

**OG's Speculative Fiction**  
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# Cover Art: *Cylinder World* by Anselmo Alliegro

Anselmo was educated at Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where his work with some of the best artists in the country earned him a scholarship to Parsons School of Design in New York City. He has recently published in *Space & Time*, *Intergalactic Medicine Show*, and the fifth issue of *OG's Sepeculative Fiction*.

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# Editor's Letter

In a recent discussion someone told me that we would never reach into space because the governments of the world would never get or spend enough money to make it happen. Money is an exhaustible source, they said. Won't ever be enough to get things done. Why, NASA gets a budget of sixteen million dollars a year. That's well and good, but imagine if they got five times that, or twenty times that. Wouldn't we be on Mars now, or in ships heading to the next galaxy? Just not enough money to make it happen.

I laughed.

Yes, money is exhaustible. However, money is simply something humans use to motivate action. Let's say your shower is plugged. Every time you use it, the water slowly rises until you are standing in a couple inches of soapy water. Let's say this really ticks you off. You don't like standing in three inches of water. Nobody is going to have to pay you to plunge your shower. You will do it because you are motivated to have a clean, plug free shower.

The same goes for space travel. If the people with the knowledge (or the ability to quickly attain knowledge and think through problems and devise new ideas), the people with the materials, and the people with the experience all got together and decided they wanted to travel through space to distant planets, having enough money would not be a factor. The people with the material would gladly give more than was needed to build the ships. The people with the knowledge would spend their time developing advanced technologies and designing equipment. The people with the experience would willingly teach and share their experience as each theory was tested and proved.

No. Money is not what stops us from reaching the stars. It is desire. It is commitment.

Isn't that what has spurred every leap of technology. A desire to improve a current situation or realize a newly created idea.

So then, does that mean the world just doesn't want to reach across the stars (or have cars that run on sunlight, or travel across the earth as quickly as your phone can call around the world..) badly enough?

-SC

# Twisted Computing

by Steven Mathes

*Steven Mathes writes articles about computers as well as short stories, so it is no surprise that this story of family dynamics revolves around an unexpected break in technology. Steven also has a story, *The Darkness of Truth*, coming out in the anthology, *Forbidden Speculation*, later this year.*

So the revolution started when my son Danny built a computer. I needed some sort of bonding time with him. I thought it sounded like a good project. I thought he should learn.

We all learned. We all learned that reality has a shelf life, just like love.

Computers simply snap together. If you've ever built one, you know how hard it is to make a mistake. Memory boards slip into their slots. The CPU slides into its socket. If it belongs there, it fits. And so on.

They give you a big diagram with arrows and pictures, almost nothing to read. If you've got a dad who does this sort of thing for a living, what could go wrong?

Everything, it turns out.

Of course he had to do it himself. That would be my excuse. No help from me.

"Fine," I said.

Part of his education. We could bond over it without me hovering. What if he broke something? If he bent a pin, scratched the graphics adapter, burned out the motherboard? Too bad. Back to square one. Wait a month to teach him the value of a dollar, then buy a couple of parts. Compared to soccer camp, this was chump change. If it could buy time before he grew up and away from me, it was a bargain.

"You mess it up, you'll pay to fix it," I lied.

"Yeah, whatever."

Maybe he figured I was more excited than he was. Maybe I was.

I never dreamed he'd get the memory in backwards and still make all the connections. It should have been impossible to slot that board in there backwards.

"Dad, I need help. Something's wrong," he yelled.

I went into his room hearing the terror in his voice. More like he'd seen a monster, which in a sense he had.

I got there too late to see it running the first time. I came in and there he stood, pale, holding the unplugged power cord. He looked too shaken.

"It's only a computer," I said. "Relax."

I admit to stretching the truth a little. I had sprung for the cutting edge. Quantum computing had become mainstream, but the resulting advances made every month a new era. I bought cutting edge. Top of the line, and maybe more expensive than necessary. And untested.

It looked like a minimalist sculpture, a rectangular slab of pure black stone. Stroke it and it was supposed to come to life, bathe you in its virtual world.

"So show me," I said.

"But you said to unplug it right away if anything weird happens."

"You did good. Now plug it back."

His expression reminded me of a bad incident, once in a bar. Almost in a fight, I told the guy: "Okay, let's see your best punch!" The guy's look was the same as the look on Danny's face.

The computer snapped on. I almost lost my supper.

Impossible. The perfect slab of black stone stood unchanged, except wrong. Almost like it was twisted, except it had to be right. You could see it was unchanged. No words could work a description of this twist.

My mind failed me, my eyes failed me, but my gut told me. But I couldn't put my finger on it. Impossible.

My son looked at the wall, refused to look at the computer.

"Unplug it," I said. "Please unplug it."

"I told you. I warned you."

He unplugged. The computer returned to possible. Black stone. Normal geometry.

"Let's leave it until this weekend," I said. "This looks like more than an evening."

I had to get out. My brain still screamed.

"I warned you."

I should have heard his tone of voice. Instead, I spent the weekend at work when I should have been helping Danny.

So he turned it in for art.

