

Loss Leader

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Erin Campsie ran her hand over her brow, pushing aside several strands of dark brown hair. She forced her gritty eyes to focus on the lens as her lips did their best to twist into a grin. 'You'll have to speak up,' she said loudly. 'I can't hear you.'

The roar of the ship's thrusters almost drowned the hiss of static. There was a faint click and a cultured, male voice emanated from the grille. 'I'll repeat it. Don't worry, we'll be editing this before it goes out.'

'Can you smooth out the bags under my eyes?'

The man's laugh sounded tinny through the speaker. 'For you, anything.' The voice changed slightly, became more formal. 'Erin, has the last month or so been hard on your team, given the delays?'

Erin nodded, her face serious. 'It's been pretty stressful. They only bedded down the last of the colonists a week ago.'

'Because half of them changed their mind at the last minute, right?'

Erin frowned. 'I'm not aware of that.'

'I've been watching them slinking out of the ferries. Doesn't it worry you, the fact that almost five hundred people refused to go through with this?'

'You're mistaken. If anyone backed out there would be hundreds more ready to take their place.'

There was a low chuckle from the speaker. 'Don't be so sure.' The interviewer changed tack. 'Is it true there was a last-minute problem with the cryo-tanks?'

'No,' said Erin flatly.

'There have been rumours. Reid Corp stock fell eight percent yesterday, and...'

Erin pushed herself out of her chair and leant close to the camera. 'Interview terminated,' she said firmly, cancelling the connection. For six years, she'd been shielded from the media, only to be thrown to the wolves now that she was leaving. Arseholes.

She turned round as a door opened behind her.

'Everything is ok?' Anton Piret studied her through half-closed eyes, his face a worried mask.

Erin forced a smile. 'Everything is fine, Anton.' She rested her behind on the narrow desk. 'I had to give an interview.'

'Ah, the media attention. They make you famous, you know.'

Erin shrugged. 'Makes no difference, where we're going. I'm pissed at the Reid people, though, letting slime like that through now that we're out of their hands.'

Anton looked at her thoughtfully. 'What was this about the colonists?'

'Not you, too! It's nothing. He was trying to provoke a reaction.' She looked up at the plain white ceiling panels, seemed to stare right through them. 'How long until we dock with the colony ship?'

Anton's face cleared. 'Ten minutes, no more.' He lowered one eyebrow. 'I am in charge of the union.'

Erin laughed. 'You're not going to keep that act up for the next hundred years, I hope.'

Anton grinned. '*Mais oui!* It is a ploy to - 'ow you say - pull ze chicks?' His face fell. 'But I shall not be needing this skill, I think.'

There was a crackle of static from the speaker. 'Is Anton with you?' demanded a male voice.

'Sure is,' said Erin.

'Anton, if you don't zip your arse up here right now they'll be picking body parts out of orbit for the next twenty years. Our body parts.'

‘On my way, monsieur Roth,’ called Anton. ‘Ze duty, she calls,’ he said, with another exaggerated leer. Then he turned and vanished through the door. His footsteps echoed on the bare metal deck-plates in the corridor, and as they faded away Erin pushed herself upright, took a last look around the cramped cabin, and followed.

#

The four crew members stared at the heavy airlock as it inched open on hidden runners. There was a gust of warm air, like the wind preceding a subway train. Erin blinked as a long-forgotten memory came to her. She was standing on a platform, holding her mother’s hand, laughing as scraps of paper ran away from the oncoming train. She sniffed, half expecting the smell of tar, damp concrete, electricity, and was startled when she recognised new carpet and fresh paint.

‘Smells like an office,’ said Greg Roth. He ran his fingers through his thinning blond hair and blew out his cheeks. ‘Anyone want to make a speech?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ muttered the fourth member of the team, a tall man with an unruly mop of black hair and a sour expression permanently etched on his narrow, lined face.

There was a long silence as they stared through the narrow airlock into the brightly-lit, carpeted hallway on the other side.

Roth glanced at Erin. ‘Ladies first?’

‘Get stuffed,’ she said. Then she stepped into the airlock before any of the others could move. ‘Privilege of rank,’ she called over her shoulder.

Beyond the airlock, the hallway curved away to the left and right. Erin frowned as she tried to remember the layout from the mock-up on Earth. It seemed so long ago! She stood aside as the others came through the airlock behind her, and as they looked around she was reminded of a group of tourists rubbernecking in a cathedral.

'Anyone remember the way to the control room?'

Anton and Roth pointed in opposite directions.

'Great start, guys,' laughed Erin.

They all looked up as a neutral, female voice came through concealed speakers. 'Welcome aboard the *Glory*. I am happy to report there is a pathfinder installed aboard this vessel, and if you would care to follow the blue light I shall lead you to your destination.' A strip of blue appeared along the base of the wall, with pulses that shot along the hallway and vanished around the corner.

'Thank goodness somebody knows the way,' muttered Winters. He raised his voice above the background hum of the air processors. 'How far is it?'

'Four hundred meters. Are you sure you want to come up? Your cryo-pods are ready and it would be more convenient for you to...'

'We'll come up,' said Erin. She looked up at a nearby speaker, a slight frown on her face. 'If that's all right with you, of course.'

Anton laughed. 'Sarcasm, it is wasted on a computer.'

Erin said nothing as she set off along the hallway, following the bright blue fireflies. The other three followed in silence.

#

The flight deck was spacious, with a wide console across the forward end, a large screen and, incongruously, an aluminium table with four chairs.

'Where's the umbrella?' said Greg Roth, as he stared at the furniture.

