

The Greatest Show

By Jon Buck, with Robotech_Master

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ECS Great Eastern in Zharus high orbit.

“*March Hare, Mock Turtle, and Caterpillar* are free and clear,” Tentmaster Jorge Escalante shouted into Seamus Odell’s ear. “What the *hell* is the holdup, Seamus? Where are you?”

“In an airlock. Clamp Seven is still jammed,” the engineer replied patiently. He powered on the skinsuit and connected all the life support. The air supply smelled stale—the suit obviously hadn’t been serviced recently. No surprise there, unfortunately. “Give me ten more minutes and we’ll get the *Alice* undocked.”

“You have *two* minutes!” the so-called Tentmaster snarled over the comm. The Eridanite strongman’s pale mustachioed face covered the upper left quarter of the space suit’s visor.

“That’s not how it works, Jorge,” Seamus said patiently. He waited for the airlock to cycle through and open and lift him up to the hull’s surface on a platform. “Since I’m doing it by *myself*, ten minutes. We won’t miss the Nextus drop window, I promise.” *Even though we shouldn’t even be dropping at all*, he reflected. *And if we had to, it would have been nice to have had, oh, an hour’s warning so we wouldn’t be doing this at the last minute.* Thanks, Jorge.

The massive malfunctioning clamp that still held the *Alice* to the hull of the *ECS Great Eastern* had been damaged in a pirate raid in the Kepler system years ago. It bore the marks of many “temporary” fixes that were anything but. The clamp was exactly midway on the *Alice*’s half-kilometer length. Seamus jetted along a narrow ledge on the *Great Eastern*’s hull, where the equilateral triangular core started to turn on one of its points. The core ship that transported Brunel’s Star Circus was 1,855 meters long. Like the *Alice* it was battered and in growing disrepair.

Directly overhead was the super-Earth Zharus, physically and in population the largest of Earth’s colonies. Despite its mass and diameter—twice Earth’s—it had lower surface gravity, which made the descent easier than their last stop, the inhospitable colony of Wednesday. On Seamus’s left, the system’s sun, named Pharos, shone much more amiable than Wednesday’s temperamental blue star. He was looking forward to getting planetside.

Assuming the lifters held out.

Seamus wondered if his red-flagged report on Lifter 26 had gotten up to Isabella Brunel, but with Jorge between him and her doubted it. She was the Ringmistress and Commodore of the Circus and its small flotilla. One former colony ship formed its core and hauled six 500-meter Bigtop landers, six 300-meter Pinnaces, and another six 100-meter Gillies. The *Great Eastern* carried enough circus folk and smaller ships to reach every corner of a colonial star system, from the main planetbound settlements, to orbital habs, to moons and smaller bodies. Everyone would get some entertainment, even if it was only ten performers in a Gilly.

“Hey hey *hey hey hey*, Seamus!” whispered a dry voice in the comm. A pixelated emoticon of a white-faced sad clown appeared on his faceplate. “Need any help out there? I think I can suit up without Jorge noticing.”

“No point, Frick, but thanks,” Seamus replied. “Give Frack kudos for running interference the other day, though. I’m a *horrible* magician. That hasn’t changed in years. Lifter 18 needed TLC more than I needed to practice the disappearing coin trick.”

“C’mon, Seamus. If you gave up on fixing things you might only be mediocre at it. And will do, he’ll appreciate it,” Frick replied. “I’ll be waiting at Airlock Four to speed things up getting you back inside. I think Jorge’s going to get the *Alice* away from the *Eastern* as soon as that clamp’s released. Frack’ll distract him in the control room until you’re back on board.”

“Thanks, buddy,” Seamus said. “Just like the bastard.”

The clamp was a large cylinder with flanges on the end that expanded to secure the lander to the core ship. It was ten meters long and three meters wide, and there were dozens of them studding the ventral hull of the Bigtop. He practically knew each one personally. Unfortunately the damage this lander had sustained meant this one could only be accessed from outside through a gap in the hull plating. The interior access hatch was welded shut.

Replacing the clamp’s controller box was simple enough. Normally there was a cover over where the unit was installed, but this particular fix needed to be done so often the cover had been removed. First step, power down clamp assembly. Second step, remove malfunctioning AE-35 unit from housing via pulling on the handle-latch. Third step, install new unit and latch in securely. Last step, power up. An hour ago he could have used a repair drone, but they were all stored for the drop.

Seamus took some extra time to inspect the supporting structure and other components. The Bigtops had seen better days. *This whole assembly needs a rebuild. Damned if I can fix frotzed old power feeds in open space. That’s what’s burning out these control boxes all the time.*

No money for real repairs, only short-term fixes that ended up costing even more money in the long-term. What they used to call penny-wise and pound-foolish. The entire flotilla was like this. As expected the clamp started retracting. This time he manually set it so it couldn’t deploy again. His tiny dedicated engineering crew would have to cannibalize another from one of the two defunct Bigtops after they returned to the core ship. “Okay Frick, I’m on my way back,” Seamus said. He was already out of the service space through the gap in the hull plating.

“Airlock’s open and waiting for you.”

Now to hope we can reach the ground without a resounding splat, Seamus thought. But now wasn’t the time for grim thoughts. The descent would take all his concentration keeping the gravitic lifters balanced, and damned if the *Alice* was going to go down her final rabbit hole on his watch.

Nextus Recreational Park

“Have a look at this, Mikey.” Joe Steader handed his younger, shorter brother the binoculars. They were purely optical, modeled after British World War 2 combat units. Strictly authentic to twentieth century tech. The brothers looked more alike than usual, having their light brown hair cropped to military standards. “That descent is pretty erratic. ATC is going to be all over them.”

Joe was three years Mikel’s senior, and both were middle-aged by Twentieth Century standards. Five centuries of advancing medical technology and anti agathics made their ages of 51 and 48 Zharus years (negligibly different from Earth-standard) more like the early 30s in the Twentieth. Both had the aquiline Steader features, though Mikel’s nose was a little larger, and hazel eyes. When they were younger, they’d

sometimes been mistaken for identical twins.

Hovering two kilometers over the Fairground a landing craft shaped like the upper half of a zeppelin bloomed to life, surrounding itself with a blazing holographic fireworks show that stood out even in the late afternoon light from Pharos.

Mikel Steader took the binocs and zoomed in as close as they could go, staring intently at the bottom of the ship. “One, two, three...” he muttered to himself as he counted the lifters. “Twenty-eight, twenty-nine...”

“Twenty-ten, twenty-eleven,” Joe said. “Both good years.”

“Stop that, Joey! You’ll make me lose count,” Mikel grumbled. *Fifty-three, fifty-four...hmmm.* There were breaks in the glowing gravitic thruster pattern and several were flickering an unhealthy blue-green, but whoever was keeping the descent that steady was doing a great job of it. “They’re missing six lifters. No wonder they’re being careful. That’s going to get them a hefty safety fine from the Third Tier Inspectors.”

“Makes you wonder why they didn’t land at Punta Sur or that new Aloha place instead,” Joe added. “Looks like they’ve deferred a *hell* of a lot of maintenance. Might be the opening you were looking for.”

The brothers were dressed in World War II American combat fatigues, where they and a group of friends had spent the last week reenacting the Battle of the Bulge. The brothers had used nothing the soldiers five hundred years past wouldn’t have aside from some required emergency survival gear. Granted, the Society for Creative Anachronism troupe wasn’t camped that far away from Nextus proper to begin with.

They were the only ones left at the site, doing the final cleanup. The Star Circus was coming and nobody wanted to be left out when it landed—except for the Steader brothers, who wanted to make sure the reenactment area was completely clean from their wargames. Mikel put the binoculars into their genuine leather case in the back of the olive drab Jeep, then sat down in the driver’s seat.

“You’re not planning to drive *that* to the Fairgrounds, are you?” Joe said. “Do you have enough gas?”

“It’s only ten clicks, Joe. I’ll make it,” Mikel said. He pulled open the choke, pushed in the clutch, then turned the starter. The replica Jeep rumbled to life, spewing pollution out the tailpipe that added tens of *mu* per hour of use just in pollution abatement fees. Every other reenactor’s vehicle—from the tanks to the aircraft—had used conventional materials and energy sources, either gas turbines or batteries, with noisemakers and smoke generators to add verisimilitude. The replica Jeep was Mikel’s pride and joy, fabbed from the schematics in the treasure trove of Twentieth Century culture and technology they had found on Earth twelve years ago. It ran on actual gasoline.

“Then I’ll come with you,” Joe said. He signaled the remaining automated carryall skimmer to lift off to take the gear and trash back to the family estate, then hopped into the passenger seat next to his brother. “Carry on, Jeeves.”

Mikel laughed, popping the clutch, making Joe grab his seat as he drove over mud and rocks towards the main road.