He had a sculpture project due, but he'd been playing games, talking on the phone, going out, instead of doing his work. The new computer was broken, no good for games, but he saw it as something for that project. He attended a special school for art instead of a regular school. What could be better? He had a new computer that would make you want to lose your lunch.

It was art, all right.

He brought the computer to art class, handed it in as his project.

Weeks passed. I neglected him. He became famous. I knew nothing.

I mean famous.

The computer went up the art-world food chain, from teacher to teacher's professor, from professor to gallery, from gallery to patron. My son was paid a huge sum. Gallery, professor and teacher took substantial cuts. Huge cuts. All without consulting me, the father, until the deal was too far gone to kill without making things worse.

So now I knew.

And I signed the agreements he wanted me to sign. I felt guilty about ignoring him. I loved Danny.

Even with all the people in the food chain getting their share, the deal made him a very rich school boy, with enough cash for a dozen fully-assembled new computers, not to mention a substantial piece of intellectual property.

Interests converged. All artists need to seem smart like everyone else, as if what they do is always on purpose. My son screwed up, but you'd never know it from the patent application. The food chain would get rich on that patent. The food chain included a lawyer or two.

"Do you have any clue what it does?" I asked him.

"We have people working on it," he said.

"So you don't have a clue."

"We have theories. Some sort of alternate reality, of course."

"Naturally," I said. "Of course."

"You get used to it, even attached to it. It starts to seem normal."

I couldn't give up just yet.

"Your patent application says it generates 'a virtual parallel universe?'"

"We figure we can fit almost anything under that label."

"Just keep it out of my house," I asked. "Please."

I got that same smile. Like when I first told him to plug it in.

"We had a team do a careful analysis. They certified that there is absolutely no difference between reality and the image generated by the computer. But two members of the team threw up during the test and a third killed himself that night."

"That must be when you hired your legal team."

I went through another period of working late, working on weekends. I had charge of technology for a small-to-medium enterprise. I did what I had to do to keep Danny in the best school. That's how I dealt with the guilt. If his mother hadn't died things might have been different.

Or maybe not.

Anyway, the first display went up half a year later. Very carefully placed in a pedestrian-only area. Smaller memory modules made the effect a little less intense, toned down just enough to avert potential suicides. They adver-

tised teen clothing. Very wisely placed, given the result.

It caught the eye and refused to let go. Pedestrians ran into walls, or simply tripped over what happened to be in the way. Scary but effective.

"I told you, we have people working on it," Danny said.

"You got graphics in there."

"Not really. Graphics are superimposed. We can't get graphics to work. Graphics come out scrambled when we put them through the computer."

"How about sound?"

"You should know. I thought you were supposed to be an expert."

He smirked. I smirked back.

"I thought you were the artist," I said.

He answered with a hostile shrug. Just what I wanted.

"I've seen the graphics," I said, "but sound could be different. Because of the human side, the interpretive side, not just the computer side."

"Why?"

"Computer screens display frames like a motion picture. They flash one after another and our brains put them back together as motion. The conversion happens in our brains. But sound comes in continuously. Our ears vibrate in unison with a speaker. Sound is converted in the computer, not in the brain. You should try streaming sound through your twisted computer."

He rolled his eyes and walked away, so I wrote it off. Then he came back two days later.

He actually sought me out. That made the whole thing worthwhile. He waited up until I came home.

"You were right," he said. "Sound kicks ass."

"So it doesn't distort?"

"It's not what you think. Graphics didn't distort, either, they just made people puke. Sound is even clearer, and it attracts and repels at the same time. You can't put your finger on it but you can't stop listening. You were right when you said it would behave differently. We got it just right. It kicks ass!"

"Well I'm glad it worked out," I said.

He looked at me.

"For once, I'm impressed," he said.

He offered me a job. I accepted.

I admit it. I enjoyed quitting my old job. I gave them a little notice, set up one of my people as acting director and packed up my things. They came to me with raises and fancier titles. They even offered me reserved parking. They showed enough desperation to prove my worth. And then I left them to go to work with Danny. I really enjoyed quitting.

I did not enjoy the sound. I enjoyed it much less than seeing the first twisted computer that first time. A twisted computer. The name fit. The name stuck. We were in the business of selling twisted computing, Patent Pending. The sound came out clear enough to render a piano sonata, perfect but off, twisted like sharp wire. You couldn't place it. It was like listening to a demented person being calm and rational. Something funny lurked in the background. It hurt, but not physically. To me it felt evil.

The people working for Danny had rooms full of gear. Money flowed in from all over for refinement and miniaturization. The goal was twisted systems embedded in the smallest possible form. The new rage in marketing.

The next displays went interactive. We kept them limited to inside malls and other pedestrian areas. We even cut a deal with movie theaters. The sickening visual, combined with the crystal, drilling voice. The ads drove the older generation away, attracted the young. The ads sorted the demographic before making the pitch. We had trouble imagining things getting better.

My son got richer, and the rest of us lined up along the food chain. We took our cuts.

Then I came up with one last good idea. Earlier ideas all centered on marketing. I suggested that the sound module might make a good vehicle for pop music. Crystalline, evil voices sounding like something straight from Hell. Perfect for the teen-boy segment.

