



**Wish I Were There**

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## WISH I WERE THERE

*"Wernher von Braun actually told me that the spin was a lie—that the premise for space-based weaponry, the reasons that were going to be given, the enemies that we were going to identify—were all based on a lie."*

*Dr. Carol Rosin*

He knew he was on the verge of waking. The puzzle pieces floating through his mind began to fall into place more quickly. He was working on a picture of an enormous thunderhead at sunset. It loomed above a thin red line of desert, and a throb of lightning veined one of its sides. The scene made him think of a postcard, then naturally he thought of Pam. Maybe she'd shown him a card of the cloud, or maybe they saw it on their honeymoon or their travels together before they settled down. Pam. He heard her name in distant thunder, and then the world *exploded* in flame.

Cass Rogers opened his eyes. Silence. He was in a reclining position with his right leg elevated and bent at the knee. It took him a few seconds to remember where he was, and when he did he was surprised to see that the cabin beyond the canopy's plexiglass bubble was lit. The lights spaced around the large gray cylinder of the room glowed softly in their recesses.

A movement caught his attention. He turned his head and saw a man sitting at the control console a few feet away across the curved floor. The man was studying the console's monitor.

That wasn't right. No one else should have been on the ship. Cass wondered what to do but knew that at the moment he couldn't do anything. He was stuck in the pod.

He looked down at the little computer screen by his right hand. The numbers showed his pod atmo was readjusting to a waking state. No red lights blinked in the primary functions, so he touched the screen to check the other systems. All were go.

"Hello."

Cass looked over and saw the man at the console smiling at him. He was small, had wispy blonde hair, and he wore something like a silver jumpsuit with pockets here and there.

"I awakened you early," he said. His voice was muffled by the lid of the pod. "I hope you don't mind."

Cass couldn't place the man's accent. It was as though his lips weren't accustomed to stretching around the words he was mouthing.

Cass touched his computer screen and the pod's canopy lifted away. He tried to speak but couldn't. His throat was too parched. He looked at the condenser attached to the side of the pod's footlocker and saw a couple of cups of water in its beaker. More than anything he wanted to sit up and toss the water down his throat, but first things first. He took a deep breath.

The man at the console said, "I know it will be awhile before you're able to communicate. We'll talk when you're ready."

He turned back to the console's monitor. Cass took another deep

breath and touched his computer screen. His leg began to lower. The pod's mattress was designed to constantly change shape. The movement kept his joints supple and helped prevent skin lesions.

The mattress flattened with a pneumatic hiss and Cass knew the escaping gas would be captured and recycled. The ship was a marvel of biospheric engineering. It collected molecules from the air and either added to them from the ship's store of elements or took away from them for careful preservation. When Cass was asleep in the pod, the gasses in the Vapor stasis system provided nutrients, hydration and oxygen through his skin's pores. Other gasses dissolved excretive toxins and delivered whatever medications were needed. The Vapor provided a sedative too, for the long sleep.

Cass shivered and felt a ripple run down his naked body. His skin tightened into gooseflesh. Power diverted from the nuclear pulse drive heated the cabin and pod, but just barely. He remembered his robe in the footlocker.

The muscle toning needles tugged at him as he struggled to a sitting position. The canoe-shaped pod was skewered on a titanium rod that ran its length, and just then the pod was canted away from the wall. Cass kept himself from falling sideways with a hand to the mattress, and with the other hand he began removing the needles.

There were dozens and it took awhile. After he pulled out the last of them he did some flexing and was pleased to find that the toning system had worked as it was supposed to.

He removed the electrode pads from his temples. The electrodes had been stimulating his brain with puzzles, to keep new neural pathways developing while he was out. He ran a hand through his shoulder-length hair and then his beard and wondered how long he'd been in stasis. It could have been one year or hundreds since the last time he was awake. The pod affected metabolism in odd ways and hair growth was no indicator of how much time had passed. Cass looked at his fingernails. They were an inch long and thick.

He swung his legs over the side of the mattress and nearly tipped backward before he could grab his knees. A moment to make sure of his balance, then he disengaged the pod's gear mechanism. He felt himself swing into alignment with gravity, which he judged to be about three-quarter earth's just then. Prolonged weightlessness was hard on the body, so the ship's jets fired from time to time to spin the ship and create artificial gravity. It would spin for a few weeks at one speed, then another, then another, and the pod rotated occasionally on its rod to reposition the body. The system helped with blood flow and prevented bone deterioration.

Cass scooted to the foot of the mattress and leaned sideways to open his locker. He took out his robe and saw Pam's collage beneath it. He touched the collage, briefly, before he closed the locker and slid out of the pod.

He stood uncertainly. The man at the console glanced at him and

then turned back to the monitor.

Cass felt lightheaded, but he held onto the side of the pod and the giddiness soon passed. He rose up on his toes, to test his calf muscles, then he clenched his buttocks and shifted the weight on his hips. His legs were iffy but seemed to be working okay.