“Come on baby, hold together,” Isabella prayed. It had been a long time since since she’d last gone below the *Alice’s* Arena Deck. Jorge’s reassurances and regular reports that all was well had been enough for her peace of mind until they’d reached Zharus orbit. This time they needed every hand who knew which end of a hydrospanner

to hold to keep the Bigtop from descending faster than her inertial dampers could handle.

She should have been on the Bigtop landing in Zharustead, but the crew of the *Alice* deserved the vote of confidence in their skills. The other landers had all made it down without incident in Zharustead, Grand Valley City, and Landing. The four operating Pinnaces had found smaller cities and the Gillies were on their way to spacer hubs. When the circus flotilla dispersed like this one simply had to let their crews handle things on their own.

The *Alice* shuddered, rattled, and shimmied as it descended through the planet's atmosphere a kilometer above the Fairground's landing pad. Ringmistress Isabella Brunel ran through the tight engineering corridors under the arena floor of the half-kilometer-long lander, deftly avoiding exposed conduits on the walls. *Six lifters out. We're lucky Zharus has lower surface gravity than Wednesday...*

"Boss, if you don't get me that part in *fifteen seconds* we're going to lose this lifter fifty meters above the ground!" Tentmater Jorge Escalante said through her comm badge. "If we lose another we'll come down *hard!*"

"I know, Jorge! I'm just around the corner!" she replied, sweat rolling down her face at a full sprint. She practically slid into Lifter 26's service compartment, pitching the cylindrical part at the Eridanite Tentmaster overhand. The large man caught it easily.

Jorge yanked out the hot-swappable failing part and slammed in the replacement almost too fast for Isabella to follow. The lifter's harmonics immediately became much less dissonant, the lander's shuddering reduced to tolerable levels.

"Hope it works. That was the last of the fabber matter for a while," Isabella said.

"It'll be fine, boss," the strongman said. "You should probably go and get dressed for the arrival."

"The show must go on," Isabella agreed. She took a moment to have a look around. There was junk everywhere. The fabber recycler hadn't been working since before their last stop, so waste was piling up. It was too valuable to get rid of because when the recycler was fixed, into the bin it would go. One couldn't just go down to the corner shop to get more raw materials in deep space. "I didn't know things had gotten that bad down here."

"It's fine down here. Absolutely fine," Jorge sputtered. His exertions had left his normally immaculately-waxed handlebar mustache looking very disheveled, more like a giant hairy caterpillar glued to his upper lip than human hair. "You should really get dressed. Show *must* go on."

"We aren't on the ground yet," Isabella pointed out. "I'm going to check on the Lifter Control Room."

"I'll come with you," Jorge said.

Suddenly so defensive, the woman thought. "Stay here, Jorge. This lifter needs your attention."

"But I really should..." he said.

"Stay. Here," she repeated, pointing at the deck. "I need you to make sure we reach the ground in one piece. I'm going to get myself out of your way so you can do your job."

"Yes ma'am," Jorge said.

Isabella moved out into the cluttered, claustrophobic corridor. Five years since

Kepler. Five years since the pirate attack that had killed her father Isambard in the boarding action and had caused so much damage to the Star Circus. The landers *White Rabbit* and *Mad Hatter* were both wrecks, their metal corpses still clinging to the *Great Eastern* like coffins in a hearse.

Her contact lenses displayed a map, which was necessary in the poorly-lit corridors. She still bumped into the performer-crewmembers trying to keep tabs on the descent and make her way to the control room. They were torn between their traditional double-duties, trying to get ready for the spec when the Bigtop opened her doors on landing and trying to keep her from losing another lifter.

The other three Bigtops weren't in as bad a shape as the *Alice*, but this one was the Circus's flagship, named after the main character in *Alice in Wonderland*. When she went "down the rabbit hole" the Circus could truly begin.

Her contacts reported their altitude was 1000 meters, descending a little fast for comfort. Isabella headed for the Lifter Control Room.

"Maybe you should try plate spinning instead of that silly magic act they tried to make you do," Frack suggested, slowly releasing his grip on the control panel from the last big bump the dampers could not handle. He was the happy clown to Frick's sad version, though was only in makeup rather than full costume. "Because after watching you load balance fifty-plus lifters, I think you'd be pretty good at it." He patted Seamus on the shoulder. "Damned good job."

"Thanks, but I'll just keep the *lifters* spinning, if you don't mind," Seamus said. He hadn't bothered taking the time to get out of the skinsuit, only removing the gloves and helmet. Six lifters were out and four were borderline, including Lifter 26 that Jorge had just fixed in the "nick of time", putting everyone on board at risk. The entire lander was still vibrating like a sonofabitch even though the danger had passed. "Almost on the ground..."

"Ah, Nextus," Frack said. "Were you with us last time we were here, Seamus?"

"Before my time," Seamus replied. It wasn't a matter of adjusting individual lifters so much as it was directing the LanderAI to devote more resources to one segment or another. The *Alice's* antiquated AIs and expert system software could barely do the job.

"Well, don't judge 'em when you first see 'em," Frack said. "They're...how to explain it? Players of games. They put on a mask of sticks-up-their-assness to outsiders, but underneath they're damned nice people. We might see 'em loosen up a bit around here. They've got places where they can take that mask off and go a little nuts to blow off steam. The Circus fits that bill, so keep an eye out when you're wandering the Midway for some stuffy bureaucrats cutting loose."

"I'd love to have some time to see some of the planet while we're here," Seamus said. While outside on the hull earlier he'd gawked at the *supercontinent* where Nextus was situated. There was a vast desert, fittingly called the Dry Ocean, that dominated it. Trackless and extremely dangerous, what knowledge Zharusians had of it had to be garnered via remote sensing satellites and high-altitude flyovers. There was some kind of mineral dust down there that took down any and all equipment—and it was *hot*. Even the deserts of his homeworld Ibn-Rushd barely got half as hot.

I joined up to see the galaxy, Seamus thought. He hadn't been disappointed thus far. After five years he'd seen Proxima, Centauri, Zheng He, and Wednesday. Now,

Zharus beckoned like a giant sapphire.

“Two hundred meters altitude,” Seamus said. The last five hundred meters of a descent was very slow indeed. “Got an irregularity in Lifter Sixteen...”

“Bad?” Frack asked.

“Nothing the system can’t handle, but only *just* inside tolerances. I’m going to have to realign the cavorite disk subassembly when we land,” Seamus said, continuing his AI direction.

“Take a break, then. I’ll keep an eye out on the systems. Go get a look from Nextus at altitude. It’s a funky place,” Frack said, coming over to the other side of the control panel.

City layout was in concentric circles crossed by roadways that radiated out from the center. That wasn’t unusual in itself. Many cities on his homeworld had that kind of layout. It bespoke a city that had been planned from the start—as most colony cities had—rather than allowed to grow haphazardly from scratch. Seamus zoomed in on the architecture. “Is that building a *klein bottle*?”

“Wasn’t there last time, but I’m not surprised it is,” Frack said. “An elegant mathematical construct, both simple and complex at the same time. Fitting for Nextusites. Nextusians? I’m not sure which.”

Seamus moved from the buildings to the growing crowd surrounding the landing area. There were egg-shaped skimmers everywhere, and there was a disappointing sameness to them. A few things stood out, though. He zoomed in on a blocky olive drab shape in the middle of a sea of white skimmers. “What is *that*?”

“No idea,” Frack said. “But I’d like to find out. Looks like some ancient design someone printed up. There’s wheels, but I don’t see any lifters. Looks military. Might even be an internal combustion engine—look at that blue exhaust!”

There were two men sitting in it. Seamus zoomed in closer...

“How are things going in here, guys?”

Seamus and Frack looked up. Isabella Brunel casually leaned against the open door in her orange spacer’s jumpsuit.

“Uh, fine,” Seamus stammered. “Perfectly fine. We were just...”

“Peopleshooting?” Isabella looked at his nametag. “Odell? I don’t believe we’ve properly met.”

“Seamus Odell, ma’am. I joined on Ibn-Rushd after the pirate attack,” Seamus said. He wasn’t sure if he should salute or what. This was the Ringmistress, the Commodore. And she was beautiful. “I’m just an engineer. It’s all I do around here, fixing things.”

“So *you’re* why *Alice* is still flying, then?” Isabella said. “You’ve been in here the whole time?”

“Since we did the deorbit burn, yeah,” Seamus said.

“I’m telling you, Seamus, plate spinning,” Frack said.

“Landing in five minutes,” the Lander AI reported. “Altitude one hundred meters.”

“I’d better get myself dressed for success,” the Ringmistress said. “Nice finally meeting you, Seamus. See you and Frack in the center ring, Frack.”