Danny agreed.

We chose two sounds. One was the predictable, angry, quasi-Satanic hard rock already popular with the segment. Another was Japanese bands of cute girls singing suggestive folk songs. Both went platinum inside of two weeks, but the girl sound went off the charts, popular with both sexes.

"What is it that works?" I asked Danny.

The music sounded vile, but for professional reasons, I was forced to tolerate it. At least in front of my boss, Danny.

"What do you mean?"

"It's like being raped by angels from Hell," I said.

He grinned.

"Totally," he agreed. "I could have gone out with the lead singer, but she sounds so lame in person."

"Lame? She's a star. She's almost as rich as you."

"She stalks me. She claims she can learn to sing twisted without the electronics."

"Would you be impressed if she could?"

"Absolutely. She'd totally have me then."

She had beauty and the voice of an angel. Only the new twisted micro-

phone gave her that part from Hell.

"What I mean," I said, "is that if you could put it into ordinary words, how would you describe the attraction of twisted voices?"

"You mean besides making a sound that suggests supernatural sex, power, wealth and corruption?"

I almost asked how that could be attractive. I saved myself.

"But how's that different from what you already have?" I said.

"You keep impressing me!" he laughed.

Saying the right thing left me speechless. I wanted more time with him. More opportunity. But he considered the conversation over, and he was the boss.

Twisted. A family tradition. I succeeded in making us a family again. I was happy again. At least for a time.

I say that we were a family again, but it was already too late. Twisted computing split the demographic. It split society. It split families. Especially after that Japanese singer learned to sing twisted.

Her triumph followed the course of so many intellectual breakthroughs. She learned to think twisted, then she learned to control her voice. But as soon as she could do it, others followed. It took a year. By the end of a year, toddlers could do it. Toddlers and teenagers, but not their parents. Apparently the skill could not be taught.

Twisted voices split the demographic.

True to his word, my son took up with the singer. He too could sing, talk and think twisted. After all he was the pioneer.

My son grew up. Soon he and I lost touch, although my checks kept coming. Huge checks, lots of royalties. Twisted people preferred twisted technology. My division employed more and more twisted people and produced plenty of twisted gadgets.

We lost touch for several years. And I dealt with my own future, that of looking in from outside.

He got married, though, and I got an invitation. I got front-row center seating, even with all the movers and shakers there. Of course I was a mover and a shaker, even if I was one of the few who couldn't come up with a twisted voice. Hey, the voices had been my idea, sort of.

Rock stars, movie stars, inventors, innovators, but very few as old as I was. The wedding was a celebration of the twisted generation, the new, the young, the powerful. We oldsters hovered and smiled from the edge, no matter where our assigned seats. The bride's parents spoke only Japanese, but the mother could speak it twisted. She was the oldest to learn that I knew of. The father and I stood together, watching, mute, unable to console each other. We nodded and offered replies when people tried to include us.

My son felt for my awkward position. He took me to a room and talked. He thanked me, spoke in his old voice. We hugged.

"You were late," he said. "But you finally did the job. You're my Dad."

"Then why do I feel like this is goodbye?"

"That's what happens to fathers," he said. "Every generation separates. The gap's just wider this time."

Finally he went back to his wedding, having said goodbye to me. Having taken pity on me.

I went back to work. My team got twisted graphics working. They could send pictures and type through the Web and twist it, now that they could think that way. Typefaces displayed an eerie, sinister clarity, but this failed to improve the writing they displayed.

Danny retired before I did. Maybe I still hoped that by working on the technology, I would learn to speak. I deluded myself. At best, I learned to tolerate the new displays, but I failed to become attached.

We drifted apart through email. I finally grew old enough to understand what I had lost, what everyone loses. And my excessive royalties kept coming and coming.

# The Sentry of Inish Ddraig

by **Elizabeth Barrette**

*Elizabeth Barrette writes poetry, fiction, and non-fiction in the fields of speculative fiction, gender studies, and alternative spirituality. Her poems have appeared in Helix and Star\*Line, and her poem, "Beach Combing" was nominated for a Rhysling Award in 2007. She serves as managing editor of PanGaia and as a Dean of Studies for the Grey School of Wizardry, where she teaches a four part course in poetry. Her book Composing Magic was published in July.*

## **The Sentry of Inish Ddraig**

Pale before dawn, the air clears  
over the storm-gray sea,  
revealing the sleek ship  
as it slices through the waves.  
Shields slung along its sides shine like scales,  
and a fierce figurehead rises above the prow,  
lantern-fire clenched in dragon jaws.  
The scarlet sail slackens at last.  
Stern and stealthy,  
the first warriors wet their boots  
on the foe's foam-swept beach  
and the swords slither from scabbards,  
their tongues deadly as serpents.  
Then a second blood-red sail unfurls  
to challenge their ship, and a third!  
Between them rises a head  
finned in crimson and emerald,  
fringed in gold, horned like a helmet.  
The drake bugles a challenge  
and pounces on the interloper  
with claws and jaws and flame.  
He shreds the scarlet sail, rakes loose  
those shields still hanging on the sides,  
and swallows the figurehead whole,  
lantern and all. The dragonship

falls to the dragon, sundered and sinking,  
its wailing warriors trampled into the sand.  
Grumbling, the drake returns to his roost  
above the nest with its fidgeting hen.  
He licks a new scent from the wind.  
The girl has come. Yes. It is the girl.  
The sunrise lights the gold torc  
at her throat and the amber over her breasts.  
She lowers the baaing sheep to the ground  
and steps back for the hen to feed.  
Then she shakes out the blue wool blanket  
which, approved, is quickly tucked around  
the eight eggs. Her work done for the day,  
she slips away as silently as she came,  
leaving the sentry to his post.

