

Artifacts

by Jerry Oltion

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The worst part was the drowning. No matter how many times he did it, when the gee pod began to fill with oxylene and Brian felt the warm, neutrally buoyant acceleration fluid lapping at his ears and then at his cheeks and finally at his nose, he screamed loud enough to wake the passengers in cryo. But it only echoed in his tiny sealed tank, and since his ears were already awash and gurgling he didn't hear it all that well himself.

"Good," the comp said, as it always said. "One more, please. Empty your lungs completely." He could hear that just fine, since it came in through the bone phone in his jaw.

He obliged it. No problem. By then the oxylene was up past his nostrils anyway, and there was only one thing to do. If he held his breath he would just choke longer.

So he screamed all his air away, flattened his lungs as much as possible, and then while his mouth was still open in that primal expression of terror... he breathed in.

Oxylene's density was the same as the human body, but it had the viscosity of starlight. The stuff slid right down. Plus it was supercharged with oxygen, so it hit like jet fuel. Brian gasped a whole lungfull in shock, blew most of it back out to splash against the curved wall of his tank, then sucked in another more normal breath. It tasted a little metallic, like water stored in an aluminum pitcher, but after a few breaths he hardly noticed it. The sound was worse. His pulse beat like a drum in his ears, and would until the acceleration was over and he could get out of the tank.

"Are you comfortable?" the comp asked.

He pinched his nose and blew the last of the air out of his sinuses through the shunt installed in his ear. He also belched and farted and blew bubbles out of a few other special orifices most people didn't have. He couldn't leave air anywhere inside of him. At five hundred gees, a gas pocket the size of a ping-pong ball could kill.

"Captain?"

His voice wouldn't work now that his throat was full of fluid, so he reached up through the warm currents and tapped the talker panel in front of him. It was an easy arm's reach; his tank was less than a meter in diameter. The panel had been above him a moment earlier. He hadn't moved, but up and down ceased to mean anything once he was afloat. That was the whole point of the tanks. He pressed the green "yes" button in the glowing panel and settled back for launch.

"Crew are secure," the comp told him. "Passengers are secure. Cargo is foamed." The passengers didn't get gee pods. It was too expensive to do that for everyone, and too dangerous. Only the captain and his crew of four stayed awake during the trip. People who weren't needed on the way were frozen for transport, then sealed in dry ice bodymolds and slotted into cubbies. The cargo was just stacked and sprayfoamed into place. The boxes weren't going anywhere, and it was the shipper's problem if the internal packing didn't hold up to the thrust.

Brian pushed the "proceed" button on his panel, then lowered his arm to its rest. Theoretically it could have hovered over his head during launch, the oxylene holding it perfectly balanced, but he wasn't that trusting. A slight difference in density between the working fluid and his body, and his arm could suddenly weigh half a ton. Of course if there was an imbalance he'd probably die from internal hemorrhaging

anyway, but he didn't want to slap himself in the face first.

"Launch in ten," the comp said. "Nine." And so on down to zero.

Then the hydrogen bomb went off.

The walls of his tank flexed under the stress. The lights that ringed the inside of it flickered. One burned out. Brian hoped that was the worst of the damage to the ship, but he could only see a small, unfocused oval of the control room through his tiny peep hole. A big window would compromise the tank's strength too much.

There must not have been much else, however, because a few seconds later another bomb went off. Then another. And another. And another. Brian spent the time watching his life flash before his eyes, trying to force the subjective movie to dwell on the good bits. It never did. He got flashes of his schoolmates teasing him for believing in Santa Claus, and of ex-lovers telling him he wasn't adventurous enough for them.

If only they could see him now. Riding a bombship built partly out of alien technology--technology left for humanity like presents under a tree--and risking his life with every blast.

He felt the urge to pray. Years of indoctrination died hard, but he fought it down.