Seamus only relaxed when she was out of earshot. “Five years and I’ve never met her face-to-face.” He facepalmed. “Argh! I should have asked her if she saw my report. Guess she didn’t, or she’d have recognized my name.”

“Yeah, odds aren’t good. Jorge likes to keep you engis isolated from the command staff so *he* can take all the credit when things get fixed,” Frack said. The old clown smiled genuinely. “I’d better haul jets and get the rest of my costume on. Again, *damned* good work, son.”

“Hard to believe something that size can soft-land,” Joe marveled, looking up at the descending lander that cast a shadow over the entire Fairground. Underneath the lander, writing in a massive, glowing cursive script between lifter exhausts proclaimed it the *Alice*. “Last time they were here we had to head up to their dock on Omphalos. Lifters are really an incredible technology, you know that? We finally got the flying cars they dreamed of in the twentieth.”

“Last time they were here we were actually on our way back from Earth,” Mikel pointed out. “What you’re remembering was their very *first* visit to Zharus forty years ago when we were kids.”

“Hmm, you’re right. Don’t remember it being a circus then,” Joe said, scratching his three-day stubble. “Wasn’t it the Colonial Expo?”

“It was. And you should catch up on your *recent* history instead of staying immersed in the Twentieth all the time,” Mikel said. “A man named Isambard Kingdom Brunel bought them after their first circuit of the Colonies and turned the whole thing into a 19th century circus with an *Alice in Wonderland* theme.”

“As long as it isn’t steampunk,” Joe said, making a sour face.

There was very little ground traffic. Most modern Nextusites preferred their egg-shaped skimmers. But they all had to land somewhere, and the parking lot around the landing area was already crowded with people watching the slow descent. The *Alice* was less than a hundred meters from the ground, its massive lifters thrumming mostly harmonically.

“I’m hearing some bad notes with those lifters,” Mikel said. “They’re in pretty bad shape.” He honked the Jeep’s horn a couple times so people would make way. The Jeep and its riders were causing a bit of a stir all by themselves. A few Policia IDEs stood guard at regular intervals, the 6-meter-tall mechs standing at attention.

“Ugh, those things are ugly,” Joe said, pointing at the blocky mecha. “They need a few Gundams. Or at least a Patlabor.”

“That one of those giant robot shows from the Twencen Trove?” Mikel found a place to park, and came to a stop before someone could land in the space and turned off the motor. He stood up and pushed the windshield so it laid flat on the hood, then put his feet up on the steering wheel.

“Two different ones. Japanese,” Joe said, putting his feet up on the dashboard himself. He reached back into the cargo area and picked up a canteen. “So, we wait until they open then find out who’s in charge?”

“Isabella Brunel, Ringmistress,” Mikel said. “And she’s aboard the *Alice*. It was all over the net.” *And oh boy, is she a looker.* From the posters on the net, a statuesque woman in a red, tailed overcoat, white gloves, black fishnet stockings, and a black top hat, with long black hair and decisive green eyes. The perfect image of a Circus Ringmistress, and the adopted daughter of the *ECS Great Eastern*’s previous owner. *Hopefully as reasonable as she is beautiful.*

Gently, the *Alice* landed in her dock, the shimmering ads shutting down section-by-section, leaving a rather ruddy half cylinder. Waiting near where the ramps and

gangways would deploy was an army of Third Tier Public Safety Inspectors and their dozens of attendant floating inspection bots.

“Wish they’d get on with it,” Joe grumbled. “I could use a good circus.”

“What’s in that canteen?” Mikel asked.

“Coca-cola,” Joe said. “Mixed with a little rum. Made it this morning from the ‘emergency rations’. Popular twencen drink.”

“Sounds good. Give me a pull of that.”

“Just a sip, Mikey. Don’t wanna make a bad impression.”

“Relax, Joey.” He took a long sip from the canteen before giving it back to his brother. “I have some calls to make. Where did I put my ‘specs?’”

“With the rest of the emergency gear,” Joe said. He took a few more gulps from the canteen. “Oh, that’s *good* stuff.”

With his ‘specs on, Mikel called the Public Safety Department. Anyone who actually read the manual about how the department operated and analyzed it would have found some interesting codes and patterns. To outsiders, Nextus bureaucratic red tape was legendary for its impenetrability. But to polity citizens like the Steaders, there were ways of slashing through it like a hot machete. It was all there in the Nextus Citizen’s Manual, if you knew where to look. All part of the game.

“Public Safety Department,” the AI answering service said.

“Connect me with Aunt Bertha, please,” Mikel said.

“Acknowledged. Thank you for waiting,” the AI said.

“Every T crossed, every I dotted, and this inspection is *still* going to take a full ten hours? We even had a Number Two Datapen brought from that shop on Center Street, at *great* expense, and shipped out to the *Great Eastern* before we even entered orbit! What is *wrong* with you people?” Isabella’s volume and fury rose with each sentence. Only Jorge’s hand on her shoulder kept her from assaulting the Sanitary Inspector and his fifty floating robots.

“Indeed, the required-optional datapen was a nice touch,” the Inspector said, packing a great deal of obviously repressed amusement into that one sentence. “You neglected to include a Form 754a with your public performance permit applications. We must be more thorough with our inspection of your concessions and restroom facilities before you can deploy any of your equipment.”

“That form was *optional!*” Isabella shouted. “I read every word. It didn’t seem to *do* anything important.”

“Perhaps you should have examined the codicils more closely,” the Inspector said, tapping his own datapen on his tablet. “It would have allowed you to submit your sanitary inspection results from Wednesday in lieu of doing it ourselves. We find their standards more than adequate.”

“We can’t lose ten hours of midway and performance time,” Isabella said.

The Inspector put his finger on his right ear. “Perkins here. Yes...getting it now. Thank you.” He shut the cover on his tablet and put the datapen back into its holder. His stuffy bureaucrat facade came down. “Well, looks like you’re in luck, Miss Brunel. Someone filed an exemption for you. Don’t ask how—even I don’t know how our own bureaucracy works sometimes. It’s the ferreting out that’s the thrill.”

“That’s how things work here?” Isabella asked. “You actually seem like a real person now.”

“All part of the game we play with outsiders and ourselves, yes,” Inspector Perkins said. “We maintain a certain...aloofness to those who can’t figure that out. Your Star Circus is free to deploy.”

“Told you this place likes to play silly buggers with people,” Jorge said.

“Who filed the exemption, Mr. Perkins?” Isabella asked.

“That would be telling, wouldn’t it? I don’t know. A secret admirer? Someone who enjoyed the circus immensely twelve years ago? Could be anyone. You don’t need money. You just need to play the game,” Perkins said. “Looking forward to your opening acts. I quite enjoyed your previous visit here.”

Isabella smiled brightly. “Well, I hope you’ll find a good time with us. Thank you.”

“Though your lander is a little more decrepit than I remember...” Perkins said. Behind him the floating inspection probes were filing out in twos. “Enjoy your stay in Nextus.”

The Ringmistress sighed deeply and resisted wiping her sweat with her immaculate white gloves. She was in full regalia, and it was made for looks, not comfort. “Jorge, soon as they clear the gangway, deploy everything we’ve got in the Midway. The other Bigtops have already started their shows. We get to play catch-up.”

She turned on the PA system. “Okay, everyone! This is it! Places! Let’s give these stuffed shirts a hell of a show!”

On the outside, the Steaders watched the massive lander transform itself. Panels slid open from one end to the other, down to ground level. A carnival procession emerged from the gangways, rolling out to predetermined spaces on the Fairgrounds, escorted by carnies and attendants in colorful garb. Before long it was unrecognizable as the nondescript half-zeppelin that had landed, projecting a giant tent emblazoned with colonial emblems over its dirty hull.

The gathered crowd cheered.

“Well, it worked,” Mikel said.

“Of course it worked, Mikey,” Joe said. “Tut tut! Our bureaucracy *always* works. Ye of little faith.” He extended his arm over the side of the Jeep and upended the canteen. “Damn. Out of Coke. I think I have a couple more bottles...” He reached back into the rations chest.

“Hey, forget the Coke.” Mikel tugged on his brother’s sleeve. “I want some Keplerian chalam fruit. I haven’t had any in almost forty years.”

“They had them on Earth,” Joe pointed out.

“They grow *these* on board in Keplerian soil, under the right spectrum grow-lights,” Mikel said. “You can’t get the creamy texture right on Earth. Missing something. Turns out like that stinky durian fruit.”

“I *like* durian,” Joe protested. “I still have a couple frozen crates in storage.”

“I know, believe me, I *know*.” Mikel held his nose. “Give me some chalam cream pie. Better than chocolate.”

“Heresy!” Joe exclaimed, hitting his brother amiably on the shoulder. “Looks like they’re about to open the gates. Let’s at least get some cotton candy in the midway while we figure out what to do next.”