He slipped his robe on, sidled to the end of the pod and took the beaker from the condenser. He gulped half its contents. Almost immediately he could feel himself rehydrating. The Vapor provided just enough H<sub>2</sub>O to keep him alive, and he felt his tissues sucking in the water and itching for more. But after the gulping he slowed down and sipped. He remembered nearly making himself sick with the water when he awoke the last time, about a third of the way through the trip. He'd been asleep more than a hundred years by then and his gas mixture got out of balance. The computer roused him and it was a good thing because while he was working to adjust the mixture he found that his course for the Alpha Centauri system was off. *Way* off. So after he returned the gas levels to where they were supposed to be he programmed a course correction, and when all was well again he went back into stasis.

Cass tried to speak to the man sitting at the console, but he was only able to grunt. His throat muscles were slack from disuse. They burned too. He sipped some more water and forced himself to make humming noises, to give his throat a workout.

The man turned to Cass and Cass saw that his eyes were pale blue above his little smile. "My name is Tristan," he said in his tight-lipped way. "I see from your ship's log that your name is Cass Rogers." He gestured to the console. "Fascinating old technology. I couldn't keep myself from . . . is the word 'snoofing'?"

Cass sipped water, cleared his throat and said, "I . . . umm. Do you . . . Do you mean . . . 'snooping'?"

The man named Tristan seemed to think, then the skin around his eyes crinkled with an intensification of his smile. "Yes," he said, "'snooping.' You'll have to excuse my use of Old English. I uploaded it just before I ported."

"Ported? What's that?" Cass was gaining control of his voice. "Where did you come from?"

"From Ashlar, in the Gotha star system. The one they used to call Alpha Centauri."

"That's where I'm going."

"Yes, I know."

"So am I on course?"

"Yes." Tristan looked around at the cabin. "This is amazing. I never thought I'd actually see a bullet ship." He turned to the computer again and became absorbed in whatever was on the monitor.

Bullet ship, Cass thought. The press began calling them bullets because of the way they created their artificial gravity, by spinning like bullets fired from a rifled barrel. Also, they were shots fired at the Alpha Centauri

system. As close as they could figure that's where the aliens who attacked them came from, so that's where they aimed their retaliation.

Cass sipped water and thought back. He wasn't enlisted at the time of the first attacks. He'd joined the Air Force years before because he couldn't find a decent-paying job, but then after his discharge he was able to land a position with an aerospace company. But before all of that, in the years before the Air Force, times had been hard for him, the same as they'd been for tens of millions in America. There just weren't any jobs. Everyone knew *why* too, but there wasn't much they could do about it. Giant financial institutions had taken over the planet and shifted manufacturing to poor countries. The banks didn't care about the people they left devastated in the process, either. The developed nations all suffered disastrous drops in their standards of living as people were driven out of their homes and off their land. Hunger and despair flourished along with corporate profits, and then, when it seemed things couldn't get any worse, the aliens attacked.

What a horror that was, to see Rio and Shanghai and Miami burning after the initial blasts. The damage was worse than anything done by the asteroids two years before. Cass normally stayed away from television, hated its madhouse clamor, but he watched in silence in his hotel room in Colorado after he learned of those first three strikes. And then he watched the first reports come in about Seattle. Seattle, his home, where Pam was. He turned up the television's sound just in time to hear the reporter say, "It's expected there will be few if any survivors."

Cass opened the footlocker again. He took out the postcard collage and looked at it. He'd kept the collage rather than a photo of Pam as a memento because looking into her face was too painful. But he saw her specter in the collage, in her work, and he remembered how pretty she was when they first met. He was four years older and to him she was the picture of the young bohemian artist with her long black hair and dark, probing eyes. She was about to graduate from college with a degree in art, and when she did they got married and she began moving with her "flyboy" from assignment to assignment. Three years of that and then he was discharged and they settled in Seattle for his new job.

Pam got her teaching certificate and went to work in an elementary school, and she liked to use postcards to stimulate the kids' interest in geography. She taught for a couple of years but then the economy tanked and she was laid off. She couldn't find another teaching position, and she took lesser and lesser jobs until even those dried up.

She stayed busy with her artwork, though. She drew and painted, but she couldn't sell anything, and in time the paintbrushes and charcoal pencils went the way of the job applications. To occupy herself she began spending time with her shoeboxes full of old postcards. It was just nostalgia at first, Pam talking about which of her former students had liked which cards, but as she sank deeper and deeper into her memories Cass became concerned for her state of mind.

Then suddenly one day she announced that she'd come up with an

idea for a new project, and she went to work cutting the cards into little squares and rectangles with a paper cutter. She pasted the scraps together to make collages and called the overall project *Wish I Were There*, a turn of the "wish you were here" phrase that so many people used to write on postcards. Collage followed collage in an adrenaline-fueled gush, and Cass was glad to see Pam rekindle with the sense of purpose that had been snuffed out by the loss of her teaching job.