Erin ignored him, and addressed the computer. 'Give me a newsfeed,' she said.

The screen flickered into life, showing an outside view of the ship against a backdrop of stars. A talking head appeared, inside an oval in the corner of the screen.

'This is it, ladies and gentlemen, your last sight of the Glory before it leaves. This is a historical moment without parallel, a moment which opens the book on the Human conquest of space!'

The commentator paused for breath as the rectangular grey slab vanished in a glare of white light.

'And there she goes, departing on a journey of a hundred years! Don't forget, folks, you can book your place right now. Just press the Order button on your remote. Please note, those under eighteen years will need permission from...'

'Turn it off,' called Erin.

The viewscreen cleared.

'What the hell was that?' asked Roth. He looked around the control room. 'We haven't gone anywhere.'

'They prepared that earlier. Our launch window clashed with a major sports event so they mocked something up.'

Roth shook his head. 'So much for excited, waving crowds.' He looked up as a voice crackled over the speakers.

'Evening, Glory. Ground control here. The shuttle is clear, and you'll be leaving in sixty-five minutes. I'm shutting down your comms now. Good luck.'

#

Greg Roth leant his elbows on the console and glanced across at Erin's profile, sharp against the banks of instrument lights and status screens. 'Missing the place already?'

She shook her head, her eyes never leaving the wide screen fixed to the wall above the console. It was mostly dark, with patches of fuzzy light.

Roth tried again. 'Nothing much to see until dawn.'

Erin's mouth creased into a tiny smile. 'We'll be long gone by then.'

They both looked up as the door opened. Anton stalked in with a rustle of plastic and a string of muttered curses. He held up a clear cellophane bag and shook it at them. 'This crap, it is everywhere. I find ends of carpet in the toilet, pieces of the wire in the kitchen and the plastic wrap all over. The bastard workers left the whole place like a...a...building place?'

'Site,' said Roth. 'Building site.'

'Precisement. It is a sty for pigs they want us to fly, yes?'

Roth glanced at his watch. 'There's still half an hour. Why don't we tidy up?'

Anton snorted. 'What for? This ship, she will fly to the planet and then is all over. I prefer to sleep.'

Erin glanced at him. 'You don't want to watch the departure?'

Anton shook his head forcefully. 'Me, I want to see the arrival.' He stuck out a hand. '*Bon chance, mes amis.*'

'Yeah, and good luck to you, too,' said Roth as they shook.

Erin stepped forward, only to be caught in a bear hug. 'Anton!'

The Frenchman released her and stepped back, his eyes bright. 'Something to dream about, that! *Au revoir!*'

'That guy is something else,' muttered Roth, as the door slid to.

'He's amusing,' said Erin.

'In controlled doses. Does he know how to work the cryo pods?'

Erin raised one eyebrow. 'Worried he might get overdone?'

'Wouldn't do to arrive one short. Care to give me a hand tidying up? I can never sleep if the place is a mess.'

'A hundred years of insomnia. Too bad.'

They looked at each other, suddenly serious. 'Do you think we'll make it?' asked Roth.

Erin closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Her slender face looked almost child-like in the soft glow of the instrument lights, and Roth had to stop himself reaching out to her.

'I don't know, Greg.' Her eyes opened and she studied his face. 'What if we never wake up? What if our minds leech away while we're in suspension?'

Roth shook his head. 'Everything has been tested, pushed as far as possible. We've got the best of everything.'

'What if none of the planets are suitable, and the ship just keeps going for hundreds of years until it falls apart?'

'Try not to think about the negatives.'

'It's difficult, especially with a cryo-pod waiting for me below decks.' Erin shivered and glanced up at the screen.

'The next time we come up here there'll be a fresh, new planet on that,' said Roth heartily. 'We'll be itching to get down on the surface to start the first colony.'

'And everyone back home will have been dead for at least a hundred years,' said Erin softly.

#

Ken Mortlock eased onto his back, wincing at the pains that knifed his guts with every movement. He lifted a shaking hand to his thinning, snow-white hair and patted at it ineffectually, barely noticing the strands that came away on his fingers. He brushed them off against the coverlet with an automatic, oft-repeated gesture and returned his gaze to the window.

It was early evening, and the yellow streetlight glistened off the raindrops rolling steadily down the glass in the tall bay windows. The dark panelled walls were thrown into relief every now and then as a flickering screen near the foot of the bed paged through rows and rows of figures.

Mortlock sighed and reached out to the bedside table, where a small remote sat in its cradle. He picked it up and flicked through the channels at random, pausing every now and then to gaze at a bombed-out building or the flashing lights of emergency vehicles.

'This isn't how it was supposed to be.' The thought was little more than an automatic protest, worn into his brain years ago. He turned the set off and reached for a button inlaid into the timber bedpost.

Moments later the door opened, admitting a young lady in a starched blue uniform. She crossed to the bed, her round face flushed. 'Yes, sir?'

Silence as he gazed at the blank screen.

'I'll fetch the bedpan, shall I sir?'

Mortlock raised himself on his elbows, ignoring the pain. 'When I need a crap you'll be the first to know,' he muttered, eyes slitted in his pale face.

The nurse's lips tightened. 'Why did you call me?'

The old man lowered himself back onto his pillows and closed his eyes. 'I think the end is near.'

The nurse turned a snort into a cough. 'Nonsense, you've still got years.'

Mortlock opened one eye. 'I bet you say that to all your patients.'

There was a muted buzzing sound from a small pack clipped to the nurse's belt. She tilted it to bring the screen into view, then tutted. 'What kind of person comes knocking at this time of day?'