Fortunately the acceleration didn't last long. Within a few minutes the ship was moving at four percent the speed of light. Still a hundred years to Alpha Centauri at this velocity, but fast enough to cross the solar system in five and a half days.

They were going the other direction. Straight up out of the plane of the ecliptic toward Polaris. Only fifty AU, a mere fraction of the distance to the North Star, but even so by the time they got there the sun would be just a bright speck in the night behind them.

This was Brian's sixth visit in as many months. He was the person who had first set foot on the Artifact, and he'd been on every trip to it since, ferrying up scientists to study it. They had a fair sized team there now--fifteen people--and they were bringing seven more.

When the bombs stopped exploding, the comp said, "Acceleration complete. Are you ready to drain your tank now?"

He pushed "yes," and the oxylene slipped away as quickly as it had flooded in. Air jets forced the last of it out; there was no gravity now to help it drain away. He exhaled as much of it as he could in one breath, then coughed out the rest in involuntary spasms as his lungs filled with air again. When he recovered his composure a bit he said, "Open the door," and the computer popped the seal.

He had to push it away himself. Hydraulic machinery that could survive the acceleration would weigh too much, and would trap him if it failed. Bombships were built simple and rugged. The tank was small enough to brace himself in, so it was no problem to open the door anyway.

Fortunately there was plenty of power for hot water. He washed away the last of the oxylene in his zero-gee shower, donned his bright blue Captain's uniform, and bounced along the central corridor to check on the crew.

Marlene had already showered and dressed. She was wearing the green coverall of the general crew. Pierre was just emerging from his shower; he snagged a towel from his personal bin and floated in the air before them, toweling off without any trace of modesty.

"So did we lose anybody?" he asked, and in the same breath, "How much work have we got?"

Brian didn't see Sharrol or Dave, but the computer would have told him if anyone had died. Of course if any of the cryo passengers had shifted and broken, the crew wouldn't know until they open the cubbies, but that didn't seem to be Pierre's concern. He apparently just wanted to know if he'd have to do any extra work to fill in for anyone.

"We all made it," Brian told him. He wanted to say something about his attitude, but he didn't. They all reacted to danger in their own way. Pierre had been this way on the flight back home from the Artifact last month, too.

He nodded and took a green coverall from the bin. Sharrol and Dave came in while he dressed; they glistened from more than just the oxylene. They showered together, toweled each other off, and dressed, then the five crewmembers made their way out into the ship, looking for damage.

They found the usual broken equipment, but nothing more. Just enough to keep them busy with repairs while the ship coasted out to their destination. To Brian it seemed a hell of a way to fly, but when they were robbing technology from random sources they couldn't necessarily get a smooth marriage.

* * *

After repairs it was back into the tanks for deceleration. Boom, boom, boom, and they were at rest relative to the Artifact. They'd stopped two hundred thousand miles to the side of it, since they didn't want to use the main drive any closer than that, but from there it was a relatively easy jaunt across the gap. Like Earth to the Moon. Piece of cake.

Pierre piloted them in using a more conventional rocket engine. Brian watched through the porthole--a heavily reinforced window only a foot across, the biggest one on the ship--as they approached the Artifact. That was what the tabs had been calling it, as if it were the only one, but in truth the Solar System was lousy with artifacts. The place was four billion years old, after all, and the galaxy was full of life. Had been, anyway. It apparently came and went, usually on the wings of religion or warfare, judging by the records left behind. Explorers had identified fourteen separate waves of expansion, involving at least thirty races. All of whom left their garbage behind. And a few of whom left treasures.

This one looked like a treasure. It certainly looked alien enough to contain something humanity hadn't come up with on its own. It was mostly a spaghetti pile of tubes, each about fifty feet across with an occasional swelling to accommodate large machinery. Some of the tubes were habitat for winged serpentine monsters about ten feet tall (long dead, fortunately--or unfortunately, depending on a person's point of view), but the rest were just a warren of passages full of stuff. Like most artifacts, however, nobody knew what any of it was intended to do. They had learned with the Phobos station not to just push buttons at random, so the team studying this one was taking their time here, looking at things closely.