And the collage work was good. She mixed colorful bits of photographs with postage stamps, ancient time and date cancellations and snippets of scrawled messages. So much information contained in each finished piece, artistically balanced and arranged so the eye crept along in one direction for a while and then veered off in another and eventually came back to the starting point to begin a different journey. The images and postmarks called up memories of places the viewer had visited or heard about, and each time you reapproached a piece it would conjure up different thoughts and memories.

The owner of a local art gallery was wild about the work when Pam took him a portfolio of samples. He wanted to build a show around them but said he would need some larger pieces, so Pam went to work on them and Cass remembered how excited she was when she was finishing the last one. It was huge. You could study it for hours if you wanted, identifying places, examining cancellations and reading handwritten messages. Pam was down to the last square foot of the piece when Cass left to go to Colorado on business.

And then the aliens hit Seattle.

Cass felt a sudden jolt of the old anger, standing there in the cabin of the ship, a strong jolt but just a tiny shard off the monolithic rage he'd felt when he first realized Pam was dead. With her gone he immediately re-upped in the Air Force, thankful to have something to take his mind off her passing. He did deskwork and flew every once in a while, and when the bullet ship program came along he managed to claw his way into it.

Industry was retooled worldwide to deal with the alien menace. Work began on several new space-based weapons systems for defense, and the bullet ships were planned for offense. Cass trained and waited the seven years it took to finish the first of the ships, then he waited to go out with the fifth wave of launches. And that was . . . how long ago?

"What year is this?" he asked the man at the console. Tristan, his name was. He looked at Cass.

"6397."

Cass wondered if he'd heard right.

"Did you say 6397?"

"Yes. Anno Lucis."

"Anno Lucis? I don't know what that means."

"Well, it's also the eleventh year of the reign of the current Beneficant. A very significant year."

"What's a Beneficant?"

Tristan looked stunned. He sat rigid for a moment, then he bowed his head slightly and crossed his forearms over his chest. His cheek muscles drew back too, baring his teeth in a rictus that gave his face the appearance of a skull. The face and X'd forearms made Cass think of a pirate flag with a skull and crossbones on it.

Tristan came out of the pose. He smiled at Cass and said, "Please excuse me. I should have realized you wouldn't know about the Beneficant. You've been asleep a long time."

"So fill me in."

Tristan seemed to rummage through his thoughts for something, then he nodded and said, "'Fill me in.' A quaint colloquialism. As I told you, my knowledge of English is . . . lacking."

"It sounds fine to me. What were you saying about the Beneficant?"

"He is the supreme ruler."

"Of what?"

"Of mankinder."

"You mean mankind?"

"Yes."

"How'd he get to be ruler?"

"He was born to it, as all Beneficants are. The current Beneficant is the third in the line from the illustrious House of Prescott."

"Okay, I'll take your word for it. And it sounds like you've changed calendars, so how long have I been in stasis?"

"More than three hundred and fifty years."

"Three hundred and fifty? Then I must be getting close to the Alpha Centauri system. I mean the Gotha system."

"Yes, you are," Tristan said, still smiling. "As a matter of fact, that's why we detected your ship. The sensors on the new defense perimeter around Gotha B picked you up. We don't have the weapons in place yet, but the sensors work, and once we realized that this was a ship I was sent to investigate." Tristan looked around. "You know, some people think the bullet ships never really existed. It's hard to believe this was built when the Gotha system was still called Alpha Centauri." He looked at Cass. "The A, B and C designations for Gotha's stars were retained, by the way. What we call Gotha B is the one you knew as Alpha Centauri B."

"That's the star I'm going to. The aliens are probably on a planet in orbit around it."

Tristan studied Cass appraisingly, then he lifted an eyebrow and said, "That was remarkably good guesswork your people did. Celestial cartography was very crude back when this ship was launched. I'm surprised you were even able to guess the star had planets orbiting it. And I'm even more surprised you made it here. Your courses were set to disperse you."

"Disperse us? Our ships? I don't understand."

"Well, the ships were part of the Great Deception, the story that sent mankinder out into the stars."

"Buddy, I *still* don't understand what you're talking about. And you're

not supposed to be here, so you'd better start making sense."

Tristan didn't respond. He just smiled his inscrutable little smile and Cass realized he might have to deal with the man. Physically deal with him.

He did a quick analysis of the situation and wished he had a weapon, but he didn't. Apparently Tristan didn't either, so that meant if there was a confrontation it would be hand to hand. Cass felt comfortable with that. He was probably a foot taller, and even out of shape from the long sleep he had a lot more muscle mass. He hoped it wouldn't come to a fight, though. If the man was a threat, maybe he could be controlled through intimidation. Cass put some force behind his voice and said, "I want answers. *Now.*"

Tristan didn't seem to be intimidated. He just smiled and said, "I will answer any question you ask, but first I'll need an additional upload of data."