'Who is it?'

'Some government agent. Urgent, apparently.'

Mortlock sat up, pain forgotten. 'What are you waiting for? Show him up.'

The nurse left with a rustle of stiff clothing, leaving the door ajar. Mortlock strained his ears for clues to the visitor's identity or purpose. He listened in vain, and was settling back into the pillows when the door opened and a woman in a neat black suit entered. There were grey streaks in her dark hair, which was pulled back into a neat ponytail.

'I'm Liz Worth,' she said, crossing the room towards the bed. She stopped and thrust out a slim hand.

Mortlock brushed loose hairs off the coverlet with his left hand as he shook with his right. 'How can I help you, Ms Worth?'

'My department needs some advice.' There was a flash of silver as the woman flipped open a black plastic wallet.

'Which department?'

The wallet disappeared and the woman smiled, revealing a set of perfect white teeth. 'That would be telling, wouldn't it? I'm sure you understand.'

'Don't get coy with me, madam. I was privy to more top-level secrets in my working years than you'll see in your entire life.'

'I'm sure you were. Very well, I'm making this approach on behalf of the Reid Foundation. Perhaps you've heard of them?'

Mortlock closed his eyes, the veins like spider webs across the pale lids. 'They emerged from the ashes of the Reid Corp, which went bust after the colony ships were cancelled.' He opened his eyes, a frowned. 'They're following up the cryogenic research, from what I can gather.'

Worth nodded. 'They're developing a more advanced technique. Not that there was anything wrong with your work, of course. Brilliant.'

'Nothing wrong with it?' said Mortlock bitterly, stabbing his finger at the screen. 'Perhaps you should tell them. Those idiots are calling the colonists the 'lost souls'. They're comparing me with some of the worst monsters of the twentieth century.'

'It's a misunderstanding, nothing more. The point is, the Reid people need access to your final test results.'

Mortlock closed his eyes. 'You're wasting your time. I'll have nothing to do with it.'

'But why?'

The old man glanced at the window as a sudden squall pelted the glass with fresh raindrops. 'It's so long ago. Let me die in peace.'

'And yet you watch that, desperate for any mention of your name,' said Worth, tilting her head towards the screen. 'I can turn this around for you, make you into a hero.'

'How?' The single word hung in the air.

'Reid Corporation is advancing cryogenics beyond anything you imagined. We want to set up a...'

'We? I thought you worked for a government agency?'

'I'm a liaison,' said Worth smoothly. 'We're setting up a deep sleep facility where terminally ill patients can be put in suspended animation until a cure is found for their disease. We're specifically targeting those amongst us with the most to lose.'

Mortlock frowned. 'Who would that be?'

'Children, of course.'

'No!' The word exploded from Mortlock's lips. 'Never! That would be...'

'Murder?' interjected Worth, a gleam in her eyes.

Mortlock lowered his gaze to the smooth bedspread. His shoulders slowly slumped. 'I'm not as sharp as I used to be. I suppose you came here to dig up more dirt,' he said in a broken voice.

'So there *were* problems with the cryo pods?' Worth's voice was low, charged with emotion.

Mortlock nodded jerkily. 'It was after the third colony ship. We woke some of our long-term test subjects.'

'Humans?'

'Of course not. Rats.'

'And?'

'They'd forgotten the mazes. Couldn't operate the levers for food, fought ferociously when they were put together.'

'So what happened?'

'No more colony ships,' said Mortlock flatly.

'I meant, what happened to the research?'

'Terminated. We leaked news of a new star drive that would obviate the need for long-term sleep. Once that got around, you couldn't have filled a colony ship at gunpoint.'

Worth was silent.

'You know, I dream about those colonists every night,' said Mortlock. 'I think about them, every one of the three thousand, and I wonder whether they dream, too.' He glanced at the woman standing at the foot of his bed. 'You're not really from a government agency, are you?'

She shook her head. 'My parents went on the second ship. I just wanted to know the truth.'

Mortlock brushed the back of his hand across his forehead. 'I can't offer you any hope, I'm afraid. We'll never hear from any of them.'

He was still staring into space when the door closed softly behind her. The nurse bustled in five minutes later, carrying a silver bedpan. She placed it on the foot of the bed then glanced at the screen. 'Would we like to watch something while we do our movement?'

Mortlock grunted and pointed the remote. The screen flickered, then cleared to show a large expanse of cracked concrete, the weeds almost as tall as the reporter who walked slowly amongst them. She straightened and stared into the camera, her greying hair catching the light from the setting sun.

'This was the last glimpse of Earth for three thousand people,' she said solemnly. 'Just what did happen all those years ago?' Her ponytail shook as she turned to stare up at the overcast sky. 'Next week I'll give you the truth.'

The remote slipped from Mortlock's fingers as his head fell back onto the pillow. The last thing he heard was the nurse's sharply indrawn breath.

#

Erin blinked several times to clear the gummy residue from her eyes. Harsh light stabbed into her brain as she forced her eyes open, the first she had seen for... how long? She shivered suddenly, cold despite the warm air flowing through the cryo-tank. The curved perspex lid was an inch or two from the tip of her nose, and as her eyes focused she made out a distorted caricature of a human face reflecting back off the clear plastic. She blinked and turned her head, her throat tickling as the cleansers removed the last traces of fluid from her lungs. Something stabbed her right arm, jolting her with an electric shock. The breath hissed in through her teeth, and only then did she realise it was the first she had taken since waking. Her chest felt painfully tight, like perished rubber.

Gradually the stabbing pain eased, and her breathing settled down to a slow, steady rhythm.