But even mistakes made in haste could have interesting consequences. Phobos made a much more beautiful set of rings than it ever had a moon.

The people they had left behind on their last trip were glad to see them again. A supply ship meant fresh faces, fresh equipment, and best of all, fresh vegetables. After six months on an isolated station, Brian had had people offer sex for a good crisp apple.

These scientists weren't quite that glad to see their supply ship, at least not overtly. Brian imagined later on most of his crew would get lucky, but the dozen or so people crowded around the airlock when they arrived were all fully clothed and much more interested in showing off what they had accomplished since the ship was last there.

The lead xenologist, a small, energetic woman named Julie, shoved a U-shaped device into Brian's hands. A boomerang? No, it was a headset. A massive one. He recognized it from when he was there the first time, on his own and poking through the Artifact in a spacesuit with a headlamp. There had been racks of them in many of the rooms he had entered; they were one of the things that had convinced him this place would be worth investigating further. "Turn it on," Julie said.

"How?" he asked. She pointed at a rough spot on one side. He wondered why she didn't switch it on herself, but it looked simple enough so he pressed his thumb into the spot.

Suddenly he was flying through the air. For a second he thought the headset was pulling him through the airlock vestibule, but then he realized he wasn't even in the airlock. He was back on Rockaway Station, in Lunar orbit, skydiving down its ten-mile-long central axis in the nude. And he was female. She was exulting in the moment; everyone was looking at her. She commanded the attention of the whole colony. Soon she would command their lives. She reached up to cup her breasts seductively, and suddenly he was back in the Artifact vestibule, himself again. The motion of his hands had broken the connection.

The headset was a virtual reality generator. A good one--he hadn't even had to put it on his head--but nothing fundamentally new. Brian wondered at the program Julie had chosen to run for him; was this

some new way to proposition someone? If so, shouldn't she have given it to Pierre? They had been practically inseparable on the last trip. But even if she was after Brian now, it hadn't worked. He was left with only a mild annoyance at her presumption and an uncomfortable feeling that he'd glimpsed something a bit too personal. Who would guess that Julie had an urge toward megalomania? "It's polite to warn a person before you switch their gender," he said, handing the alien device back to her.

She didn't apologize. "Wasn't it great?" she asked. "The bandwidth is better than anything we've seen before. I think it engages the entire nervous system."

"How did you record it?" he asked. She obviously hadn't been on Rockaway recently.

"That's the amazing part. That was a memory. I just remembered it while the VR wedge was running, and it picked up all that detail."

He wondered what aliens from the distant past were doing with virtual reality equipment tuned to the human nervous system. He wondered how distant this particular station's past might be. All the others they'd found had been millions, if not billions, of years old, but people had always suspected that newer ones existed. Earth history was full of circumstantial evidence. "Have you established an age for any of this yet?" he asked.

Julie shook her head. "Not for sure, but it can't be very old. Most of the gadgetry still works."

"Then don't push any buttons while I'm here," he said. She laughed; obviously she thought he was kidding.

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They formed a pass-it-on line from the ship to the Artifact living quarters. It wasn't as easy as on a human-built station. Normally you only needed to put one person at every corner and float things down the corridors from person to person, but here it was all curves so they needed people every few dozen feet. But they managed it, even pulling the new scientists out of their cubbies and stacking them in the on-site med freezer to await thawing. That would be a long process, and the warm bodies had already worked up a good appetite, so they left the others frozen for the moment and had their big welcome dinner.