# The Other Ten Thousand

by David C. Tallerman

*David Tallerman lives in York, England, where he works as an IT Technician, which seemed the only logical career move after studying for an MA in the literature of seventeenth century witchcraft. In the last few months his work has appeared in Hub, Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine and Pseudopod, amongst others; with more forthcoming in The Willows, Mytholog and in the British comic Futurequake.*

Grimol, roused from half-sleep by a tingling in his nostrils, belched bilious smoke rings up towards the distant ceiling.

It was the unmistakable smell of human, rank and tempting—it made his stomach rumble like an avalanche. How long had it been since he'd eaten? How long had he slept? Grimol curled a leathery tongue over rows of razor teeth and smiled in anticipation.

He didn't have long to wait—out of the blackness of the tunnel mouth a small figure soon appeared. He wore no weapon, but was wrapped from head to toe in a cowl of dark cloth. If it was meant to camouflage him then clearly the human didn't know how well Grimol's eyes saw in the blackness, or how precise was his sense of smell. Perhaps he'd wander right into his jaws given the opportunity. But Grimol valued amusement almost as much as he did meat, and there was no amusement in easy prey.

“Who are you, that's fool enough to come into a dragon's lair unarmed and unarmored?” And yet perhaps he wasn't such a fool, for he'd stopped just out of range of Grimol's fire. “Speak up! Who are you that's about to feed the dragon Grimol?”

There was no hesitation or hint of nervousness in the man's voice as he replied, “If that were the case then I wouldn't think my name would matter much. But as it is, I'm here to see you die, and you may as well know that my name is Thale of Ankor.”

Grimol's smile widened. How delicious these humans were—not much flesh on them, a horse or a cow was better eating by far, but for amusement there was nothing better than men. “Whole armies have come to slay me, and all the good they did was to glut my belly. What makes you different to the other ten thousand that have tried and failed to kill me? See, their bones decorate my lair, their gilded weapons are my treasure trove.” And to illustrate, Grimol coughed a plume of fire into the air. While it burned, one could clearly see the glints of whitened bone, the glare of blades, and shields, and scattered fragments of armor. For an instant, the vast chamber

was a mortuary. And then the flare burned out, and darkness reigned again.

The man called Thale cleared his throat. “What makes me different? Well, for twenty years now I’ve studied...”

But he was cut off by the deep throaty rumbling that for Grimol passed as laughter. It echoed back and forth between the far-distant walls of the cave. “Oh, studied? And you imagine they didn’t? They mastered bows, staves and axes, sword craft and spell craft, every school of combat known to your kind. If their boasts were to be believed then many a great hero lies cadaveric upon my cavern floor.”

But then Grimol realized that the man Thale wasn’t paying him attention. Instead, he was muttering something under his breath. “What are you mumbling, human? If you’ve something to say then say it out loud, before my hunger gets the better of my patience and I have to eat you.”

“Oh,” said Thale. “I was just finishing the incantation I began before I came in. And what I was saying before you interrupted me was this: I’ve studied the art of necromancy for twenty years now, so that I’d be ready for this day. And as for what makes me different from those other ten thousand ...well, if you’ll look around you, monster...”

But Grimol, whose ears were very keen, did not need to look. For five centuries he’d walked upon a carpet of bones, and he knew their rattle well enough. And for the first time in five centuries he knew as well the cold creep of fear, a chill from his horns to the point of his tail. From all around came the chink of plate and chain, the rattle of iron—and worse by far, the rhythmic click of ivory upon cold stone.

But even above the encroaching racket, Grimol could just make out the voice of the man Thale, as he finished: “What makes me different is that *they’ll* kill you, dragon...while I’ll be content to stand here and watch.”

# Black Swan

by Lawrence R. Dagstine

*Lawrence Dagstine's writing has been published over 270 times in print and online. He is the author of four books, Espionage First, Spencer Prague, Allegiance to Arms, and Death of the Common Writer. This tale presents a frightening situation of being on the edge, both physically and mentally.*

**T**error, complete and undiluted, is a violent physical force. Unless it can be channeled into action, it feeds on itself. After that, it feeds on the person owning it. And in a universe as infinite as ours, it will eventually feed on everything.

For Aren Fenstar, a space jockey looking to deliver her payloads and meet people from faraway places, she suddenly found herself alone in the Black Swan's roaring flight pit. In this small spectra and helium-powered freighter the only outlet for her terror was a bio-com feed for behind her ear and under her tongue; and when nobody answered, panic grew like a spreading fire.