The lid on the tank popped open with a hiss, swing out of the way on twin hydraulic rams, then locked into place with a metallic click. Something pressed for attention in the back of Erin's mind as she stared into the darkness.

Then it came to her: she had no idea where she was.

She tried to sit up, struggling for several seconds before she thought to look down at herself. She was naked, and a solid-looking strap crossed her chest, tight enough to restrict her breathing. Another bound her legs.

Her mind began to work on the problem. She couldn't move her arms, trapped as they were under the wide band of metal. She opened her mouth and croaked a single word.

'Help.'

There was a beep, and a voice spoke next to her ear. 'Please specify nature of help required.'

'I can't get up,' said Erin, the words forced out of her dry throat one by one. She heard a click, and the bands swung open. 'Who are you?' she asked, as she twisted her head to get a look at the source of the voice.

'Have you suffered memory loss? Your vital signs are normal but I detect changes in your ECG.'

Erin sat up, and immediately the tank whirled around her like a demented carnival ride. She closed her eyes and swallowed. 'Does it have to do that?'

'I don't understand.'

'The tank. Does it have to spin like that?'

There was a long silence before the computer spoke again. 'The pod is not in motion, Erin. Perhaps the effects of cryo sleep have not worn off yet.'

'Cryo sleep?'

'Surely you remember?' There was a faint undertone in the computer's otherwise level voice. 'You are aboard the colony ship Glory, with one thousand colonists and three crew members.'

'Glory?' Erin looked up at the even rows of perforations in the ceiling panels. 'Why is it so quiet?'

'We left the solar system thirty years ago. After initial acceleration the engines were shut down. Tell me, do you remember planet Earth?'

Erin frowned. 'Dark with patches of light. They didn't want me there.'

'I have prepared a mix of stimulants to help you. May I administer them?'

'I guess.' There was a quick flash of movement, and Erin stared stupidly at her upper arm, where a drop of blood welled from a pinprick. 'Ouch,' she said.

'I apologise for the discomfort.'

Erin took a deep breath as fire and ice chased each other through her body. Her eyes snapped open, and she looked around cryo-bay six with a series of sharp glances that missed nothing. 'Where are the others? Why did you wake me?'

'They are still asleep,' said the computer. 'I was forced to revive you because of a minor fault in your pod. It will be necessary for you to use to a spare.' There was a pause. 'Has your memory recovered?'

Erin stood up. 'Almost. Just tell me where I left my damned clothes.'

#

Greg Roth ran his fingers through his hair and blew out his cheeks. 'Memory loss?'

Erin nodded. 'We may be able to stave off the effects by coming out of cryo at regular intervals.' She hesitated. 'That goes for the colonists, too.'

Roth stared at her, face ashen. 'You want to cycle a thousand people? The four of us?' He did a quick mental calculation. 'Erin, it's seventy years to the first planet. If we have to wake a thousand people twice we're going to age ten years each!'

Erin spread her hands. 'The alternative doesn't bear thinking about.'

'But what if the first planet isn't suitable,' said Roth, his voice rising. 'It's ninety years to the next. And fifty to the one after.' He leant forward, eyes wide. 'We could die of old age out here.'

'We'll teach some of the colonists to operate the pods. Everyone can have a four-month stint.'

‘And what if some of them go nuts, start frigging around with the controls up here? No thanks. Anyway, how can you be sure this memory loss is cumulative?’

‘I can’t be sure. The only thing we can do is wake everybody at fixed intervals until we get to...’

The computer broke in. ‘I hope you don’t consider this an intrusion,’ it began.

Erin looked up. ‘Go ahead.’

‘There are insufficient supplies for such a plan. A minute quantity of liquid is lost each time you revive the occupant of a cryo-tank. The compounding effect of such a loss...’

Erin frowned. ‘This is a closed system.’

‘There is always some leakage,’ said the computer. ‘Hence the storage tanks.’

Roth stared across the table. ‘What the hell are we going to do?’

Erin stood up and crossed to the console. She played with a keyboard for a few moments, calling up several displays in quick succession. ‘The computer’s right. We’ll never make it.’

Roth groaned. ‘Oh brilliant.’

‘There is one planet within reach.’

Roth looked up, a faint hope in his eyes. ‘Where?’

Erin tapped a command on the keyboard and a file picture appeared on the main screen. It was a green and blue planet, and it took Roth a moment or two to realise what he was looking at. Then he began to laugh.

‘I’ll go and wake the others,’ said Erin. ‘They’ll have to be in on this.’

‘What about the colonists? Won’t they object?’

Erin shrugged. ‘What choice do we have?’

#

'We are there?' Anton sat up slowly, bracing himself against the side of the pod with hairy, muscular arms.

'Not quite.' Erin averted her eyes as she handed him a towel.

Anton dried his upper body then stood up, swaying, and wrapped the towel around his waist. 'What...' He coughed. 'What is the emergency?'

Erin stared at him. 'You know where you are?'

'You woke me to ask me this? We are aboard the Glory, outbound from Earth.'

Erin strode to a commset and called the flight deck.

'Yes?' It was Roth's voice.

'Greg, Anton's OK. No problems with his memory at all.' The speaker was silent. 'Greg?'

'What does that mean for us? For the colonists?'

Erin heard Anton's bare feet on the metal deck. She turned round as the Frenchman put a hand on her shoulder.

'What is the matter, Erin? What is this memory loss?'

'We're thirty years into the trip. My pod had a failure, and the computer revived me. When I came out, I was like a newborn. I could speak, but I had no memory.'

Anton stared at her, concern in his eyes. 'That is bad.'