"So what else have you found here?" Brian asked as they sat down in the half-gee section of the rotating lifestream. Most of the long tubes that made up the Artifact could rotate; they spun longitudinally, flexing like something alive so they could maintain their curved topology even while in motion, and they had frictionless collar-joints so different sections could spin at different rates. The investigators had only run a couple of them up to speed to use as a cafeteria. Humanity had adapted pretty well to zero gee in the hundred years or so they'd been out in it, but people still liked a little gravity to hold down their food while they ate, and one thing they'd never discovered among all of the alien gadgets littering the Solar System was an artificial gravity generator. Nor a faster-than-light starship. The more they looked at the way the various aliens had lived and traveled, the less likely either one seemed.

Julie ticked off on her fingers the discoveries her team had made. "Yet another high-temperature superconductor, this one good up to twelve hundred degrees. An airgel packing foam stronger than solid steel. A polymer that we think was food when they brought it here, but it makes a great glue now. And the VR device I showed you. We think they're actually external memories."

"Not religious artifacts?" Brian asked.

She rolled her eyes and he grinned to show her he was kidding. Archaeologists used to claim everything from figurines to soup bowls were religious artifacts. It evidently sounded more interesting than the mundane truth. But when dealing with alien races, even the mundane could be pretty exciting, so they'd quit using the religious interpretation to mean "we don't know."

Besides, there were plenty of artifacts that obviously were of religious origin. Aliens were no different from humans in that regard. But if Julie had stumbled across any of those, Brian's ship would have carried a theologian this trip.

So he asked, "Were there any alien memories left in any of them?"

She glanced at one of the other scientists, and a flicker of communication passed between them. "Nothing comprehensible," she said.

Sharrol asked, "What happens when you access one?"

Again that brief eye contact, then the other scientist said, "When I tried it I spent a week staring at my navel before I came out of it. Anton disappeared into the warren and hasn't been seen since."

"You *lost* him?"

Julie shrugged. "There are fifteen of us. We searched as far as we could, but the rest of the station isn't heated or pressurized. He couldn't have survived long in there even in a spacesuit."

"Then you should have found him." Brian couldn't believe her attitude. He'd thought Pierre was the only one who thought that way.

A little testily, she said, "You're welcome to go have a look yourself if you want."

He planned to. The ship wasn't scheduled to return for a week; he wanted another look at the Artifact. He hadn't had a chance to poke around since he'd first come here, and he felt responsible for everyone's presence. If he'd said no, this was just another dead Outie station, it might have remained undisturbed for another geological epoch or two. But it was a new design, probably built by a new race, and it was full of nifty new stuff, so he'd called in the vultures.

Now he wondered if that was such a good idea. Nothing overt made him question it, but he'd learned to trust the back of his neck, and it was definitely tingling. Something didn't feel right about Julie's story. For one thing, neither she nor her companion looked like people who had spent a week in a coma after playing with alien tech. They weren't afraid enough.

* * *

After dinner he set out to find out why. Julie tried to keep him at the party, but he brushed her off and wandered the station. He explored the corridors that had already been pressurized first; no sense making himself uncomfortable until he'd seen what was close at hand.

The spaghetti tubes wound around one another apparently at random. They were filled with living quarters, storage rooms, open-air piles of machinery, and bare patches of dirty floor that might have once held living things. Paths wound through it all, and portals occasionally connected one tube to another when they touched. It would have been easy to get lost. The right-hand rule for finding one's way out of a maze would be useless there.

And so would any kind of search pattern Brian could imagine. Unless he stationed a watcher at every portal and examined the tube from end to end, checking every building along the way--a job for an army--a person could never catch someone who wanted to stay hidden. For that matter, Brian wasn't sure there was only one tube. Two of them coiled up in a heap would have looked pretty much like one.

The place was silent. Everyone else was off celebrating in the commons. Brian drifted along like a fish over a reef, occasionally pushing off with a finger or a toe when he approached a wall, or pulling himself inside a building when he got the whim to investigate something closer. He saw lots of ordinary alien stuff: benches and beds and tables were pretty much universal. He saw lots of incomprehensible stuff as well, but most of it looked pretty innocuous. Artwork, sculpture, maybe their equivalent of coffee makers. It was obvious that this was once living space for a lot of aliens; not just an outpost. He wondered if they'd been fleeing one of the wars elsewhere in the galaxy. Or maybe they'd been troops.

