a way, but I can sure as hell tell you that if I did it wouldn't include abandoning us on a planet we found purely by chance. And I'm going to tell him that."

He turned away and began to move off, but Christine - reacting before she could think - reached out and grabbed his elbow to stop him. "John, don't. You'll just make an asshole out of yourself."

"Let go, Chris. I have to do this." There was a hostile edge to his voice and Christine found herself promptly letting go. John shrugged his shoulders to adjust his clothing and stormed off towards the podium, turning his commphone to broadcast as he went.

Vatu watched him approach. "Have you something to say?"

"Yes, I damn well do," John snapped back. "What are you thinking? We rely heavily on Earth resources. Without the hope of rescue, what point is there in going on?"

"There is every reason to go on, to serve ourselves, and God."

"And what about those few in *your* society who don't believe in *your* religion? Or those who disagree with our staying here and with *your* reasons for our coming?"

"By staying here we will be separated from imperfection, impurity and sin. Surely

you must see that I do this for our benefit? Those who disagree will not be stopped from sending a distress signal. However, it would take many years before Earth received it, and many more before a rescue could be attempted. But, should an Earth ship arrive, you could leave, though I wouldn't be accompanying you, and neither would those who agree with me."

"What sort of a life would this be, though?" John pressed, appealing now to the crowd rather than to Vatu. "Separated from Earth and its colonies, from our families and friends..."

"God is our family. If we have faith, we will overcome our adversity."

"I'm sorry, Captain - or is it Reverend? -, I don't share your faith and I don't believe we were brought here for a reason; we are no better, no more special than any others. We had a hull rupture which forced us here, nothing more, nothing less. That this world is extraordinary is little more than a coincidence. And I don't believe a merciful God would enforce His will on us in such a way."

Julia spoke for the first time during the meeting. "Have faith. God and faith are the same, and belief in God will overcome those doubts."

"Fine. Whatever turns you on," John said sarcastically. "But I don't share your belief. What I believe is that both of you feel guilty over the deaths of a dozen people and have concocted this... unbelievable scheme to justify those deaths."

Vatu's face darkened and his voice was taut, shaking with anger as he spoke. "How dare you? I try to help, and you insult me blatantly. Yes, I feel guilt over their deaths - I failed them, it is as simple as that. But I resent any accusation of seeking justification. They died. It happens. Now they are in paradise, with God. And their deaths brought us here."

"I think you embrace death too easily. You cherish it like something precious, nurture it even. But what if you are wrong and there is no heaven, no afterlife? Then every death is meaningless, a waste. We must live now, enjoy what we have, because, either way, one day it will be gone."

"Just because I am religious and believe in an afterlife does not mean I don't value life," Vatu responded perhaps a little too pointedly. "The thought of death is terrifying - but not as much as not existing at all. Facing death is the ultimate test of character. I don't want to die - but if I have to die, I'd like to do it with a bit of pride. That'd be no different whether I was a Christian or not."

The debate raged on and on, and seemed to just deepen the division between the people. Christine listened to the arguments until, finally, she could take no more. She slowly made her way back to the edge of the crowd, and then back to the *Deliverance*.

As she began to pack her possessions - there were not many of them; it was by no means a life of comfort, life on a starship as she had pointed out on numerous occasions - thoughts raced through her mind. Christine had listened to both sides, and found she disagreed with both of them.

While still an atheist, she recognized and respected the belief of the religious -

something John and the others, in her opinion, couldn't and didn't. And the Christians were no better - they forced their views on everyone they met.

Each believed their view was best, and usually wouldn't even listen to anyone else's. They were more similar than they realised.

Christine couldn't live with either, just as she could not agree with either of their practices. Science vs. Religion. It had been like that for centuries, a psychological and often physical battle which surely wouldn't be solved by (almost) 10,000 people stranded on a far-distant planet.

Christine wasn't sure what kind of a life she would have, not being part of either; most likely she would be an outcast. That was fine with her. She'd rather be alone.

Christine finished packing, and left the *Deliverance*. The crowd was still listening to Vatu and John argue; Captain or former-lover, she could side with neither, could agree with neither. Perhaps she should find her 'betrayal' of him sad after two years of faith in John, but she saw it as he who betrayed her not the other way around; it was he who did not listen to reason, after all, he who was as blinded by his faith as Vatu. She shook her head.

Then, with the warm sun beating down on her shoulders, Christine marched off into the desert, turning her back on civilisation.

Once again she was a Walker, completely and utterly alone.

### ***About the Author***

Christopher Levinson is sixteen. He has been a consistent short story writer since he has been in Year two at primary school. He hopes to have a novel published someday in the future. A Christian himself, he means no disrespect by the themes raised in this story. He lives in Sydney, Australia, with a gigantic science fiction collection and his parents. Christopher anxiously awaits the release of Star Wars: Episode 2, a Pat Rafter victory at Wimbledon and the next South African Cricket tour of Australia. He can be reached for comments about this story at [christopherjlevinson@bigpond.com](mailto:christopherjlevinson@bigpond.com)