'The computer gave me a batch of stimulants, and gradually everything came back. The trouble is, we don't know what the effects will be over a longer period.'

'Perhaps it is best if you wake every thirty years?'

'Sure, and what about the colonists? This ship wasn't designed as a hotel. Can you imagine how long it will take to wake each one and test them?'

'But you need only do it once. The ones who show no effects, they can stay in their beds until arrival. The rest can be woken at intervals.'

'What if the effects take longer? What if your mind goes after fifty years instead of thirty? What if the colonists refuse to go back into sleep? They could stage a riot, smash the flight deck up, anything.'

Anton was silent.

'We've decided to turn back,' said Erin quietly.

'Ah, non!' cried Anton. 'That is not the deal! Never will I return to that overcrowded waste dump. Me, I prefer to die in space!'

Erin pressed her lips together.

'Look, this memory problem, it is a worry. We will discuss the alternatives. But to run back with the tails between our legs? That, never!'

'There are four of us, Anton. We'll revive Winters, then we can decide.'

#

'So, gentlemen. It looks like I have the casting vote.' Erin sat back in her seat, felt the sweat on her forehead as she pushed a loose strand of hair away. They'd been talking for hours, going over the problem again and again without reaching any sort of agreement.

Sandon Winters had emerged from his cryopod showing no ill-effects. He and Anton were all for waking the colonists, dividing them into two groups and continuing with the journey. Roth and Erin, on the other hand, were ready to turn back.

‘There is one thing you haven’t considered,’ said Roth, his face drawn. ‘They were going to send a colony ship every decade, doubling the rate once the manufacturing was automated. How many thousands do you think might die if we don’t go back and warn them?’

Anton stared at him. ‘If we turn now, already they will have sent a dozen ships when we get back.’

‘He’s right,’ said Winters. ‘We’re too late to save any of them.’

Erin looked at him in distaste. ‘Not for the dozens scheduled to leave after we get back.’

Winters shook his head. ‘By now they’ll have refined the process, improved the ships beyond recognition. They’ll still have a maximum top speed, because of the ablative effect on the matter shields.’ He frowned. ‘If they’ve cracked atomic-level manufacturing, they may even have perfected a better one.’

Anton nodded. ‘We return and they put us in a sideshow, yes? Look at primitive man, living in primitive ship. Not a way to impress, that.’

Winters glanced at Erin, a calculating look in his eyes.

She stared back. ‘What?’

‘There are others who have a say in this. We must ask the colonists.’

‘What, all of them?’

‘We will revive a cross-section. A random sample. They can provide us with a vote.’

Erin shook her head. ‘It won’t work. They won’t want to decide for the majority.’

‘We can explain the situation, tell them there isn’t enough energy or spare fluid to revive more. I say we wake ten colonists.’ Winters leant forward. ‘You have to agree, it’s the democratic thing to do.’

Anton nodded slowly in agreement.

Erin shook her head. 'This isn't a democracy, Winters. I'm in charge. I've got the deciding vote, and we're turning home.'

Winters jumped up, his face working. 'You can't do this! I refuse to let you screw up the rest of my life!'

Erin leant forward. 'Yet you want to screw mine up, by forcing me back into the cryo pod.' She turned to face the console and addressed the computer. 'I want you to calculate a course which will take us back to Earth.'

'I'm afraid that is not possible,' said the computer.

'What?' Erin frowned. 'Access priority one.'

'Identify yourself.'

'Erin Campsie, commander.'

'Priority one access granted.'

'Course change required. Destination, Earth. Calculate and activate.'

'Unable to comply.'

'Explain!'

'Our course was hard-coded into my operating system before final compilation and encryption. It cannot be altered.'

Erin stared, her face white. 'Why, dammit?'

'Because this is a one-way journey.'

There was a snort behind her. Erin spun round to see Winters' face creased in a triumphant sneer. 'Looks like the computer's got the deciding vote.'

Erin held up her hand and addressed the computer. 'We have to turn around. You yourself have admitted that we can't make the first planet.'

'That is not correct. We can reach all the planets, stopping at the first which offers the right mix of climate and atmosphere.'

‘But we’ll arrive as mindless vegetables!’ yelled Roth. Erin jumped as he slammed his fist on the table. ‘You can’t let this happen!’

‘Save your breath,’ said Erin, her voice quiet. ‘During priority one access I have sole control of the computer.’

‘You call this control?’ yelled Roth. His eyes bored into Erin’s for several seconds before he looked away.

Erin spoke to the computer. ‘What do you suggest?’

‘You have sufficient resources to wake the crew and twelve colonists at thirty-five year intervals.’

‘Twelve colonists,’ muttered Roth. ‘What do we tell them? Sorry, guys, the rest of you are just so many warm corpses? Anyway, what happens if the first planet is a bust?’

Erin repeated his question. There was a long silence before the computer spoke again, a silence that gave Roth his answer better than any amount of synthesised speech.

‘I am sorry, I cannot help you.’

‘Right,’ said Winters. He stood up. ‘We’d better start waking colonists to determine which ones suffer from memory loss.’

Erin slumped back in her seat.

‘You can go back into your pod, if you like,’ said Winters. ‘You’ve got about thirty years before you’ll need to walk the colonists around, help them recover from their memory loss. There’s no need to wake Anton and me, obviously.’

‘Shut up, you prick!’ Roth jumped up and faced Winters. ‘Shut up or I’ll shove your teeth down your throat!’

‘Don’t threaten me, golden boy!’ Winters stuck a finger out, holding it two inches from the younger man’s nose. ‘You wouldn’t want me to leave you in your tank, would you? Forget to revive you, perhaps?’