He found a few weapons. That wasn't disconcerting; every race they'd studied had weapons. These looked like simple microwave lasers--masers--though it took a moment to find the business end. These aliens had unusual hands. Brian resisted the urge to test fire one, remembering Phobos. But then he saw what was obviously a power gauge along the side of the emitter and he realized its energy pack was long dead. So the Artifact was at least old enough for batteries to drain. That would be about a thousand years if these aliens used the same battery technology found in other outposts. Julie must have had to recharge the memory gadget to make it work.

The tubes wound around and around each other, but after a while Brian realized there was a definite

direction to them. It was a subconscious feeling, and he wondered where it came from, but he knew he was heading somewhere so he drifted onward, following the subliminal cues, and he eventually came to an amphitheater. It was in a section of the spaghetti tube designed to rotate for gravity; it wasn't rotating now, but there were benches arranged in semicircular rows. Brian wondered why the aliens hadn't put the amphitheater in a zero-gee section where everybody could get a good view, but he figured whatever they watched here must have required gravity. It hadn't taken long, apparently; the benches looked uncomfortable. They were set farther apart than human design would make them, too, independent corroboration that these aliens had been bigger than humans. There was a dais down at the bottom with what looked like a stubby podium in the middle of it, but when he floated closer he saw it was a bed of some sort. It was designed for a ten foot winged monster to lie down on--on its back.

Odd, he thought. Their limbs came out from the sides and bent downward like gila monsters', and their wings folded up behind them; they would have been almost helpless on their backs.

Then he noticed the gutters around the edge of the dais. For bathing? But he saw no water source. And the gutters didn't empty into a drain, but only into a basin. So whatever the fluid involved, there mustn't have been much of it.

Blood? The thought came unbidden, and suddenly with the clarity of a hallucination Brian saw a person strapped there, struggling as he plunged a knife into their chest. He flinched back, disgusted with himself, not just for the image but his reaction to it. For a second there he'd been excited.

He shook his head as if he could dislodge the image, and pulled himself closer to the table again. Trying to be charitable, he thought perhaps it was an operating theater for training medical students. A little examination revealed a shelf below the bed on the back side of the dais, where someone facing the audience could easily reach it, and floating behind a net to keep it in place he found a stone knife. Double edged. Quite sharp. But not delicate enough for surgery.

They were hundreds of millions of miles from the nearest rock. There were much better materials to make a knife from anyway. Brian could only think of one reason to use a stone knife on a helpless subject in front of an audience, and he didn't like it.

Nor did he like the hundreds of headsets in a rack behind the altar. He gingerly removed one, avoiding the thumb-switch, and examined it closely. There was no way to tell what was stored inside, but he could guess. Either the memories of the victim or the memories of the congregation, and either one made his skin crawl.

Now that he held the device in his hand he saw a tiny amber light glowing from its apex. The power gauge read fully charged.

He flung it away with all his strength. It smashed against the wall above the farthest row of seats. Pieces of plastic, or whatever it was made of, sprayed outward and tumbled back into the room.

He snatched another one to send after the first, but he stopped with it still in his hand. How could it have power?

He looked at the others. The first twelve were lit. Counting the one he smashed, and the one Julie surprised him with, there was one for every person on board before this last supply ship arrived, but only if they had been activated after the missing scientist, Anton, disappeared.

Or maybe *while* he disappeared. Considering the flashback Brian had just experienced, that seemed pretty likely. He must have gotten that image through Julie's headset along with the memory of flying.

What else had she planted in his brain?

* * *

He heard a noise from outside, and immediately jumped for the ceiling. Nobody thought to look up when they entered a room, especially if they were busy. The amphitheater was in zero gee, but it had been designed to be used in gravity, so maybe the subjective impressions would keep people aligned along the floor. Brian wished he was armed in case they didn't, but he hadn't been expecting this kind of situation when he went for his walk.