Somehow she had to fly the Swan away from what was in front of her, away from the anomaly which grabbed her with such unspeakable force. Dully, she wondered about it. Anyone her age and inexperienced as she was would have done the same. From what she remembered the freighters back home had basic flight controls, perhaps a few dozen instruments and a simple computer pod on the panel—and that was that. Nowadays, however, things were different. A modern cargo freighter like the Swan was leased and capable of operating in universal conditions. It had its advanced equipment and gravity-beating systems equal to those carried by many multi-rocketed transports: dozens of major flight and engine controls, hundreds of major instruments to keep track of orbital symmetry and flight attitude, navigation, and hull and reactor performance. Her copilot, Sam, said it was dual controls—*before* he hit his head and went unconscious.

The computerized panels were in front of her.

Now, frantically, she turned her head and looked at Sam. He was still and pale in his elastic flight suit, breathing raggedly. She found herself thinking in a vague way what might have happened between them in the future, but somehow the familiar questions—such as whether or not you were in love with someone—seemed utterly disconnected from reality. Even the fact that she was a tomboy, coupled with the unanswered question of whether Sam would live or die, held no shock, no impact. He was just...there, a part of the pulling and swallowing nightmare.

*The Swan. Come on, now—think about the ship. Force yourself to think.*

She gazed at the control panels. It was hopeless, impossible; the flight pit was a jungle of things she didn't even begin to understand. Not by herself.

She felt herself beginning to sob and buried her face in her hands, weeping. She hadn't known it was possible to be so frightened; but the fear kept welling up, blotting out everything. And in a minute someone would be talking to her. Then she'd *have* to get a grip on herself.

She put the communication feed back under her tongue and waited patiently. Then she took a deep breath and looked deliberately out the side window. According to her instruments, millions of miles away, and still super massive and too close for comfort, was a black hole consuming every small star, every uncharted moon, all solar mass and gaseous nebulae with an electromagnetic digestive tract and a density lighter than air. Its gravitational force seemed almost supernatural. In the center of the hole was a cold patchwork of nothingness. Nestling in a fold in the patchwork was a vacuum, its neutrinos incredibly detailed on the Swan's computer cursors. Wisps of radioactive gas floated luminously away from it, and a carousel of planetary debris made pinpoints of color around its hollow mouth.

Above the event horizon everything was endless and coldly blue with blazing strips of orange. The black hole looked much bigger from where the Swan was situated, an overwhelming emptiness and certain oblivion. The naked red shifted glare of the nearest galaxy's dwarf and the sparse high streaks of gas cloud seemed to emphasize the limitless expanse of nothing and her own demise. The Swan's droning flight pit seemed very small and puny against the vast indifference of what awaited her outside.

So much for being a competent pilot.

Aren looked down at her trembling hands. Two fresh tears began to roll down her cheeks. How long she screamed she had no way of knowing; it was actually about ten minutes, but to her it could have been ten seconds or ten hours. In between screaming she slapped Sam's face hysterically, again and again, shouting half at him and half into her bio-com, imploring him to wake up. He sat unheeding, eyes closed, head stiffly upright.

Now the ship droned on smoothly, the auto piloting sequence holding it rock steady and in a calm trajectory. In the end, Aren crumpled. Crying wildly, she buried her face in her clenched fists, hitting every switch possible and trying to shut out the sight of the flight pit's windows and the terrifying vacuum quickly encroaching. No one was listening, no one was going to do anything. The bio-com slipped out of her mouth, clunking softly onto the metal floor. Immediately the speaker in the pit's roof crackled and a link was established. It broke into slow, deliberate speech.

“Cargo ship in trouble. I have received your distress call,” it said. “Put down your feed and listen very carefully. Do not do anything, and do not attempt to reply to me yet. I repeat, do *not* attempt to reply to me yet.”

The voice caught Aren by surprise. She jerked in her seat, shock making her shriek again. Then she screamed and laughed all at once, unable to stop herself. Her hands went to her ears to shut out the horrible sound of her own hysteria; finally, slowly, the screaming began to subside. *You’ve got to pull yourself together*, she thought desperately. You’re a space jockey; you’re supposed to be cool, sensible.

The voice started speaking again. “Cargo ship in trouble, I say again.” The words were clearly pronounced, matter-of-fact. “Do *not* attempt to reply to me until I tell you. Up to now you have been keeping your feed under your tongue. This kind of communication link operates solely on your biological makeup, using the DNA from your saliva as a battery conductor. When you do that you cannot hear me talking to you. Now, in a moment I want you to place the feed behind your right ear and speak to me again. But this time just press the feed switch on the speaker panel in front of you, say yes, and then release it so that I can talk some more. I will press a button on my end so I can hear *you* more clearly. I know it is an old-fashioned method, but if you understand that, say yes now; if you do not, then do not say anything, and I will explain it again.”

Where was the feed switch?

Aren looked wildly around the pit. The mass of dials and switches and levers seemed to mock her helplessness, hiding the small black and gray panel among them. If she didn’t find it, the voice would go away. If she didn’t find it, all hope was lost. She’d finally located the thing; it had practically been in front of her.