“On the surface, immaculate,” Joe said. “But she’s ugly underneath. There’s no

way this thing is still spaceworthy. Is that battle damage? I've heard about pirate problems around Kepler from our family branch there."

He's right. They've been in a firefight or two, Mikel thought. In the hustle and bustle of getting ready for showtime, it hadn't been too hard to find their way behind the holographic facades the ship projected without anyone noticing. Everywhere behind the scenes there were increasingly obvious signs of neglect. Patched power and data conduits, discoloration in the hypercarbon-titanium spaceframe in ominous places. Storage rooms intended for spare parts were instead filled with junk that should have been tossed into the fabber, which didn't bode well for their on-board recycling gear. He went over to a hatchway that descended into the bowels of the lander's engineering spaces under the public areas. "Let's see how bad it really is. I want to find one of those inoperable lifters."

"Lead the way, Mikey. This is your idea," Joe said.

As decrepit as the areas above were, the engineering space below decks was far worse. A tangled maze of narrow corridors, inoperable equipment, jury rigs, junk, and foil food wrappers. The ventilation system didn't seem to be working at more than half-capacity.

"Smells like rotten chalam," Joe observed. "And those rat bars we ate on the Trove dig. Phew! I thought those didn't go bad. And those are just the food smells I recognize. Hope there's nothing toxic. It's like one of those Twencen dumps we dug into."

"Boy howdy," Mikel said, fanning his hand in front of his nose. He pointed down one of the narrow corridors. There was nobody in sight. No sign of maintenance personnel, when on a lander like this the whole deck should have been busy with them doing post-landing inspections on the massive lifters. A good happenstance for the brothers, but not for the Star Circus. "Let's go thataway."

The more deeply they went into the *Alice*, the more certain they became about their assumptions, and other things were revealed. Scorch marks from pulse weapons scarred some equipment, and there were fabbed repairs everywhere that should have been temporary, but from the wear and tear had become permanent.

"Hey, you down there!" a male voice called from somewhere deeper within. "Can you give me a hand with this?"

The source of the voice was a face so Irish he might have stepped out of a 19th century shipyard. A freckled redhead, under his scruffy beard he was probably younger than he looked. But he had no identifiably Irish accent. "We'll? Are you going to help or not? I need some free hands but there's nobody else. I'll even take a couple of townies."

"Is it really that obvious, mister...?" Mikel said.

"Seamus Odell," he said. "Lifter engineer and general fixer, for what it's worth around here. And yes, it's really that obvious. It doesn't help there's no real security. On Wednesday we found about twenty stowaways on the landers *after* we left the system. Not a competent engineer among 'em. Just wannabe *performers*. Maybe like you two." He eyed their clothing. "That looks more like some kind of military gear to me. You sharpshooters or something?"

"Something, Mr. Odell," Mikel said. He sat next to an open service panel for one of the lander's massive lifters. "This is a Moffat Lifters CXL-1A, isn't it? They didn't make many of those. Prototypes."

"You have a good eye...?" He looked askance.

“I’m Mikel, this is my brother Joe,” Mikel said. “Just call me Mike.”

“So, how much do you know about lifters, then? The job I’m doing doesn’t require any special knowledge, but it’d help. I just need two more pairs of steady hands to help me realign the cavorite disk over the gravitic amp.”

“Magnetic bearing come loose?” Joe asked. He looked inside. The disk in question was three meters across and half a meter thick. “You need a shipyard for something this size.”

“You can do it manually if times are pressing, which they are,” Seamus said. “I have ten dedicated engineers trying to maintain this rig. Ten! They’re all doing work that’s equally important, but also can’t wait. We need to get the *Alice* spaceworthy enough for the local safety inspectors if we’re going to even lift off the ground again. That’s gonna take months. Now are you going to help out or what?”

“Just tell us what needs doing,” Mikel said.

Joe nodded. “We’ll be the hands you need.”

“Go have a seat next to the other two clamps. I’ll give you a lifter engineering lesson as we work.”

Three clamps secured the disk in the center of the machine. The disk itself was made of cavorite, a naturally-occurring mineral discovered on Centauri, mankind’s very first colony. Cavorite was a metamaterial, which gained its properties from its structure rather than strictly its chemical composition. It had been in use for a century closer to Earth, and taken almost twenty years to get out to Zharus. The key to cavorite’s widespread use was that it was easy to make synthetically and cheaply using modern molecular printers.

“Cavorite’s funny stuff,” Seamus said. “Comes in a half dozen flavors, depending on what you want to do with it. Shipboard gravity, inertial dampening, gravitic STL drives, that trifling thing known as superluminal travel, plain old groundside antigravity, and a distant cousin for hardlight lenses. It’s pretty much the foundation of all modern transportation technology and then some. You know what they named it for, right?”

“It’s from *First Men on the Moon* by H.G. Wells,” Mikel said. “Fictional metal that could shield anything above it from gravity.”

“Exactly! You know your lit,” Seamus took three tools out of his dirty gray coveralls, then tossed one each to Mikel and Joe. “You’re going to help me realign this over the emitter plate. Joe, nudge that clamp two millimeters forward.”

“Got it,” Joe said, giving the adjustor a little twist.

“Mike, three millimeters,” Seamus ordered.

“Done!” Mikel said.

“Done and done. I just need to degauss the whole assembly next. Anyway, there’s two types of cavorite ‘engines’ in service,” Seamus continued. “You’re sitting on one of them. This type everyone just calls a lifter, ‘cause that’s what it does. Your standard antigravity pipe dream we had for centuries. Flying cars, easy ascent to orbit, the whole shebang. Takes very little energy to run ‘em.”

“The other type are impellers,” Mikel said.

“Right! They just give a really *big* push, like an ancient rocket engine or fusion drive on steroids. Lifters don’t provide much thrust since they work with existing gravity fields. Maybe three gees on a good day in planetary gravity fields. That’s still pretty good by the old fusion drive standards when the *Great Eastern* was launched, but it’s pretty

damned laughable when you get talking impellers.” Seamus eyeballed the alignment, then nudged his own tool on the clamp. “Just a micrometer more...”

“The Pharos Rangers—that’s our intra-system police—have ships that can do near five hundred gees of acceleration,” Mikel said. “Metamaterials are really amazing things. We have one of our own here on Zharus—qubitite. It’s been pretty useless, though, except for killing any technology that goes more than a klick or so into the desert.”

“Maybe not, Mikey. Nextus Nano has some big announcement on that stuff coming up,” Joe said. “They’re keeping a real *tight* lid on it.”

Tight enough that even the Steaders can’t find out what it is, Mikel reflected. “This all you need from us?”

“You’ve both got some great hands on you,” Seamus said. “Looks like the alignment’s back in tolerance. She’ll be good for at least one more lift. After that... Well, thank you both.”

“If you need more help, we’ll be happy to stick around,” Mikel said.

“I’m gonna get in trouble for letting you guys in here,” Seamus said. He looked towards the open access panel. “Aren’t I, Jorge?”

“Damn straight,” the large, pale man growled. “The Human Cannonball fizzled, Seamus. Would you know anything about that?”

“I had other things to do. I can’t keep this thing spaceworthy if I’m fixing spring-loaded ‘cannons’,” Seamus said. “I told that stuffed shirt Cannady the Megalomaniac I didn’t have time to fix it, but he went ahead anyway. He’s lucky if it only fizzled.”

“The performers are the *lifeblood* of this Circus, Odell! If you weren’t...” Jorge said angrily, pointing his finger at the engineer, so angry he was unable to speak.

“Right now me and my mates are the only reason we made it to the ground in one piece,” Seamus said. “If I were another type of man I would’ve jumped ship on Wednesday, and then where would you be? A crater, that’s where! I’m *fifty* hands short of dedicated engineers down here just on the *Alice* and you know it! You’re no damned help, you know? Stop exercising those muscles and start using that brain!”

“I’m damned good at what I do!” Jorge said, abruptly on the defensive. “I fixed this thing on the descent, while it was still powered!”

“You’re nothing but a glory-hound! I warned you before we left orbit the graviton condenser needed replacement! You just wanted to take the credit for being a fucking hero! ‘Nick-of-time fix’ my ass!” Seamus retorted. He dashed across the top of the disk to get right in the other man’s face. “If you want to fire me, Mr. Tentmaster, you goddamn *do it* right now!”

“Old argument?” Mikel said, sliding off the clamp to stand against the lifter wall. “You know, rivalry like this between departments isn’t healthy corporate culture.”

“Shut up, you!” Jorge shouted. The strongman glared at the brothers. There was a flash of recognition. “Wait...I’ve seen your faces in the local mesh. You’re Joseph and Mikel Steader!”

“Really?” Seamus said, distracted from the shouting match. “They’re Steaders? Funny thing, they didn’t mention. And I haven’t had time to look.”