The scientists entered the sacrifice chamber, Julie in the lead. The others held Sharrol and Dave. Brian saw no sign at first of Marlene or Pierre, but then he realized why: he was looking for them among the captives. Instead they were helping hold their crewmates, who struggled and shouted obscenities at them.

Brian had about two seconds in which to act before he lost the element of surprise. He did the only thing he could think of: kicked off hard against the ceiling and flew into their midst, turning over in flight so he struck feet first, knocking Pierre back. Sharrol kicked at the other person holding her and twisted away. More hands reached for her, but Brian grasped the door frame with his right hand and her hair with his left and yanked her free. They tumbled into the main tubeway, kicked off clumsily from the receding wall of the sacrifice chamber, and flew across the tube and through a portal into another one just as the back of Sharrol's green uniform tunic burst into flame. The science crew were using the alien masers.

Sharrol screamed and slapped out the flames, but the word she repeated over and over as they pulled themselves behind a building and Brian dragged her away was, "Dave, Dave, Dave!"

Brian tried to think of some way to break him free as well, but it was sixteen against two and the sixteen had the weapons. If he and Sharrol could make it back to the ship they could get their own guns, but even then it would have been suicide. Their only real option was to get away and go warn Earth what was out here.

It had always been a danger. Many people back home argued that people should never have exposed themselves to it in the first place, that alien technology wasn't worth the risk of importing alien ideas as well. Look what happened the last time an alien idea got loose, they'd said. Humanity was over two thousand years eradicating it, at the cost of billions of lives. And the concepts affected society forever.

In fact that probably wasn't the last time. Brian always suspected that the Aztecs had uncovered something that led them down their high-tech but bloody path; now he bet he could describe just what they found. A cache of alien memory devices, at least one of them still functional enough to plant a seed in a receptive mind.

That was the sad thing explorers had discovered in their examination of the myriad relics left behind: Aliens died, but their ideas lived on. Often twisted and warped to fit human minds and human agendas, but they spread like fire. It usually took a fanatic to promote them, but these particular aliens seemed to have found a way to make a fanatic of anyone.

The tube Sharrol and Brian were in curved around, and they heard voices in front of them again. Brian looked for a side-passage, found one between two buildings, and they ducked into the next tube over. It veered away toward another one, and from there they crossed to another, and so on until they looped back around to the living quarters.

Pierre was waiting for them. "You're not going any--" he said, just before the headset Brian threw crushed his throat. The memory devices made decent boomerangs as well. Brian wondered if that's where the Australians had learned the trick, from artifacts with dead batteries that were useless for their original purpose. Fortunately, that idea had spread as well.

"Dave," Sharrol said again. "We have to rescue Dave."

"No time," Brian told her. Pierre was good at moving in zero-gee; he had no doubt outdistanced the others on his way back to head them off, but they couldn't be far behind.

Brian pulled Sharrol through the airlock and into the ship. He couldn't figure out how to seal the station doors, but he knew his ship. He killed the power to its door. It was designed to withstand five hundred gees; nobody would be coming through it unless he let them.

"Into the tanks," he told Sharrol. She nodded and went down the passageway toward the crew quarters. Brian headed for the bridge. This time there was no hesitation. He stripped off his clothes, climbed into the tank, and said, "Flood it." The computer started the oxylyene flow. When it reached his nose he inhaled it greedily.

Status? he typed on the talker panel.

"Crew are not present," the computer replied.

Not even Sharrol? Had her injury finally caught up with her?

There was another explanation. *Airlock status?* he typed, and sure enough, the computer reported, "Ventral lock open."

She had gone back for Dave.

Brian could have drained his tank and gone after her. Or he could have launched then. He did neither. He gave her as much time as he could, but when he saw motion through the peep hole in his tank he tapped the launch key.

"Crew is not secure," the computer said.