Cass watched as Tristan took a small black device from a breast pocket of his jumpsuit. The device was thin like a cell phone. He held it to his forehead and closed his eyes. Cass tensed, hoping he hadn't been too hasty in ruling out weapons, then he heard Tristan sigh and saw his eyelids begin to flutter. Whatever the device was it didn't seem to be a weapon.

Cass relaxed and felt his stomach grind with hunger. He drained the water beaker, put it back in place and laid Pam's postcard collage on the pod's mattress.

His legs wobbled a bit as he shuffled across the curved floor to the galley recess. He tore open a food bar, and while he ate he watched Tristan's eyelids twitch. He wondered what the device he held against his forehead could be. Just how much more advanced *was* technology now? Tristan had talked about the ship like it was a museum piece, but it still seemed pretty advanced to Cass.

They solved the design problems of the bullet ships slowly, painstakingly, and then the materials to build them were lifted into orbit around earth. When six ships were finally assembled they launched them in the first wave. It seemed to Cass that his wave would never come, but eventually it did and he remembered the thrill of the launch and the early phase of the trip. The pilots in his group agreed to stay awake until the slingshot at Jupiter, but of course they crapped out long before, like kids falling off to sleep one by one at a slumber party. Novak went into his pod halfway to Mars' orbit, Jackson not long after. Cass was the last of the six to enter stasis, and he assumed all the ships had made it past Jupiter and picked up the speed the maneuver was calculated to add.

They used every trick they could to lay on speed. The aliens possessed faster-than-light technology but humans only had conventional thrusters. Through a stroke of luck they developed nuclear pulse drives not long after the first attacks, and that gave them a way to retaliate. It was a slow retaliation but at least it was *something*, so they built ships with the pulse drives, and Cass knew his must have been firing as programmed because he was approaching the target on schedule.

Tristan sighed again and opened his eyes. Cass finished his food bar. His legs threatened to give out as he shuffled from the galley back to his

pod, but he made it and boosted himself up onto the mattress. He dangled his legs, massaged his knotted thigh muscles and waited for Tristan to speak.

But he didn't say anything. He seemed to be in a daze.

Cass cleared his throat and pointed to the black device. Tristan had dropped the hand holding it into his lap.

"So, what does that thing do?"

No response.

"Hey. Are you okay?"

Tristan blinked, looked at Cass, and smiled. "I'm fine. It takes a moment for the brain to absorb new data."

"Data from that thing you're holding?"

"Yes. It's a universal instructor." Tristan slipped the device back into its pocket. "I selected the history of your era, and now I believe I possess enough knowledge to answer the questions you were asking."

"Good. Then let's start with the time issue. It's been three hundred and fifty years since my launch, right?"

"Three hundred and sixty-two, to be precise."

"And I'm close to Alpha Centauri B? The star you call Gotha B?"

"Correct. At your current rate of speed, you'll be within the system in seventeen earth days."

"Then I'll need to get at the console there, to scan for planets and adjust my course."

"That won't be necessary. I'll set a course that will ensure the ship falls into the sun after we leave."

"Leave? What are you talking about?"

"We'll port to Ashlar, the habitable planet that orbits Gotha B. Or I could take you back to earth if you prefer. I'm authorized to do either. I needed to make sure you were . . . suitable first, and I see you are. So we can go to either Ashlar or earth."

Things had definitely changed while Cass was asleep. He wondered if the other ships made it through to the target and how the war was going. And what the hell was "porting?"

"You said we'll port to Ashlar. I don't know what you mean by 'port.'"

"Teleport. It's . . . It's . . ."

Tristan couldn't seem to put into words what he was thinking. He reached for his universal instructor but Cass stopped him before he could get it out of his pocket.

"No. Just the quick version."

"Well, teleportation is the way we travel now. It's one of the benefits that came from the Great Deception."

"Okay, so we've made some technical advances in the past few hundred years. What's the news on the war?"

"The war?"

"Yes. With the aliens."

"Ah." Tristan thought for a moment, then he said, "I believe an understanding of the Deception would answer many of your questions. Do you want me to tell you about it?"

"Sure. Fill me in."

"Yes," Tristan smiled, "I'll 'fill you in.' And I suppose I should begin with the twenty-first century." He paused and gave Cass a quizzical look. "That would seem like yesterday to you, wouldn't it?"

Cass nodded, impatient. "Yeah. Go on with what you were saying."

"Of course." Tristan adopted a kind of lecturing monotone. "The early part of the twenty-first century was not a good time for mankind. The world was overcrowded with genetic defectives, but fortunately the ancestors of the Beneficant were in a position to deal with the problem. More than two centuries before, they had begun putting in place a system to control earth's finances, and with that and manipulation of the infomedia, they were able to lead mankind into two world wars. Those occurred in the twentieth century, and they resulted in the planet being split evenly between rival economic systems."