Then she saw the curly black wire the feed was supposed to be connected to when not on remote. Her eyes followed the wire to the floor, and there it was. The little black plug-in. She grabbed the wire, pulled it up, and a second later she had a two-way comlink. She put her lips to the speaker panel and pressed a button.

“Yes. I have it!” Her words came out in a muted, terrified croak. Several seconds passed before she remembered to let the button go.

“Good. Now I want you to switch to neutral gravity, because this will buy us some time. Then tell me calmly and clearly what has happened on your end, without speaking for too long, if you have a copilot, and remember to talk into the panel and sit absolutely still when I stop talking. Got it?”

Aren took a deep breath, feeling her whole body shuddering. However crazy, however incredible it was to be talking to a disembodied voice speaking into the panel out of thin air, she *had* to calm down, she had to

answer.

“All right. I mean, yes,” she said nervously. “I have a copilot. But he’s out cold! My name is Aren Fenstar. I’m a flight messenger, and I deliver parcel. We jettisoned some empty fuel bulbs yesterday and were thrown desperately off course.”

“I see. Well, it’s nice to meet you, Aren,” the voice said. “My name is Cal, and I’m going to try and help you. Can you tell me the name of your ship?” he asked.

“The Black Swan,” she replied anxiously. “Sam, my training pilot and navigator, looks like he has a concussion.” The words sounded hollow, disconnected, as if somebody a universe away were saying them. “He hit his head and passed out suddenly, and now I can’t make him get up.”

“Everything will be all right. I promise. I see you on my monitor as we speak. What’s happened is you’ve wandered into a forbidden sector and crossed paths with a very nasty black hole. You’re in the Devil’s Divide.”

Aren cringed. “If you see me that means I can disengage my airlocks and you can get us out of here. Troubleshooting my cursor readings, I’m about 23.8 million miles in.”

“I know, but it’s not that simple,” Cal voiced despairingly. “You’re also another 57 million miles off course, and the light speed differentials surrounding you and that vacuum is constant. You’re temporarily stuck in the reentry phase of the event horizon, a sort of intermittent loop, which is why you can’t escape its gravity. Also, I’m nowhere near you where I can just magically whisk you away in some rescue ship. You were lucky I picked up your signal when I did and at this great distance. It’s a miracle, really. I’m in an emergency outpost over 300 million miles away.”

Aren leaned back, confused. “Emergency outpost?”

“Yes, a monitoring station in space. I might as well be in a whole other universe. Luckily, my outpost’s communication satellite is light-year free so transmission comes instant. Now what I’m going to try and do is guide you *away* from the event horizon. Hopefully, you still have time to get out of its gravitational field.”

“But I’m not qualified enough,” she cried uncontrollably.

“Yes, you are,” he insisted. “You can do this.”

“Please, why don’t I just disengage the airlocks? Then you send a ship and have another party get me out of here.”

“There’s no one in the vicinity. You must calm down, Aren, and you must listen to me. That isn’t just any ordinary black hole. You’re in the path of an extremely bright and active young galaxy with an internal nucleus. I can’t explain how you wandered into its path, but that vacuum before you is part of a quasar!”

Once more, Aren looked through the side window. *No, it can't be a quasar*, she thought to herself. It was too small, too dark. But the closer the Swan got to it, the bigger and brighter it became. The electromagnetic force and luminous bands radiating from its center were stronger than a trillion suns—billions of times stronger than a supernova or a gamma-ray burst—and its mixed bag of intergalactic ingredients, now streaming perpetually inside its warped funnel, seemed ready to implode.

Above the massive celestial body was a compressed halo of matter, surrounding the central line and many newborn galaxies, eating up the old and filtering out the new. Cursor readings aboard the ship registered energy release levels equivalent to the output of a hundred galaxies combined. Still in awe, it was another moment before Aren took her thumb off the transmit button. This time Cal seemed to be waiting for her. “All right,” he said. “Just relax, and we’ll get this sorted out. Now, first of all, do you happen to know if the freighter’s on autopilot?”

For a moment Aren blinked, and then the memory came suddenly. Of course it was. Sam had sequenced it before the accident. She felt the trickle of new tears on her face. She had to stop being stupid; most of all, she had to stop being insecure.

“Come on, Aren.” There was a trace of urgency in Cal’s voice now. “I need to know if your ship’s on autopilot.”

Aren squeezed the bio-com behind her ear, returned to the transmit button on the panel and said hoarsely, “Yes. Yes, it is. Sam put it on before...before we got pulled in.” She looked at the still figure beside her. Sam’s face was deathly white and immobile. Under his flight suit his turtleneck moved in slow, irregular jerks as he breathed.

“Good.” Cal’s relieved tone was lost in the hiss of the 300 million mile nebulous transmission. “That, along with the neutral gravity shift, gives us some time then. So first of all, I want you to sit back and relax, get a grip on yourself, and just listen.”

“Get a grip on yourself,” Aren laughed. “That’s easy for you to say. It’s not like you’ve flown out of the path of a black hole before.”

“Perhaps I have.” Cal’s voice was unruffled and masterful. “Just trust me.”

Aren looked down at the controls in silence.