“You two think you can just go anywhere you want?” Jorge said, his anger at Seamus nearly forgotten. He stood toe-to-toe with Mikel, towering over him by twenty centimeters. “You spoiled do-nothing rich boys? What the *hell* are you doing down here?”

“I want to help you,” Mikel said. *You blowhard.*

“Stand down, Jorge.” It was a firm female voice. A woman dressed in a bright red overcoat and black fishnet stockings stepped in. The Ringmistress herself.

“What are you doing here, Boss?” Jorge asked. “You should—”

“The show can go on without me. I have Ursula doing the introductions,” Isabella Brunel said. “*Alice* is her tent, after all. After that last descent I realized I’ve been neglecting things down here. I’m glad I decided to come.” She glared at the strongman. “Seamus, what you said about the lifter—is that true? Do you have evidence to back it up?”

“It’s in the predrop report I sent Jorge before we undocked from the core, Commodore,” Seamus said. “Since we have so many lifters out of action I gave it a red flag. We shouldn’t have dropped out of orbit in this condition.” He took a small tablet out of another pocket and handed it to her. “Here’s my original report. I don’t think it made it up to you.”

“Red flag,” Isabella said. She scanned the report. “Red flags are supposed to be showstoppers, Jorge. The *Alice* either should’ve stayed with the other two Bigtops or we could have cannibalized the *White Rabbit* for another lifter. There’s no way you didn’t know about this. We could have killed a *lot* of people because you decided to take a stupid risk.”

“Seamus was full of it. There’s no way that condenser was in *that* bad a shape,” Jorge said. “He was supposed to keep the Human Cannonball in good repair, too, but you saw what happened! It fizzled! It ruined the act!”

“I was busy trying to keep us from cratering to work on that stupid cannon, you idiot,” Seamus said.

Isabella tapped the stylus on the screen. “This report nails it. The condenser failed just like he warned it would. You were...wrong...to keep this from me, Jorge.”

“Would it have mattered if it *had* gotten to you, Boss? You didn’t listen to me on Wednesday, why would you listen to me now?” the engineer said, emboldened by being listened to for a change. “Jorge here has you by the tits. He shields you from anything me and my tiny staff have tried to tell you, and he takes credit for *himself* when he miraculously fixes it!”

“You’re a damned liar and a horrible comedian! Is this supposed to be your act?” Jorge said desperately. “You should be a clown, Seamus. Then you’ll *really* earn your keep around here!”

“Jorge? Shut up,” Isabella said in a dangerously cold tone.

“Sounds like you need specialists,” Mikel said.

“Unwritten rule, Mike—Mr. Steader,” Seamus said. “They want every member of the crew to have some kind of act, no matter how bad. Takes away from a lot of necessary work to keep things running. *Real* engineers like me are treated like shit.”

“If you don’t have an Act, you’re not contributing to the Star Circus,” Jorge said.

“Keeping us flying *isn’t* contributing?” Seamus replied. “Are you insane?”

“I said *shut up*, Jorge,” Isabella said. “You think you have *any* credibility with me right now? What else have you and the other Tentmasters kept me in the dark about?”

“If you’re asking, Boss, I have a very detailed assessment,” Seamus said. “It won’t surprise you, but we’re in a bad way.”

“We might be able to help with that, Ringmistress,” Mikel said. “Is there somewhere we can talk privately?”

“Is your brother involved in this, too?” Isabella asked.

“This is all his idea, Miss Brunel,” Joe said respectfully. “I’ll see myself out.”

“It was you two who sent the inspectors scurrying away, wasn’t it?” Isabella said.

“It was my little bro,” Joe said proudly.

“Guilty as charged, ma’am. Evidence of my good faith,” Mikel said, putting both hands up. “I truly want to help you.”

“Well, you’ve certainly got my attention. Jorge, you escort Joe Steader out,” Isabella said. “Seamus, follow me. We have things to discuss with Mikel.”

“Call me Mike, please.”

“I should be with you, Bella!” Jorge insisted.

Isabella’s face turned red with anger. “You’ve done *enough* for me for now, Jorge. Either escort Mr. Steader or just *go away*.”

Growling, Jorge stormed out of the lifter and down the corridor.

“Guess I’ll be seeing myself out after all,” Joe said. “Good luck with the negotiations, Mikey. I’ll wait back at the Jeep.”

Isabella led Mikel into a rather mundane, surprisingly clean conference room, with only a few antique posters on the walls advertising Ringling Brothers & Barnum and Bailey’s Circus. She gestured he should have a seat, so he did. She took the one across from him, while Seamus sat in a chair a few further down on the Ringmistress’s right.

“There aren’t going to be any backroom deals, Mr. Steader,” Isabella declared, putting her top hat on the table. “This’ll be recorded for the entire Circus staff. Everyone will have a say in approving your proposal. It’s the way I do things here. If we don’t like your proposal you’re out on your ear.”

“No dark rooms, Miss Brunel,” Mikel agreed, taking the seat across from her. He waved at the camera on the wall behind her. “As long as we’re pulling no punches, do you mind a candid assessment of what I’ve seen today?”

“Yes, I’d like to know what you think,” Isabella said. Amazingly she actually sounded sincere.

“Your operation is on its last financial legs,” Mikel said. “This lander won’t even be able to lift back into orbit—no offense, Seamus. If the rest of them are in similar condition, then I doubt you’ll make it to your next stop. I noticed you haven’t let your public and performance spaces fall into similar disrepair, but it’s a Catch-22—the money you’ve put there means you haven’t kept your landers spaceworthy. The crowds I’ve seen today and what I’ve read reported from your other three landers indicate this is a very healthy crowd, but it’s simply *not enough*. With the condition they’re in you need all six of your landers on the ground to pull in enough revenue just to keep flying.”

“We’re doing the best that we can with the resources we have, Mr. Steader,” Isabella said.

“I didn’t mean to imply otherwise,” Mikel replied respectfully. “From what I saw during my little self-guided tour, your mechanicals are still cutting edge despite their age and condition. Cutting edge means high maintenance costs, though. Even modern consumer lifters are very finicky about tuning.”

“My father was a visionary man, Mr. Steader,” Isabella said. “Twenty years ago he pioneered using lifters to land craft the size of the Bigtops on the worlds we visit. Now this tech is in common use to aid the Diaspora from Earth.”

“Being an early adopter of any tech is a very expensive proposition,” Mikel said. “We’re here to show the very best the Colonies have to offer one another,” Isabella said. “It’s why we exist.”

“And I want to help you *keep existing*,” Mikel said.

“Mr. Steader, I’ve read about other members of your family,” the engineer said. “The Steaders helped found half the Colonies.”

“We almost went bankrupt to buy the rights to Zharus,” Mikel said.

“You’re also, to a man and woman, crazy as all get out. Is that gear authentic?” Seamus said.

“Did you hear anything about the vehicle my brother and I drove in on?” Mikel asked.

“I heard on the twitter. The roustabouts said it’s pure internal combustion using gasoline,” he replied, marveling.

“Twentieth Century replica, Second World War,” Mikel said. “In a way, it’s part and parcel of the assets I’m bringing to the table here.” He took a pad of paper and a pen out of his pocket and slid them across the table. “How much *mu*—I mean, money—would it take to get the *Alice* off the ground again? And don’t stop there. I want a price for a complete overhaul at Colossus-Rhodes Yards for everything attached to the *Great Eastern*, from prow to stern. Plus the licensing costs for any other Zharus technology that turns your fancy.”

Isabella glowered at him. “If you’re trying to buy this Circus, Mr. Steader...”

“Far from it,” Mikel said. “What you’re doing is important for all of humanity. We Steaders might be crazy as all get out, but you *need* a little crazy to fund the colonization of a couple billion people and not expect any direct profit.”

The Ringmistress’s expression softened a little, but remained suspicious. “You have me there. But what do *you* want out of this, Mikel Steader? You, personally?”

“A modest berth—I think you’d call it a ‘possum belly’—on your ship. I’ve been to Earth, Wednesday, and Eridani, but I want to see all there is to see between here and Neorus.”

“Neorus is on the opposite end of human space from here, almost forty light years,” Seamus said. “Further than even Eridani.”

Isabella slid the pad and pencil over to him. “Seamus, can you give me the estimate he’s looking for? It just occurred to me that I don’t know enough about my own operation, after what Jorge’s kept from me.”

“I can pull something together for you, Boss. Me and the rest of the engineering staff have kept a tally,” Seamus said. He chewed on the eraser for a moment, then started jotting down lines. “Let’s see...add the three, carry the four, and...”

Isabella watched over his shoulder. “Are these figures really accurate? I mean...I hadn’t realized it was this bad.”