"Are you talking about the Cold War?" Cass asked.

"Yes. Do you know something about that period of history?"

"We learned about it in school. Communism versus capitalism. For about fifty years after World War Two those were the two main systems that people lived under, until communism collapsed."

"Indeed. But the collapse of communism was engineered. It was all according to plan." Tristan looked around. "Von Braun talked about it before his death."

"Wehrner von Braun?"

"Yes. Do you know about him?"

"A little. He was a rocket genius. He worked for the Germans during World War Two, then he came to the United States to work for NASA."

Tristan waved a hand at the ship. "This technology is an extension of the work he did. A brilliant man. At any rate . . ." He resumed his monotone. "Just before he died von Braun talked about how the future would unfold. NASA was involved in placing weapons in space at the time, and he said the weapons would eventually be used to unify mankind through a series of threats of increasingly greater magnitude. But the ancestors of the Beneficant knew that people would need to be demoralized before the final drastic step in the process could be taken, so that was the reason for the destruction of the world economy in the twenty-first century. The market disruptions, the loss of jobs, the . . ."

Jobs. Cass thought again of how devastated Pam was when she lost her teaching job. She missed being around kids and began talking about having a child of her own, but Cass convinced her they should wait. Because of the money situation. The dollar was crashing and prices were going through the roof, so they waited, and meanwhile Pam came up with her *Wish I Were There* project. The gallery owner encouraged her and she labored long hours over the collages, hoping to make lots of money so they could

afford a baby.

Tristan was still droning. "...the weapons would target the larger cities and the governments of the world would claim it was an attack by extraterrestrials, then freedom of dissent would be outlawed and..."

"Wait a minute," Cass interrupted. "Did you just say the space weapons were used to target the cities?"

"Yes."

"Our space weapons?"

"Yes. As von Braun foretold, the satellites put into place by NASA to deal with the communist threat were later used to fight international terrorism. And then one of the space-based cannons simulated the asteroid strike. After that the heat weapons were used for what mankind was told was an attack by extraterrestrials."

"So then the attack on earth, the destruction of the cities, that *wasn't* done by aliens? *People* did that?"

"Of course."

Pam, Cass thought, his head swimming. Pam wasn't killed by aliens after all. She was killed by...by whom? NASA? The government? Cass checked his rising anger, took a deep breath and asked Tristan to continue.

"The attacks were intended to unify mankind," Tristan said in his lecture voice, "and the plan worked. The heaters targeted the larger metropolitan areas first, where people had been driven by financial hardship, and then the smaller cities were destroyed. Governments across the planet pledged their support in the fight against the alien menace, and they never questioned the global military command that the ancestors of the Beneficant put in place to do the job." Tristan smiled. "The Great Cleansing. Earth's genetic defectives culled. No one thought to ask at the time why northern Europe was suffering relatively light damage, but naturally there was a reason." Tristan touched his wispy blonde hair, then he pointed to Cass's head and Cass wasn't sure what the gesture meant. He reached up and pulled a handful of hair around in front of his face so he could see it. The hair was greasy and matted, but a dark blonde. Tristan said, "They must have been truly stupid, the people of the southern regions. They deserved elimination."

Cass's anger mounted. No wonder the U.S. suffered such heavy damage, with its amalgam of races. Even he was a mutt—English, Mexican and Greek—but Tristan must not have known that. He might have sabotaged the pod's life support system if he had, and they wouldn't be having their conversation.

"Okay," Cass said, his voice nearly a growl. "I get it. People accepted the alien story at the time because they were stupid, or terrified, and the world's population was reduced. But why am I here now, in this ship? How was *this* part of the plan?"

"Oh, well..." Tristan smiled broadly. "This is the ingenious part of the Great Deception. The ancestors of the Beneficant knew that people would need a *specific* hope to cling to before fully committing to the war

against the aliens, so they offered them the bullet ship program." Tristan shook his head. "Everyone must have known it would take generations for the ships to reach their destination, but they supported the program anyway. 'Grasping at straws' I think the term was. And they focused their attention on the building of the ships as the world's population was reduced by eighty percent in the seven years before the first launch. They supported the implementation of drastic new social control laws, too. The military council said it needed a stable world society in order to fight the aliens, so people gave away their freedoms and pinned their hopes for the future on the bullet ships."

Cass had been listening, stupefied by the enormity of what was being described, but when Tristan paused and shook his head again he pulled his thoughts together. "Yes," he said, feeling a sudden urge to be understood. "That's it exactly. We pinned our hopes on the bullet ships. They were the best way we could think of to strike back at the aliens. We weren't capable of light speed travel, but we built the fastest ships we could, even though we knew it would take hundreds of years for them to have their effect."