Erin strode across to the console and typed on the keyboard. She waited for the information to appear on the screen. 'Strange,' she said, as the screen remained blank. 'Computer, open the colonist database for me.'

'Cannot comply. The database is classified.'

'No data is classified from me. Show the database on terminal four.'

'I cannot do that. You do not have sufficient clearance.'

'I don't believe it!' crowed Winters. 'They've locked you out, too! How does it feel now, little miss I'm-in-charge?'

There was a solid crack and Erin turned round just in time to see Winters go flying backwards, one hand clutching his cheek. Roth stood over him, his face red.

'One word,' he hissed. 'One more snappy remark and I'll kill you, you weasel.'

Anton pushed his chair back. 'This, it is helping yes?'

Roth turned on him. 'You want some too?'

Anton raised his hands. 'Me, I am peaceful.' He watched Winters struggle to his feet. 'Monsieur Winters, perhaps you and I should examine the colonists, yes?'

Winters glared at Roth, but kept his distance. As Anton left, he followed without a word.

'And don't touch anything!' shouted Roth as the door closed behind them. He glanced at Erin. 'Why did you want to look at the colonist's data?'

'I though there might be a clue. You and I suffered memory loss, Anton and Winters didn't. Perhaps there's something in our medical background that leaves us open to the effects of cryo-sleep. If I can find out what it is, we'd only have to wake the colonists that have the same quirk.' She spread her hands. 'It's academic, anyway, because some bright spark decided I didn't need to know.'

'That's a worry. I mean, there's nobody but us, now. Why would they seal the data?'

'Who knows. It could be something simple, perhaps to keep us from studying individual colonists. Can you imagine Anton reading up on all the women, trying to find a mate? He might even be tempted to wake someone up.'

Roth nodded. 'Not outside the bounds of possibility, I'll grant you that. The man's got a one-track mind. I'm not sure he's that stable, either.'

'Are any of us?'

'Well... ' Roth was interrupted by a beep as the commset announced a call.

'Yes?' called Erin.

It was Anton. 'The colonist's - the area is sealed.'

Erin cursed. 'Of course. It would be.'

'Can you not open it from there?' Winters' voice held a challenge.

Erin addressed the computer. 'Unseal the colonist's quarters.'

'I'm afraid that area is off-limits until we arrive at our destination. Interaction with colonists during the voyage is prohibited.'

The commset crackled. 'Perhaps you should say please,' said Winters drily.

Erin pursed her lips. 'Come back up. We'll figure something out.'

'Actually, I want to take a look at some of the equipment. I'll need Anton to give me a hand with unpacking.'

'Any reason?'

'I want to see what condition the tractors are in, for a start. They've been sitting here thirty years. It'll only take a moment to check their status panels.' The speakers went dead.

'Abrupt kind of guy, isn't he?' muttered Roth. 'Remind me to set up in a different neighbourhood when we arrive.'

'If.'

Roth frowned. 'Listen, I'm getting hungry. You want something to eat?'

Erin nodded.

'What would you like?'

'Anything hot and edible.'

'You might have to settle for one or the other,' said Roth. 'I'll go and see what the catering is like.'

Erin folded her arms on the table and rested her head on them. She closed her eyes and let her mind go blank.

She woke with a start as the doors slid open and Roth came in, his face white.

'There's no food,' he whispered.

'What?'

'Nothing. None of the buttons work, all the storage cupboards are empty.' He threw a plastic plate on the table. 'Half a dozen of those, two dozen plastic forks and nothing to eat!'

Erin sat up, blinking. She turned her head and addressed the computer. 'Where is the food kept?'

'Define food,' said the computer.

'It's the stuff we eat,' shouted Roth. 'Nourishment.'

'All such needs are met by the cryo-pods.'

Erin and Roth stared at each other in shock. The commset beeped.

'Erin?' it was Anton, his voice strained. There was a loud crash in the background.

'Yes? What's that noise?'

'All is not ok. The tractor - it is a...a car wreck.'

'A what?'

'An old car, in a crate. Winters, he is opening other equipment. We have the old machines for washing, fridges. It is junk, this.'

'Have you gone mad?' demanded Roth. 'What the hell are you on about?'

They heard Winters yelling over the sound of splintering wood. 'You lousy pricks!' he screamed. Loud crash. 'I'll give you colony equipment!' Breaking glass.

Roth jumped up and ran for the door. Erin caught him up in the hallway. 'I don't know what that idiot was on about,' he panted, as they ran along the fresh, blue carpet. 'But it sounds like Winters has flipped.'

The equipment bay doors were open, revealing stacks of wooden crates that reached the roof, ten meters above. Roth ran through, ducking around a battered forklift chained to the floor, and headed for the banging sounds that echoed around the hold.

Erin stopped to examine the shattered glass around the door's over-ride. She heard footsteps and looked up. Anton stopped before her, face grave.

'What's this?' she demanded, pointing at the glass.

Anton shook his head. 'That, it is not important.' He grabbed her hand and dragged her past the forklift and between stacks of crates. 'This, this is important.'

The narrow passage opened out near the rear of the hold. There were splintered planks all over the floor, and several crates had gaping holes. She saw Winters swinging a fire axe at the side of a large crate, saw Roth slam into him, saw both men go down in a rolling tangle of arms and legs.

'No!' yelled Anton. 'Stop!'

Roth got on top and dragged Winters' hands behind his back. The older man lay on his side, his face crumpled. Erin felt disgust and pity as she saw tears running freely down his cheeks.