Then she said, “All right. I’m listening. I only hope you know what you’re doing.” She closed her eyes and leaned back in her seat, trying to still her fluttering muscles. *Just pretend it’s a simple delivery run*, she thought; calm down and think sensibly. She pressed a quivering hand to her ear and reached out the other. “I’m...alright now. Calmer than before.”

“That’s good.” Cal’s slow, disembodied voice seemed to fill the pit. Its

matter-of-factness was somehow steady. “Next, have you tried to revive your copilot?”

“Yes. I slapped his face and shook him.” Aren felt tears starting down her cheeks again. “But there was no reaction.”

“All right, Aren.” The voice was soothing, reassuring. “Forget that for the moment; we’ll come back to it later on, when we’ve got you out of the Divide. Now I’ve got one or two questions about the ship you’re in. Okay?”

Aren took a deep shuddering breath. “Yes. Go on.”

“Right. First, do you know if your rockets have a built-in light drive? Because you’re going to need one.”

She bit her bottom lip, trying to think. “I don’t know. He—I mean, Sam—said, but I don’t remember. The energizers process dark matter, I remember that, if that’s any help...I’ve never been in a light drive ship before...” She trailed off hopelessly. “My parents drove very basic upper atmosphere vessels when I was a girl.”

“Okay, okay. I’d rather got that impression.” Cal acted deliberately droll and unconcerned. “What you can tell me, though, is what class ship you’re in.”

“G59... G59 star freighter.” She explained it.

“Fine. And now, would you tell me where you took off from, how long ago it was, and where you’re going?”

Aren tried to cast her mind back. She hadn’t noticed the time before they left, and like most messenger pilots, she didn’t own a watch capable of light year measurement. It was usually pick-up and deliver, and that was all. “We left from Titan some four months ago,” she finally said, guessing. Then she cleared her throat and said into the panel, “We were going to...er, Rodan. Near Metabelis Point.”

“Ah, so the drop-off was in the Hermes Nebula.” With that bit of information, Cal now understood what kind of fuel the Swan operated on, how much it ate up in the course of one interstellar trip, and what model light drive it used. “All right, not to worry. Spectra. That’s good stuff. Now, I want you to look on the computer panel to your right. You’ll find a touch pad with a visual clarification atlas of the nearest and safest solar system. Every cargo ship has one. Can you tell me where that system’s largest dwarf is in relation to you? It may sound silly, but it’ll tell which way you should be heading, you see.”

Dwarf? Did he mean...a sun? Aren reluctantly raised her eyes to the side window again. The huge emptiness of the ever-swallowing void with its massive solar streaks brought on a new wave of fear. “System’s in the west quadrant. Computer cursors and atlas confirm it.”

“Good. And now, lastly, it’ll help if you can tell me if your ship has four rockets or six. In other words, whether it’s got half a dozen energizers or less, beneath the hull. G59’s are rented but well-equipped.”

“Just four. Sam said it was dual controlled. Two energizers and two thrusters per side. Left and right.”

“That’s fine. You’ve done very well, Aren.” Cal hesitated, then carried on. “Now I’m going to leave you for a moment while I pull up some blueprints and gather my data. I’ll get back to you in a minute or two, so just sit tight. And whatever you do, don’t fiddle with the communication link we’ve established. At this distance we may lose it permanently. Okay?”

Aren nodded. The idea of touching anything in the flight pit filled her with horror. “Yes, okay,” she said.

“Good. All right, then, I’ll leave you now for just a moment. Just relax.”

Aren nodded for the second time. With Cal’s voice gone, she felt terribly alone again. She clenched her teeth to stop their chattering and gripped her ear tightly with her right hand, as if the device there were something precious. The Swan roared on, serene and steady, the event horizon drawing it closer with each passing minute.

While Cal was away, Aren tried to make Sam as comfortable as possible. The realization that up to now she’d practically ignored him came as a shock. Twisting in her copilot’s chair, it made no visible difference: he went on breathing slowly and irregularly. She pulled his medium-sized frame into the chair next to hers. She tightened his seat belt, her fingers shaking and clumsy, and undid her own belt to relieve the pressure on her abdomen. Almost automatically she noticed that his neck was abnormally rigid. But he was still breathing.

She sat back, trying to think what to do next. Her mind was almost blank, every thought disjointed and spaced out. She leaned over and picked up his right hand. It was a large hand, very masculine and capable-looking—if only she, too, had been that capable—which somehow made its flaccidity all the more frightening. His skin was cool under her fingers as she felt for the pulse on the wrist. The beat was thin and erratic and seemed slow. The head was still bruised. She put the hand back in his lap and, reaching up to his face, raised his eyelids, first one and then the other. The eyeballs were rolled upward, but the bottoms of the pupils were still visible. Both were dilated.

That ought to add up to something, she thought. Neck muscles in spasm, pupil dilation, irregular pulse. She shook her head and whispered hopelessly, “*Please* be all right, Sam.” She took his still hand in hers. “I...I know I may never get the chance to say this to you again—hey, who knows, I’m

probably not even your type—but I love you, Sam Walsh. I really do. I love you something awful.”