“I wish I could say I was surprised,” Seamus said. “But in all honesty, it looks like Zharus could be our last stop.”

Isabella glanced at Mikel. “You know, if you wanted to go on a Grand Tour, there are *far* cheaper ways. You could build your own ship, hire a crew and travel in complete luxury for tenth of what Seamus is coming up with here. Or book passage on starliners for even less.”

“It’s never been about money,” Mikel said. “Money is the means to an end. I want to see the galaxy, but the *Great Eastern* and the Star Circus is *how* I want to see it. The

little boy in me *still* wants to run away and join the circus.” He grinned. “Besides, it would be profoundly selfish of me if I didn’t use my wealth for the greater good. You’re a fan of the 19th century, Miss Brunel. Surely you’ve heard of Andrew Carnegie.”

“One of the pre-Space Age’s most important philanthropists,” Isabella said.

“Better than being like Cornelius Vanderbilt, the man who personified ‘fark you, I’ve got mine’.” Mikel looked at the upside-down figures on the notepad. “Are you finished?”

“All done,” Seamus said. “Here you go.” He slid it back across to him. “You folks are richer than Creosote. But let’s see how you react to this. We can give an itemized estimate, but here’s the raw numbers.”

Mikel wrote a “2x” next to the sum then slid it back to them. “I’ll give you twice the *actual* cost of the repairs, not just that estimate. Enough for a complete refit and something in the bank for a rainy day. I also have something else I want to put on the table, but that’s the monetary portion.”

“Uh...that oughta do,” Isabella said breathlessly. “Seamus?”

“Depends on how many strings are attached,” Seamus said. “And you said you had something else to put on the table?”

“All I want is a berth. Other than that, no strings. I have no interest in trying to tell you how to run your show. If you’ve kept it running this long in this state, you’re better at it than I’d ever be anyway.” Mikel reached into his other pocket and pulled out a matchbox. He slid it open, revealing a yottabyte storage module close to the same size. “What I have is this. About fifteen years ago my brother and I went to Earth. We’ve always been fans of the past, like your father was of the nineteenth century. Except we love the twentieth.”

“Nobody knows that much about the twentieth, especially the last couple decades,” Isabella said. “They locked down everything in copyright so tight it took the end of the Oil Age to shake it up. And by then it was too late. We lost...a lot.”

“Archaeologists have been able to reconstruct some from print and other analog sources in old landfills,” Mikel said. “Still, we don’t know much pretty far into the 21st century. So my brother and I went digging for it. And *boy* did we find it!” He picked up the data box. “All right here. Fragmented as hell, encrypted up the wazoo, but we’ve pieced enough together that we’re confident that this is a near-complete archive of world popular culture the century before the Oil Crash.” He slid it across the table, a sparkle in his eye.

The engineer picked it up. “You don’t mind if we verify, do you?” Seamus plugged it into the socket on the table. A staticky image appeared on the wall. “This is really is fragmented, isn’t it?”

“Whoever did the preservation was a master, but it was waterlogged in Old Singapore,” Mikel staid. “And the quantum encryption is as good as modern versions, so it’s taking a lot to crack.”

“I can see that, too,” Seamus said. “Amazing work for being four centuries old.”

“A little history quiz for you,” Mikel said. “When did we first land on Luna?”

“Easy,” Seamus said, “The Han Republic in the early twenty-second century after all that orbital debris finally came down.”

“Sometime in the twentieth century, United States,” Isabella said. She smiled at Seamus. “I’ve been to Earth and Luna, Seamus. I’ve seen the relics on Tranquility and Hadley Rill. It’s been pretty firmly dated to the mid-twentieth century.”

“History was never my strong point.” Seamus shrugged. “There’s just...I can’t really imagine them having that kind of technology that early. Sure, they had plenty of satellites. Too many. Was too dangerous for manned spaceflight for a century.”

“I don’t have time for a full history lesson, but I’ll provide all the documentation. But I want to present to you what seems to be a seminal work in the optimistic futurism at the time,” Mikel said. He had to concentrate to keep from stumbling over his own words. There was nothing in the galaxy he was more passionate about than this newly uncovered history. “From what we can tell the entire planet was consumed with a kind of space fever in the 1960s. It saturated all levels of culture in developed nations, in all forms of entertainment. Here’s one of my favorite finds.” He reached over to the keypad built into the table and tapped in a command.

The circus images on the wall were washed away by static. The next thing on screen looked so fake that Seamus couldn’t help from laughing. It was supposed to be some kind of spaceship, he supposed. It was made of a saucer connected by improbably thin superstructure to one large cylinder below and two longer ones above that had shimmering red caps. Then a voice centuries old spoke. “Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship *Enterprise*. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to *boldly go* where no man has gone before.”

“*Star Trek?*” Seamus said as the strange ship whooshed by and the title card came up.

“This is just their fiction,” Mikel said. “I don’t have more to this show than the opening title, so I couldn’t tell you anything else about it...yet. But I’ve found references to others: *Forbidden Planet*, *Star Wars*, *Space: 1999*, *Doctor Who*, *Wing Commander*, *Mass Effect*, many adaptations of *War of the Worlds*, which I’m sure you’re familiar with, *Commodore Brunel*.”

“We had an exhibit based on it on the *Mad Hatter*,” the Ringmistress said. “Lost it in the attack.”

“And...there’s this,” Mikel said. His voice shook with emotion. “One of the few files that had no encryption. I can’t...just watch. Watch.”

A low resolution color image appeared on the screen along with staticky audio—the surface of Luna, as seen from some ancient spacecraft. There was a beep, then a voice. “Eagle, Houston. You’re at 40,000 feet and cleared for powered descent...”

The voices were tense, businesslike, focused on their jobs. Technical jargon quite unlike anything they had heard before was traded between the speakers. Clearly one was in Old Houston, and the others.

“Seven hundred feet, twenty-one down, thirty-three degrees...” Aldrin said. The record was laid out so they could read the transcript and watch the video at the same time. Armstrong, Aldrin, carefully descending to Luna on the *Eagle* with a mere chemical rocket.

The images showed the lunar surface getting ever-closer. Seamus and Isabella were completely enraptured, as Mikel had hoped they’d be.

“We’re pegged on horizontal velocity,” Aldrin said calmly. The descent continued.

Then, the shadow of the lander appeared, dust flew up. “Contact light!” Aldrin said. “Okay, engine stop!”

More jargon flew back and forth between the *Eagle* and Mission Control. And then... “We copy you down, *Eagle*.”

“Houston, Tranquility Base here,” Armstrong said. “The *Eagle* has landed.”

At that point, Mikel stopped the playback, then rested his face in his hands, shaking. It was just that intense for him.

“My God,” Seamus said. “That...I can’t believe. How did they do that? It sounded like they didn’t even have a computer that worked! He did that manually!”

“Are you okay, Mr. Steader?” Isabella asked the awestruck man.

Mikel tried to compose himself and coughed. “I can’t help it. Whatever else happened during the twentieth century, no how many hundreds of millions died in wars or of preventable disease...that is the saving grace. What we mostly remember now of that time is about eighty years of near constant war—which isn’t *quite* the truth, but after this many centuries it’s splitting hairs for us. In 1969 we finally set foot on another world. The records we found unequivocally support the lunar archeology as *fact*. Even the historians on Earth accepted it.”

“And you’re offering us this data in exchange for a possum belly?” Seamus said.

“To sweeten the deal a little more, yes,” Mikel said. “Think of the odd bits of twentieth century culture you can use to create new amusement for your patrons. Maybe create a sort of twentieth century theme park in one of your Bigtops.

“This is my offer. We can negotiate details further, but here it is.”

“I would personally accept your offer, Mr. Steader,” Isabella said, still breathless herself. “But my personal feelings aside, it’s up to my crew and everyone on the Circus. I’m opening voting now. This requires a supermajority of seventy-five percent.”

“Them’s the rules,” Seamus said.

“Voting will be open for the next six hours, so we have time to kill, Mr. Steader,” Isabella said. There were over five thousand people in the Star Circus, many in the middle of performances. It would take time for everyone to catch up on the recording and then have their say.

“Please, call me Mike. Mikel if you want to be a little more formal,” Mikel said. He coughed. “Would you like to listen to some music while we wait? We’ve managed to piece together some interesting works.”

“I’m game,” Seamus said.

“Entertain me, Mikel,” Isabella said. She smiled at him brightly. “Show me what you’ve got.”

“I think I know just the thing,” Mikel said, clicking through the music directory via his specs.

A slow, dreamy bass and drum beat filled the room.