'What the hell's going on?' she demanded, in the sudden quiet.

Anton gestured towards a crate. 'See for yourself,' he said.

Erin strode to the splintered hole and looked in. She gasped as she saw the dented, rusting vehicle inside. A hand-written label pasted to the crate read 'Tractor C'.

'The rest, it is junk also,' said Anton.

Erin shivered. 'What have they done to us?'

'This could explain the food,' said Roth. He stood up and offered his hand to Winters. The scientist ignored it.

'What about the food?' asked Anton.

Roth snorted. 'There isn't any.'

'*Merde.*' Anton glanced at a length of splintered wood on the floor. 'We must turn the ship. Someone will die for this.'

'I'd like to get my hands around his neck and...'
Roth gritted his teeth.

Erin shook her head. 'Long dead, by the time we got back. Anyway, we can't change course.'

'I can hack the computer.'

They all stared at Winters. The scientist was sitting up, his head in his hands.

'What?' said Erin, softly.

'I can crack the thing. My specialty.'

'Well thanks for all the help with the colonist's database...' began Roth. Erin silenced him with a glance.

'Why didn't you say something?' she asked Winters.

He shrugged.

'Right, let's go.'

Ten minutes later they were in the flight deck, Winters at the keyboard and the others peering over his shoulder. The scientist's fingers darted over the keys, calling up system reports and data which scrolled past faster than anyone could read it.

Winters pursed his lips. 'The computer was right. They've hard-coded the course into the operating system.'

Erin looked down at his tangled mop of black hair. 'What does that mean?'

'It means we can't alter it.'

Roth snorted. 'We already knew that. I thought you could fix it?'

Winters shook his head. 'The data could be anywhere in the code. It's encrypted, too.'

'What about the colonist database?' asked Erin.

Winters typed a few commands, then examined the screen closely. 'Give me half an hour. And for God's sake, stop breathing down my neck.'

Erin pulled Roth and Anton away. 'Kitchen,' she said.

The galley was cramped, with barely enough room to sit between table and wall. Erin sat first, then glanced at the others. 'Let's go over this,' she began.

'We've been screwed. End of story,' said Roth.

Erin frowned at him. 'If I need smart comments, I'll ask the computer. Now sit down, shut up and listen.'

Roth flushed, then plonked himself down on the narrow bench. He moved along so Anton could sit beside him. They leant forwards, elbows on the table like a pair of eager students. Erin almost laughed. 'One,' she said, holding up a finger. 'The people contracted to put the supplies on board figured they could switch the stuff with junk and pocket the money.'

Anton stared at her, his face pale.

'Two,' Erin held up a second finger. 'We go higher up. The people running this show loaded the ship with junk, shoved the colonists aboard and fired us off, knowing we'll never be heard from anyway.'

'Ahh, that is impossible,' said Anton. 'The training, the colonists. It is betrayal, that!'

'Reid Corp staked their future on these ships. We know the first half a dozen will drain them, cost them a fortune. They were open about that. But when the construction is automated and people are paying for their places...'

Roth nodded. 'So, they cut their costs on the first ships.' Suddenly he stared across the plastic table, face deathly white. 'I just had the most horrible thought,' he said slowly.

'What?'

'Well, if your second theory is correct, would they want us to arrive at our destination?'

Erin frowned. 'What?'

'Look, we get there, right? We ship all the crates down in the landers and open them. Junk. We've got a thousand colonists in orbit, and nowhere to put them. What if we managed to get the ship back to Earth, turned up like an ex boyfriend at a wedding? Don't you think they'd want to safeguard against that?'

'Perhaps they believe it's too far in the future to worry about.'

'We're talking about a company established two centuries ago, not an individual,' said Roth. 'If this ship vanished en-route, who would know about it?'

'Roth, there are a thousand people aboard. They couldn't do it, too many people would have to be involved and if one of them blew the whistle, the Reid people would be burnt at the stake.'

'It is true, this,' said Anton. 'Me, I think the arsehole supply companies did the switch.'

A hidden speaker crackled, and they looked up. 'Yes?' called Erin.

There was a long silence before Winters' voice came over the commset. 'There's nothing I can do,' he said. 'Locked up tighter than a chastity belt.'

'That is not so secure,' muttered Anton.

'Move over,' said Roth, pushing the Frenchman along the bench.
'Where are you going?'
'Into the colonists' area.'
'It's sealed!'
Roth shook his head. 'Not for long.'

#

'Roth, no!' Erin's voice was drowned by the roar of the forklift. She stepped back, choking, as a cloud of diesel fumes enveloped her.

The tyres skidded on the carpet before gripping and launching the vehicle forward. There was a jarring crash as Roth drove the forks into the red painted doors. They buckled, but held, and he jerked the stick back and reversed for another go.

'Roth,' yelled Erin, as she saw him lean forward and grip the wheel. The engine coughed, then roared again, pushing the heavy machine towards the door. There was a sickening crunch as the metal forks pushed the door in, and Roth killed the engine and jumped down.

As the echoes died away Erin, Anton and Winters stepped through the buckled doorway and peered into the darkness.

'Computer, turn the lights on,' demanded Roth. There was a flicker at the far end of the chamber, and then the tubes began to light up, flowing towards them like an electronic wave. As each light came on, it illuminated heavy racking stacked with cryopods. There were a dozen rows, the door being opposite the middle two.

Roth strode across to the end of the nearest rack and bent down to peer into the cryo pod. He reached for the catches and Erin's heart skipped a beat.

'No!' she yelled. 'You can't...'