The ship wriggled violently for a moment and then settled, a tiny sunlit cell hanging rock steady at the top of the swirling cloud of nothingness. Aren found herself crying again, the tears racing like before. She made small animal noises of terror, as the Swan was pulled inward, deeper and deeper into the spiraling vacuum. Her fear had reached its highest point; if the human brain is subjected to extreme fright for an extended period of time, it eventually reaches saturation. Unable to cope any longer, Aren’s conscious mind broke out into a state of extreme shock and confusion.

She knew the ship was going to be swallowed, knew it quite certainly. But the odd thing was that she couldn’t imagine what it was going to be like. After all, no one had actually been swallowed by a black hole and lived just long enough to tell about it. The flight pit was too warm and solid, compared to the cold suppleness of space, too sturdy to think of it shattering and crumpling in an instant of time. Earlier on she’d been terrified of dying, of the Swan’s power reserves going out on her and tumbling slingshot millions of miles per minute into the void. But now, now that it was really going to happen, she couldn’t imagine it at all. It was as if the horror had been used up, dulled by overexposure. Death was just another word.

She twisted her head so she could see the other small celestial bodies through the side window. Planets and moons floated alongside each other in semi-concentric circles, rising and falling gently. She could even see a neutron star. Funny to have something so parallel and bright talking to you in the middle of space. There it was, so near yet so displaced, and it was just a remnant of something which had once been a thousand times larger. She wanted to know more about such things. And now she never would.

“Aren, are you still there? I have G59 blueprints up on my screen.” Cal’s voice came back over the speaker with startling suddenness. “Hello there, Aren? You still with me?”

She took Sam’s hand and looked dazedly at the panel in front of her. For some reason the words echoing out seemed unimportant. The spatial scene was changing with the sinking of the event horizon, as it began its tremendous collapse in on itself, taking on the electric blue and orange coldness of the birth of a whole new galaxy.

She had to go on trying. Just until she knew that death was inevitable. And if it were, she would not have regretted her final hours of life for a moment. She had seen something no one else could possibly see.

And she had Sam.

The communication feed blurted out again, “Come on now, Aren! Pull yourself together. Will you please answer me?”

She gasped with shock, then fumbled with Sam's arm in her lap and put her right hand back to her ear. She held the transmit button down on the panel with her left hand and put her mouth forward. "Yes. Yes, I'm still here."

"Good. I'm glad you haven't given up hope yet. Now just keep your voice nice and loud. Okay?"

She cleared her throat. "All right."

"Fine. Now, I want you to start setting the light drive accelerator in front of you three settings *above* parsecs. Can you do that, Aren? That's *three* settings. It should be a silver panel with yellow and red numeric switches."

"I've found it. Accelerator set."

"Good. Now I want you to drop any excess weight you might be holding, from pods to crates. Everything! The lighter you are, the easier it'll be for you to break free of the event horizon's intense gravitational shift and jump to the next system. Also, having the Swan on neutral gravity contributes to the upkeep of this."

Aren flipped a series of levers above her. She heard the cargo doors in back of the ship open. "Cargo jettisoned," she said.

"That's great, Aren. Now I want you to set your quadrant bearings to 1.34486. I'll say that again: 1.34486. It should be a big square button just above the atmospheric longitude dial, just to the right of your velocity control motherboard."

"Got it."

"Excellent!" Cal spoke slowly and loudly, keeping the anxiety out of his voice; he, too, was admittedly nervous. "Now let's go to advanced rocket settings. Tell me if there's any irregular or amplified energy buildup before you use the light drive."

"Will do."

"Good, Aren, very good. Now I need to know, do you think you're ready to make the jump? Are you ready to leave the Divide?"

Aren glanced nervously at Sam. His stillness suddenly frightened her more than ever. "Yes," she said. "I...I'm ready."

"Do you *believe* in yourself, Aren, believe that you'll manage this?" Cal asked. "Because this is it. Once you make the jump, you won't be able to thank me."

Closing her eyes and putting her hands firmly in front of her, she said, "Yes, I believe!" Part of her mind seemed to be curiously detached from her body, sitting somewhere behind her shoulder and watching the girl at the controls. She felt contemptuous in a distant sort of way, because an hour earlier that same girl was reacting very stupidly. Her body was rigid with tension when she should have been thinking calmly and clearly. She ought

to relax, this little one.

The speaker came to life. “That’s great stuff, Aren. You’re in perfect formation.”

She could feel the sinking in the pit of her stomach as she initiated the light drive sequence. The strange thing was that, with Cal and Sam by her side, there was no evidence of her failing. The frosty void millions of miles before her still looked exactly the same, not coming up to meet her at all. She quivered from head to toe during the initial countdown. The Swan was in a side orbit, a sort of knife’s edge, moving clean and fast. The conflict in neutralized gravity created a weird floating sensation, the rumbling freighter just hanging there suspended in space, yet motionless in the vortex of universal creation itself.

The detached part of Aren’s brain watched dispassionately. The *real* her went on sitting upright, still grasping the controls. Then, when the words “you’re safe” sank in, she collapsed forward and buried her face in her hands. The small, lonely sound of her sobbing was lost in the rumble of the Swan’s graceful departure and triumphant escape.