"A perfectly natural reaction, and I think it's *good* that the bullet ships were built. Some say it was wasted effort, but without the program we wouldn't have developed the Vapor stasis system, nuclear pulse drives, and perhaps not even instantaneous teleportation. That discovery grew out of work done on the bullet ships not long after they were launched."

"Not long after they were launched? Then why didn't you come aboard sooner?"

"Because the ships were redirected into deep space after they left the solar system, and no one kept track of them. They weren't needed after they served their symbolic purpose." Tristan was still sitting at the computer console. He glanced at its monitor. "But I see from your log that you awakened and corrected your course."

"Yes. And that's something else I don't understand. If we were being sent on fake missions, then why were the ships rigged with atmosphere and sleeping pods?"

"Because all of earth was watching as work on the program progressed. There was keen interest in it, and the ancestors of the Beneficant couldn't just make the ships *appear* to be real, they had to *be* real. So the scientists built functioning ships and, like I said, it was good that they did, when you consider what was accomplished."

"You mean the scientific advances, the population reduction and the world going into dictatorship?"

"Yes," Tristan smiled. "Exactly."

"You know that word? Dictatorship?"

"Of course. It was applied to the military council and then later to the Beneficants."

"Then how can . . . How can you be so casual about what you've just described to me? Doesn't it make you *angry* that no telling how many people were killed just for . . . for what? For some dictatorship based on a sick idea

about how humans should be allowed to evolve?"

"Why should it make me angry? There are still plenty of people."

But not Pam, Cass thought. He imagined her blood turning to ash from one beat of her heart to the next, and he felt his own heart lurch. His blood *pounded* through his veins.

"Life is good now," Tristan went on. "People are happy, no one's hungry, and we have enough time to do things like develop Ashlar for the Beneficant."

"Ashlar." Cass struggled to keep his breathing under control. "You said it's . . . it's habitable, right?"

"Yes," Tristan said, but Cass only half listened as he described the hundred-year project to tweak Ashlar's atmosphere to earth specifications. Cass thought of all the people who'd died during the war. The media was reporting thirty to forty percent of earth's population killed by the time the first wave of bullet ships went out, but Tristan had said the figure was eighty percent. So Cass and all the other survivors were lied to. And there were lies within lies. He always knew the media was owned by the rich and powerful and they used it to advance their causes, but he also assumed that they were motivated by money. They did what they did for profit and that was as far as you needed to look into their reasoning. But profit wasn't the incentive at all. The money was just a red herring, sold to him and others as the motivating force because greed was something people could relate to. Now he understood that the *real* motivation of the ones in charge was to kill. *Why* they wanted to kill he would probably never know, but at least he'd figured out the reason for the chaos of his times—the people running things in the twenty-first century had created turmoil so they could kill without being noticed.

His mind came back to what Tristan was saying. "The atmosphere is fine now and they're almost finished with the palace. The Beneficant will be using Ashlar as a getaway. He needs to stay close to earth, but he can't really enjoy himself in the pleasuredomes on the moon, and Mars is just a business center. Ashlar will be a nice retreat for him. I just hope the planet's defenses being incomplete won't present a problem."

"That's right. You said the sensors picked me up but the weapons aren't in place yet."

"Yes. And the Beneficant is due to arrive at Ashlar next week. He really has no choice in the matter, because of the timing, but I'm somewhat concerned for his safety."

"What does timing have to do with his arrival?"

"It's important because all major activities have to be carried out according to certain times and dates. The Beneficant must set the final stone in the palace on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, earth Grench time. That's the only time he can dedicate the palace and rename the planet. It's currently called 'Rough Ashlar,' but it will be officially renamed 'Perfect Ashlar' as the final stone is set."

"And he'll do that next week?"

"Yes. The day after he arrives. Then he'll spend a month relaxing. He'll study the architecture of the palace and enjoy the gardens. He especially likes gardens."

A germ of a plan began to sprout in Cass's thinking.

"Didn't you say this ship will enter the Gotha B system in seventeen days, Tristan?"

"Yes. That's when it will reach the orbit of the star's outermost planet."

"And tell me, when I woke up and made the course correction, was it pretty accurate?"

"Oh, yes, *very* accurate. With just two more adjustments at this point the ship could be put on a course to intercept Ashlar. And at this rate of speed, and taking into account the rotation of the planet, I calculate it would hit darkside just after the Beneficant watched the sunset eighteen earth days from now." Tristan smiled to himself, as if picturing the Beneficant looking up at the darkening sky.

Cass knew what he had to do. He would make the couple of changes Tristan mentioned and aim the ship at Ashlar. But until he had an opportunity to do that, he would need to keep Tristan from setting a course for the sun.