*One pill makes you larger
And one pill makes you small
And the ones that mother gives you
Don’t do anything at all
Go ask Alice, when she’s ten feet tall*

*And if you go chasing rabbits
And you know you’re going to fall
Tell ‘em a hookah smoking caterpillar
Has given you the call
To call Alice, when she was just small*

Nextus Fairgrounds
September 16, 112 AL

After a month of assessment it was finally time for the Colossus-Rhodes Yards work crews to get started. Before touching anything they'd taken every trouble report the engineers had submitted over the years, scrutinized every square centimeter of hull, every millimeter of conduit, sorted every milligram of trash, to get a baseline for the repair work. The condition of the machinery was worse in some areas, better in others, than the Star Circus's crew had thought it was. Every time the repair bill rose, Mikel Steader just shrugged and paid the bill, then added the same amount to the Circus's bank account.

After the last guest left the *Alice*, the work crews sent to Nextus lifted the entire Bigtop three meters off the ground. Construction drones removed damaged hull panels, so many that she looked mighty naked under her hardlight weather shielding. Clamp Seven was the first component to go.

"Good riddance!" Seamus said, watching them take it away with great satisfaction. Coming up next were Lifter 26 and *all* of the rest of the troublemaking jury-rigged machinery—which, on this Bigtop, was the majority of it.

There was so much work going on inside and out everyone had moved into old-fashioned fabbed canvas tents and wagons on the side opposite from the Midway—the Back Yard, as they called it. At the end of the day, Seamus, Mikel, and Isabella went over the Refit Report and watched, read, or listened to something newly decrypted from the Twencen Trove.

Today's report was more important than any that had come so far. The Bigtops *Mad Hatter* and *White Rabbit* had essentially been abandoned-in-place on the hull of the core ship ever since the pirate attack, cannibalized for spare parts until they'd even run out of those. Seamus and Mikel watched the Ringmistress read it, sigh, then put the tablet down.

"That bad?" Mikel asked.

"They're good for scrap and that's all," Isabella said. "Fortunately the shipbuilders can just chuck everything into their recyclers and rebuild them out of the same materials, with improvements of course. But they won't be the same landers. It's going to take almost half a year for everything before we can give her a shakedown."

"They already started," Seamus said. The shipyard had blanket permission to do whatever was needed to make the Circus whole again. "There is some good news, though. The *Great Eastern* herself is in decent condition, considering what she's been through. So the costs end up evening out. Just needs one of the secondary impellers replaced. The rest are getting re-tuned and rebuilt. Might squeeze a few more gravities of acceleration out of them. A few basic software and firmware upgrades for the onboard systems, replacing worn-out carpeting, furniture, and other minor fittings, and that's about it."

"Not bad for a ship over two hundred and fifty years old," Mikel said.

"The folks in Core Engineering are the best," Seamus said. "Mostly because they *don't* have to have an act. Captain Perez runs a tight ship and a lot of that crew have lived their entire lives on the *Eastern*. I'm not a magician, I'll never be a magician, and I'll kick Jorge in the nads if he suggests it again."

“I know what you’re saying, Seamus. But that kind of major change in how we do things is going to take time to implement,” Isabella said. “My father wanted everyone to have an act because he didn’t want anyone feeling left out.”

“What ended up happening is there are very few who can actually do both jobs well,” Seamus said. “I’m an engineer. It’s what I do. I fix things. I don’t pull rabbits out of a hat or spin plates.”

Isabella sighed, not wanting to deal with this problem now. “Mikel, what’s on the playlist today?”

“The first two minutes of a jazz piece called ‘Rhapsody on Blue’. Or was it ‘in Blue’? I’m not sure,” Mikel said. “Composed in the 1920s *just* after the public domain lockout. Composer was George Gershwin.”

As the music faded away, it left Isabella breathless. “Please tell me there’s more than two minutes.”

“Metadata indicates it’s over sixteen minutes, but this is what we’ve decrypted so far,” Mikel said. “Seamus?”

“I’m more of a rock and roll guy, I think,” Seamus said. “The ‘punk’ style sounds a lot like the music back home on Ibn-Rushd. What’s that called? Jazz? Doesn’t really do much for me.”

“Well, I’ve got bits and pieces of Rock, Ska, Country, Blues, Pop, and mix-and-match combinations of them all,” Mikel said. “Here, take the sampler.” He flung a virtual data archive at the engineer. “I don’t always get complete songs, or titles or the name of the artists. But at this point I take what I can get.”

A holographic communicator on the table beeped at an incoming call from the *Great Eastern*. “Captain Perez on the line,” the comm’s AI said. The ship was being refitted in Zharus orbit rather than at the system’s largest gas giant, Colossus.

Isabella gestured for it to pick up. “Good morning, Captain.”

“Likewise, Commodore Brunel,” Captain Nina Perez said. It was just a voice call with no picture except the Star Circus’s emblem. Perez was very cautious about anyone outside the ship seeing her. “This is a business call regarding Tentmaster Jorge Escalante and Engineer Seamus Odell. In short, after consulting with the Over Engineer, your transfer request for Escalante is granted. We will demote him and put him on one of the new Pinnaces.”

“And my request for Seamus?” Isabella said.

“We concur with your assessment on Odell’s engineering and leadership skills. Granted. *Great Eastern* out.” Captain Perez ended the call.

Isabella smiled, then stood up. “Congratulations, Tentmaster Odell. You’ve earned this.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Seamus said. “I don’t think I heard right.”

“You, *Alice*, Tentmaster,” Isabella said, smirking. “Not only that, but we’re going to hire a few hundred dedicated engineers. I need you to start looking over applications. They’re already flooding in.”

“You don’t have an expert system for that?” Mikel said.

“We’re going to be here for a year. We have the time to interview the best,” Isabella said. “Besides, your five fellow Tentmasters will be hiring for their own landers. We also have the *White Rabbit* and *Mad Hatter* to think about when they’re recommissioned. But, one day at a time. Let me and Captain Perez worry about that. *Alice* is your responsibility.”

Seamus dropped his tablet. “You’re serious about this?”

“Jorge has proven he can’t be trusted, and your skills kept *Alice* flying longer than I would’ve thought possible. She took a real beating at Kepler. I thought it was Jorge who brought her back to life then, but after reviewing the documentary evidence, I now see that it was you and the rest of your dedicated team. It’s only natural, and Ringmistress Ursula concurs. The *Alice* is yours.”

Seamus stood up and saluted. “I won’t let you down, Isabella.”

“I have complete faith in you,” Isabella said.

“Congratulations,” Mikel added in a professional tone. “I’m sure you’ll do well.”

“Thank you, Mike,” Seamus said. “Professional” best described Seamus’s relationship with Mikel Steader. The two men had failed to connect on a deeper level. Seamus respected the Steader name (there was a family branch on Ibn-Rushd) but the man’s enormous wealth simply put too much distance between them for him to feel comfortable trying to be his friend. Someone that rich probably had *lots* of people try to be his friend, and Seamus didn’t want to come off like yet another gold-digger. “Now, I’d better get back to work. I should to talk with the Refit Architect the shipyard sent.”

“If you want any more music sent over, let me know,” Mikel said.

“Will do, Mike. Thanks,” Seamus said. He left the tent, barely restraining his joy. There would be time to celebrate later. There were plenty of sights to see on Zharus in the coming year. He had a job to do.

Uplift

September 18, 112 AL

On many other planets Uplift would have been just another smallish college town. The almanac listing Seamus had pulled up on his specs told him there were ten thousand permanent residents and an equal number of students under the trio of hardlight climate domes. After being on Wednesday, underneath its hundreds of square kilometers of dome-covered landscape there, Uplift shouldn’t have impressed him at all. But where the Wednesday Domes were very spartan, Uplift’s managed an artistic vision of a small city in a snow globe.

There were three emitters inside named Bifrost, Odin, and Sif. The city’s history wiki said the Bifrost was a direct import from their nearest colonial neighbor, while the other two were local construction. They were older designs compared to what he’d seen on Wednesday, but the Zharusians managed to get more out of them.

All to protect what had started as the Zharustead University Dry Ocean Research Base (the acronym ZUDORB was still emblazoned on some of the oldest buildings), what had become a university in its own right and the core of the young city-state. Uplift was a college town, and Seamus was here to see what the Dry Ocean was all about. Aside from the planet’s size, it was its most distinct feature.

The University buildings were still constructed with climate safety in mind, and the campus map had all of them connected with underground tunnels. The Domes weren’t completely reliable and needed to be taken down for regular maintenance. Uplift was also relatively safe from the otherwise omnipresent light blue dust called quibitite, due to the combination of topography and wind patterns.

“Okay, everyone,” Dr. Martinez said to the standing-room-only crowd in the University’s largest lecture hall, surrounded by holographic displays of photos and maps

of the Dry Ocean. He was a grizzled old man with a wind-burned face and sun-bleached hair that made him look older than he was. “We *all* know why you’re here, and it’s not my tired old Dry Ocean geology lecture. Everyone’s heard the rumors of what Nextus Nano is going to release in just a couple weeks. Something to do with that blasted deadly evaporite meta-mineral. Maybe they’ve actually made it useful now. So I guess I’ll just wing it and tell you what we actually *know* about this stuff.