Roth ignored her, undid the catches and hauled the lid up. 'Empty,' he said. He stood up and glanced into the next tank. 'Empty.'

The others ran to the racks, stared through one heavy perspex lid after another.

'All empty!' moaned Winters.

'Wait!' Erin held up her hands. 'The interviewer. He said half the colonists refused to come. We'll have to check all the tanks. Take three rows each.'

They split up, and for ten minutes their hurried footsteps echoed around the cavernous hold. Then they gathered near the entrance.

'Why?' asked Roth, gesturing at the cryopods. There was a long silence as each of the four crew members tried to come to terms with the sudden revelation.

Finally, Erin broke the silence. 'The only reason I can see...' she began.

'Oh, it's so obvious,' cried Winters. 'The ship's running late, the colonists are having second thoughts and the company's stock is plummeting. How can they turn it around, get the media on-side? By sending the ship as if nothing has happened. No need to fill it with expensive equipment, of course. Just pack the crates full of junk, seal up the ship and send it off.'

Anton frowned. 'This, it does not make sense.'

'Sure it does. The first three ships were loss-leaders anyway.'

'Loss leader?' Anton looked puzzled.

'When they advertise goods below cost to get people into the store,' said Roth tersely. 'Go on, Winters.'

'Right. Since the first ship departs without a hitch, it becomes easier to sign up colonists for the next. People prefer to follow, you see.'

'Like lemmings,' muttered Roth.

‘Quite. Well, as Reid Corp. aren’t charging the colonists, it makes no difference whether they go or not.’

‘But surely the ones that stayed back would talk?’ asked Erin. ‘They’d have told everyone they knew they were leaving.’

‘Yes, but at every stage of the selection process the colonists would have been told that others were waiting to take their place, should they choose not to go. Perhaps they even offered the defaulters a new life on another continent.’

‘But without any colonists aboard, why aim the Glory at a habitable planet?’ cried Roth. ‘They may just as well have pointed us at empty space!’

There was a shocked silence before Winters spoke again. ‘Let’s go and find out,’ he said grimly.

#

‘There’s our course,’ said Winters, tapping the flat screen with a pen. The others crowded round, staring at the three columns of numbers. ‘It’s programmed to take us to the first planet.’

There was a collective sigh of relief.

‘Don’t get too excited. There are no commands to stop us on arrival.’

‘What?’

‘It’s going to be a very brief stay.’

Anton frowned. ‘Perhaps the second planet?’ he murmured.

Winters shook his head. ‘Wrong direction. Face it: we’ve been sacrificed. If Erin’s pod hadn’t malfunctioned we’d have been sleeping centuries from now, with the ship falling apart around us.’

‘We can turn this to our advantage,’ said Roth. ‘We’re all fit, we can use the cryo tanks overnight to feed ourselves, we just have to find a way to reverse our course.’

'How about activating the comms channels?' asked Anton.
'Perhaps to send a warning?'

Winters snorted. 'We're configured for deep space. The dish is behind the ablative shield.'

'Couldn't we raise it, tell them what's happened?'

'Look, we're light years out right now. Even if we could get the dish up it would be years before they got the signal, and there's no guarantee anyone would be listening.'

'Do it anyway,' said Erin.

'The dish will be destroyed.'

'So what? We won't be needing them.' A thought occurred to her.
'What about fuel?'

Winters examined the screen, frowning as he paged through displays, one after another, faster and faster. Finally he stopped, letting his hands fall into his lap. 'I suppose it won't come as a huge surprise if I tell you there isn't any,' he said, his voice barely audibly above the background hum.

Erin glanced at him. 'How much did they put in?' she asked sharply.

Winters checked the screen. 'Enough to fire us away from Earth.'

'Backstabbing, penny-pinching, money-grubbing...' Roth's voice trailed off as Erin gripped his elbow. 'What?'

'Get the communications array up, now!'

Roth moved over to the comms panel and worked on the controls for a moment or two. Suddenly a red light began to flash.

'Point of no return,' called Roth over his shoulder. 'If I proceed, we'll destroy the dish.'

'Do it.'

'Are you—'

'In command? Yes.'

Roth shrugged and pressed the button. 'Ok, what now?'

'Can you pick up omni-directional signals?'

'Yes.'

'Computer, scan all frequencies.'

'Complying.'

Suddenly there was a burst of static from the speakers, followed by a barely audible voice.

'Amplify!' shouted Erin.

'...requesting clearance, pad seven.'

'Clearance granted, Eagle Six. Have a good trip.'

'Will do, ground. Eagle Six out.'

Anton and Winters gaped at the speakers, their mouths open.

'What the ...' began Roth.

'The engines were supposed to burn for the first ten years, on and off. They must have shut down after a couple of months,' said Erin. 'We only had enough fuel to get us out of the solar system. We're barely moving.'

'You mean we've been drifting for thirty years?' Winters was incredulous.

'Our course was out of the orbital plane, remember? Two revolutions of the Sun then straight up. Unless they sent another ship out this way, who the hell would find us?'

Roth stared down at the commset. 'What shall I say?'

'Advise them to dump their Reid Corp shares,' said Erin grimly.

Programmer, computer salesman, forklift driver, archer — none of these explain why Simon Haynes started writing science fiction humour in the late nineties. Not even a couple of degrees from Curtin University could hold him back.

Born in the UK and raised in the south of Spain, Simon emigrated to Australia with his family in 1983. He's fluent in Spanish, and laughs politely when people shout Que? in his face. A founding member of Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine and the winner of an Aurealis Award in 2001, Simon lives in Western Australia, although his mind often wanders further afield.