He was still perched on the edge of his mattress. The knots were gone from his thigh muscles, so he slid out of the pod and, not taking his eyes off Tristan, he lifted his leg to the right. A half-dozen side raises, then he did a half-dozen to the left. His legs felt stronger. He put his hands on his hips and stretched backward. It might be necessary to sprint the short distance to the console to gain control of it, and he wanted to be ready.

Tristan asked what he was doing.

"Just limbering up. I've been asleep too long."

Cass dropped into a squat and heard both his knees pop. He'd been among the oldest of the bullet ship pilots, and some of the others said they hoped he would be able to get out of his pod when it came time to guide the ship in. Novak even called him Rip van Kamikaze.

"What's a kamikaze?" Tristan asked as Cass straightened up. And froze. Could Tristan read minds? Was modern technology *that* advanced?

"It's . . . just a word. Why do you ask?"

"Because it was used twice in my history upload, but I'm not sure what it means."

Cass searched Tristan's bland, innocent face and decided that no, he couldn't read minds. His question had been mere coincidence.

"Well, Japan's suicide pilots in World War Two were called kamikazes, then later some people used the word in connection with the bullet ship program."

"So you understood that you were going on a suicide mission?"

"Yes."

"And no one forced you? The historical record is vague on that point."

It would be, Cass thought. No dictatorship could have people contemplating self-sacrifice for a worthy cause.

"I wasn't forced into the mission. As a matter of fact, I had to beat out a lot of competition. There were hundreds of applicants for the piloting positions, maybe thousands."

"But that seems . . . what would you have called it? 'Loony'?"

"No," Cass said, "we may have been a lot of things, but we weren't loony. Every pilot had to go through psychological testing to make sure of that. There had to be zero possibility we would lose our nerve when we were awakened to guide the ships in. In the end the ones that got chosen were mostly just people who lost loved ones in the attacks and wanted to do a service to humanity by striking back at the aliens. The enemy."

"But now you see that there are no aliens."

Though there are still enemies, Cass wanted to say, but didn't. Tristan wouldn't understand. How could he? He hadn't lost anyone in the phony war.

"Did you lose a loved one in the attacks?" Tristan asked.

For a moment Cass reconsidered on the mind reading, then once again he came to the conclusion that Tristan's question had been coincidence. He was merely intuitive. If he were really able to read minds he would be doing something to stop Cass's plan to target Ashlar.

"Yes," Cass said softly, "I lost someone. I lost my wife."

"I'm sorry for you. It's too bad she didn't live to see the world today. It's a much better place."

"Is it?"

"Oh, yes. There's no poverty or discomfort, and we've made great strides in science and medicine."

"But you live in a dictatorship."

"Yes. We've already discussed that."

"And you don't have a problem with it? Living under a dictator?"

"No. Why should I?"

"Well, you say there's no discomfort, but could you call the Beneficant a murdering bastard if you wanted to?"

Tristan tensed up and went through his odd little skull and crossbones ritual again, but this time his mouth didn't return to its usual smile when his face relaxed from the rictus. He looked slightly troubled.

"So if you challenged the Beneficant," Cass pressed, "you would experience discomfort."

Tristan didn't answer. He bit down on his lower lip.

"*There*," Cass said, knowing he'd made his point. "Now you understand what a dictatorship is."

"But why should I mind if the Beneficant is a dictator?" Tristan asked. "The world that he and his ancestors made is perfect."

"Perfect for you, maybe, but what about for the billions who died so it could be created?"

Tristan started to answer but again bit his lip. Cass supposed that he probably wouldn't be a bad sort, if he had all the facts laid out in front of him. He picked up Pam's collage and walked over to the console.

He handed the collage to Tristan and then stood behind his chair. "Look at the way the world used to be," he said, and Tristan bent his head to study the collage.

Cass studied it too, over Tristan's shoulder, and he saw the snippet of a photo of the Grand Canyon, then the Eiffel Tower, then the Liberty Bell. Pam had liked to put people in the collages, and a dozen faces smiled up at him. One cutting showed two young girls on an amusement park ride screaming with glee as they zipped past the camera in their gaudy little spaceship car. Cass leaned forward and placed a long fingernail on the block that showed the kids. "Look here," he said, and as he spoke he suddenly saw the snip of picture differently. He thought of what he'd just learned from Tristan about Wehrner von Braun and his foreknowledge of humanity's fate. Von Braun left Germany while the stench of rotting corpses from Hitler's purges still fouled the planet's air, and he went to work for NASA, one of the most secretive organizations on earth. He helped put men on the moon but he also helped continue the Nazi plan to purge the planet. As kids around the world rode amusement park rocket cars.

"Their hair is so dark," Tristan said, referring to the girls at the end of Cass's finger. "I don't suppose they survived the cleansing."

"No," Cass said, straightening up. "I don't suppose they did."

Cass remembered some of the crotchety old men from his youth telling him that the Nazis won World War Two because their ideas survived. They'd been right. Von Braun went to work for NASA, humanity was culled, and now Tristan spoke of it all with casual acceptance.