Damn it. *Command override*, he typed.

"Authorization sequence?" it asked.

A loud clang nearly deafened him. They were beating on his tank. If he survived this he vowed never to tap on an aquarium to startle the fish again.

He typed the ten-digit code into the talker panel.

The oxylyene just inside the porthole flashed into vapor. They were shooting their masers through the hole.

Launch, he typed.

"Are you sure?" the computer asked. "Crew is not present, passengers are not secure, and we're still docked to--"

He stabbed the button again. *Launch. Launch, launch, launch.*

The bomb went off. The walls of his tank flexed. Lights flickered. The bubbles in his oxylyene, crushed by the sudden acceleration, vanished as if by magic.

Abort, he typed. There was no need to add insult to devastation.

Drain tank.

When he stepped out, the floor was coated with red goo. He floated above it to the control panel, flipped the ship end for end, and looked through the porthole at the Artifact. It was an expanding cloud of debris, completely unrecognizable now. None of the tubes had survived. He didn't know about the memory modules, but the one he had smashed earlier hadn't seemed strong enough to survive an explosion of that magnitude.

Neither were Sharrol and Dave. Nor anyone else on board, not even the passengers still suspended in cryo. Brian felt a lump in his throat and he waited for it to expand and choke off his air, but it didn't, quite.

He thought about Pierre, so callous about other people's lives since their last trip out there. He must have been indoctrinated then, and been part of the plot to spread the alien religion back to Earth. Had he smuggled any of the alien memory devices home yet? Probably not. Getting them past the tech police would have been nearly impossible without help. He would have used their last layover on Rockaway Station to set up a smuggling operation, which he no doubt intended to set into motion this time.

Well, I certainly put a stop to that, Brian thought as he watched the debris from the Artifact spread out into space. He would have liked to think he had no other option, but he wondered. Sharrol had rushed back into danger to save her lover; he had chosen the easy way out, at the expense of sixteen people's lives and another seven who never got out of cryo. He had done it without malice, but without remorse as well.

Julie had hit him with one of those damned memory devices the moment he got on board the station. She'd had to have a reason for it. Maybe she'd just been softening him up for the full indoctrination later, or maybe that had been it right there, her memory of nude skydiving just a smoke screen to hide what she was doing to his subconscious mind at the same time. Robbing his respect for life and instilling loyalty to a higher power.

If so then she'd been hoist by her own petard. Brian actually chuckled when he thought that. And then he knew. Damn, damn, damn.

He hadn't stopped it. Not yet. There was still one infected person left, and as anyone who'd dealt with religion knew, once the concepts were in your brain they were nearly impossible to get out. They slipped

through in your behavior, in your word choices, in your secret fears and desires, affecting you and the people around you for the rest of your life.

But how much damage could one person do? He wasn't a prophet or a messiah.

That's what they all said. Typhoid Mary didn't feel sick, either.

He'd read about previous alien thought patterns, how they'd allowed people to commit such atrocities, how sometimes entire cities had been emptied, houses and monuments left standing, by the blood sacrifice to a rogue system of belief. This one seemed to have the potential to be equally bloody. It had turned trained scientists into ritual killers; it would be nearly unstoppable back home. Even without the headsets, it could spread like fire.

He rested his forehead on the cool glass of the porthole. He couldn't be sure he was dangerous. He might have just been scared when he ordered the ship to launch. But he knew he'd gotten Julie's memory of killing Anton, and he remembered feeling momentarily excited by it. He also knew if he didn't take action now he would never have the strength to do it later, and with religion it was better to be safe than sorry. He couldn't even risk a message, for fear the alien concepts might leak through somehow in subliminal form.

He took a deep breath. "Set... set course for Earth," he said.

"Course set."

His mouth felt suddenly dry. He swallowed, said, "Launch."

The computer said, "You are not in your--"

"Command override is still in place," he reminded it. "Launch."

The first of many bombs exploded.

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