Tristan set the collage aside on the console and lifted a hand to the monitor. Cass asked what he was doing.

"It's time to divert the ship."

Cass made a fist and started to coldcock Tristan from behind, but he didn't. He might need his help to set the course for Ashlar.

Tristan chuckled. "Such old technology, but I believe I can work it. I managed to disengage your pod from sleep mode. But this . . . this will be more difficult."

"Let me do it," Cass said.

Tristan turned and looked at him.

Cass shrugged. "Just tell me what you want me to do, and I'll enter the commands."

"Yes," Tristan nodded, "perhaps that would be best. I don't want to make a mistake."

They traded places, and when Cass got settled at the console he touched the monitor here and there and pulled up a representation of the Gotha system. It showed Gotha A, B and C, but no planets because at launch time they weren't sure what to program in. Cass pecked at the screen. His long fingernails made a clacking sound. He had to undo a couple of mistakes but was finally able to create a representation of Ashlar orbiting Gotha B.

Tristan let out a delighted little gasp when the planet appeared.

"That's like the games our children play!"

"But is it accurate?" Cass asked. "I mean, is Ashlar in its proper orbit?"

"No, it . . . May I?"

Cass looked at Tristan and saw that he was beaming with excitement.

"I watched you work the system. I think I can correct the picture."

Cass stood and let Tristan take the seat, but he followed his actions closely. He could stop him in less than two seconds if he tried to divert the ship toward the sun.

But he didn't try. His thin fingers stabbed at the monitor and he adjusted Ashlar's distance from the sun, tilted its plane of orbit, and brought its rate of orbit and rotation up to speed. He smiled at Cass when he was finished.

"So that's accurate now?" Cass asked.

"Yes. This is fun. Do you want me to add the other planets in the system? We have time."

"No, thanks," Cass said, and he knocked him out with a punch to the side of the head.

Tristan slumped out of the chair and fell to the floor. Cass grabbed the collar of his jumpsuit and dragged him to the pod. He put him inside and closed the lid, then he went back to the console and activated the pod's Vapor system. Tristan would be kept sedated for the duration.

Cass spent two hours analyzing the orbit of Ashlar before he laid in a course to intercept it. Tristan had been right about it taking only two adjustments, but Cass triple-checked the new course, then he triple-checked again. Like Tristan said, the ship would strike the dark side of the planet in eighteen days.

When he was satisfied all was in order, Cass sat back in his chair and stared at the computer monitor. He remembered watching them build the ships. Tons and tons of titanium, lead and depleted uranium were boosted into space for each vessel, and aerodynamic nose cones as big as grain silos were fashioned out of the materials. Behind each cone were a cabin and then an engine. His ship was a bullet, but a massive one, designed to crash into Ashlar's atmosphere at over eight million miles per hour and release more explosive power than anything else the human mind could think of nearly four hundred years before. He could probably calculate what the megatonnage of the explosion would be when the ship hit the planet's surface, but why bother? He already knew the Beneficant would be caught in the blast wave after the ship struck, which meant he would die. Unless he managed to teleport away. But even if he escaped, his precious vacation planet would be rendered unusable for a long, long time.

Cass scratched at his beard and wondered what the hell had gone wrong back on earth. How could they have been so deceived?

He picked up Pam's collage and studied it. Strange, he thought, how she was still communicating with him over hundreds of years of time and light years of distance, expressing to him in artistic form that she longed for what used to be. "Wish I were there," she was saying, but not there in the

physical places shown in the patchwork bits of cardboard. She meant she wanted to be back in a more innocent time, before awakening to the knowledge that her world was such a savage place.

Cass felt tears sting his eyes for the first time in centuries. They welled up and blurred the image of the collage. At least Pam had been spared from learning about Tristan's world. She would have been aghast at his unquestioning acceptance of genocide, aghast that humanity had evolved into or reverted to a beast that devoured its young. The whole concept was so . . . alien.

Yes, Cass thought, aliens did exist, and some of them were in the old Alpha Centauri system like the world had been told. And soon he would descend on them with one of the most crushing blows humanity could deliver.

Eighteen more days to travel, and in that time he would compose a message for mankind's descendants. He would include a warning against dictatorship and suggest some actions, and then he would beam the message out as he entered Ashlar's atmosphere. With luck it would be picked up and maybe those who heard it would begin to question their despotic system.

Cass smiled, much like Tristan had when picturing the Beneficant standing in his garden eighteen sunsets away. Cass smiled for the same reason and imagined the supreme ruler enjoying the spectacle of the emerging stars, only, in Cass's mind he would notice a sudden reversal of the slow slide into night. One moment the clouds streaking the sky would be darkening toward a coagulated blood red, the next they'd whiten like old scars on the face of a righteous, cleansing fury.