“I’ll start with the discovery, about nine years before the first colony ship, the ECS *Homestead*, arrived. At the time, the spacers prepping Zharus for over ten million Firsters called it the Blue Desert. We lost three Neumon Formers to it. Three! Those beasts are the hardiest machines mankind has ever built, and the Dry Ocean *sunk* them within *minutes*. Their remains are still out there, baking in the pressure cooker.”

“So how should we go about searching out deposits of this Q stuff?” a man in a cowboy hat asked. He had a country twang in his voice Seamus had only heard from certain Earthers.

“Good Lord, you want to know how to *find* it? We spent the last three decades trying to figure out how to avoid it!” Dr. Martinez exclaimed, eliciting some laughter from the room. “Are you folks really serious about this? The Dry Ocean is *the* most unforgiving environment in human space. By themselves, we could easily adapt to the heat and pressure like we have on Ibn Rushd or Eridani. But the addition of qubitite... well...I lost *many* friends out there, ladies and gents. Brilliant scientists, colleagues and students. So please, a *little* respect here?”

That was enough to keep any further outbursts from the audience as he gave his lecture. Seamus listened intently, his ‘specs recording the whole thing for later and doing an automatic summary. The short of it was that “Q” was the powdery product of the Dry Ocean’s unique geological history. It was nigh impossible to handle without equipment shorting out. It decayed into surprisingly common oceanic evaporite minerals—gypsum, halite, sylvite—with no evidence of its original meta-structure. Most important, though, was the apparent quantum multiplicative effect it had on whatever it had bonded to.

“Now, the problem is how to get all the common evaporites and other crap out of the qubitite substrate,” Dr. Martinez said. “My colleagues managed to do this kind of refining, except...if you remove all the impurities it stops *existing* in normal space. Since that’s subspace physics and not geology, I’ll have to refer you all to Dr. Rose DeHavilland’s office down the hall.”

“I suppose this means Nextus Nano’s figured a way ‘round that,” the man in the Stetson and Scout Corps khakis said.

“It does appear likely,” Dr. Martinez agreed. “I can say that they have consulted me on the matter, though confidentiality agreements prevent me from going into details.”

“So how *would* we look for it, Doc?” the man pressed. “Any partic’lar geological features common to this sort of evaporite? You know they’re gonna be needing a huge supply of it if they’re going into full production on these...whatsits they’re makin’. I’m sure there’s lots a’ folks gearin’ up to go get lost in the desert right now.”

Dr. Martinez frowned at all the expectant faces looking back at him. “If you’re all serious about looking, I suppose I do have an obligation to make sure all those deaths were not—and the future ones will not be—in vain. It seems likely you would find the best deposits in areas marked by this sort of topology...”

Seamus's specs finally identified Dr. Martinez's questioner, and when he did he almost fell out of his seat. *That's Clint Brubeck! What's he doing here? I thought he was still out there...somewhere.*

There were even stories about him on Ibn-Rushd, where he'd made one of his stops on the way out into the Deep Beyond. If the rumors had any grain of truth to them Clint Brubeck had discovered something *within* the Ibn-Rushd system that the government had forced him to keep hush-hush.

Brubeck nodded at what Dr. Martinez had said. "That's pretty much what I 'spected already. Already marked out some promisin' lookin' spots from orbital surveys, an' none of 'em been claimed yet. Good t' know I'm on the right track."

"Locating the mineral will be the easy part," Dr. Martinez said. "Figuring out how to extract it safely is still something that has stumped even me. All our experiments have been done with surface samples. There's plenty of those for that purpose."

"Well, Doc, that's 'cuz you've already got tenure," Clint Brubeck said cheerfully, leaning back in his seat and tipping his hat forward. "It's the ones with the profit motive who'll have the most incentive t' make it work." This drew another chuckle from the rest of the room.

I'm in the same room as Clint Brubeck! Seamus thought. He couldn't pay any attention to the lecture after that. He brought up the dozens of centi-awful books and animated viddies he'd collected over the years in his 'specs. *There's...I have to ask him... I know it's silly. None of that could possibly be true.*

Nevertheless, he really wanted it to be. They had titles like *Clint Brubeck and the Headhunters of Tau Ceti*, *Clint Brubeck and the Lost Ruins of Valnastar*, *Clint Brubeck and the Space Pirates of Kepler*. He had all the technical specs on Chauncey, including the diagrams on how he could change from IDE to tank to submarine to skimmer to... *No, that's just ridiculous. I'm an engineer, for crying out loud. It couldn't work that way. That's a twelve-year-old's fantasy IDE.*

But even when Chauncey was "just" a non-transformable mecha he could still do crazy things, like taking out an alien battleship with one shot from his "Hyperwave Mega Pulse Cannon", though the name and exact damage output seemed to change depending on the writer.

Seamus didn't even notice when the lecture hall had cleared out and the man was standing right in front of him. "Hey there, young man. You with the Star Circus?"

"Yes!" Seamus squeaked before clearing his throat and facepalming. *That was the most undignified, fanboyish way to introduce yourself to your hero.* "Er, yes. I guess you saw the patch on my jacket, sir."

"Clint Brubeck," he said. "But I reckon you know that already. I seen it all before. Folks 'round here know me pretty well, so I don't get it from them anymore. You are...?"

"Uh, Seamus Odell," Seamus said nervously. "I'm an engineer on the *Alice*. Pleased to meet you."

"Well, now, I'd say that's mutual," Clint said. "Something of a tinkerer myself, but I reckon you know that too. Expect you know a lot of things 'bout me, and maybe some of 'em are even true."

"Well, you know, fact versus fiction," Seamus stammered.

"Speakin' of facts, I know what I saw in the viddies, but I'd like to hear it from someone in the know. Did Joe and Mike Steader really open up their wallets and pour out a ton of *mu* for you folks?"

“Well, it was just Mikel,” Seamus said. “We’re mostly shut down during the refitting. The fleet really took a beating the past ten years or so. The *Alice* barely landed in one piece.”

“Believe me, I know from taking a beating,” Clint said. “Went through more’n one ship m’self. Eventually you run out of duct tape and spit. As for the Steaders, well, that’s like ‘em. Always been crazy-generous folks.”

Seamus was completely tongue-tied. All he could do was smile and nod while Clint—the legendary *Clint Brubeck!*—patiently waited for him to spit out whatever was on his addled, hero-worshipping mind. “Okay, okay. I’m grinning like an idiot, but I have to ask. Did you find *any* signs of aliens out there? Any at all? Hard to believe with so many habitable planets out in the black that it’s just us.”

“That’d be tellin’, wouldn’t it?” Clint replied, a twinkle in his eye. “You know, I think I’ll give ol’ Crazy Joe a call. It’s been a while and after today’s lecture I have a business prop for ‘em. I reckon royalties from those books about me ain’t enough for proper venture cap.”

“Well, we should be re-opening in a few months,” Seamus said. “Hope you’ll think of us when you want a good time. Though I doubt we have anything you haven’t already seen. The Midway is still running and we’ve set up a big canvas tent for the big show, like they used to have six hundred years ago.”

“There’s always somethin’ new over the next hill, son,” Brubeck said, patting him on the shoulder. “Isabella’s Ringmistress now, is she? I’m sure she’s doing her old man proud.”

Seamus blinked. “You know about us?”

“You cross paths with a lot of people when you’re a scout,” Clint said. “I met her father, time or two.”

“You read about what happened to him, I hope,” Seamus muttered.

Clint tipped his hat out of respect. “Damned Keplerian pirates. That’s the one book where there ain’t much drama added. I had a couple scraps with them, myself. Hope you’re plannin’ on being more careful next time you’re there,” Brubeck said. “The *Great Eastern* is a damned big target.”

Seamus smiled like a hungry wolf. “Oh, believe me, Mr. Brubeck, we’ll be ready for them.”

“Gentlemen,” Dr. Martinez said from the desk up front. “I have another lecture in half an hour. Unless you want to hear the same spiel, I suggest you go chat over coffee in the Student Union.”

“Thank you kindly, Doctor,” Clint said.

“We’ll be going,” Seamus added, getting to his feet. “Fascinating stuff, though. I’m from Ibn-Rushd. We know about deserts, but this one is something else.”

Clint nodded. “The ‘Jewel of Sagittarius’ has nothing on this place. Been there m’self.”

“Isn’t that the crystalline planet they named Neorus?” Dr. Martinez said.

“Actually, that’s what we from Ibn-Rushd call our homeland,” Seamus said. “Since the star it orbits is in the constellation of Sagittarius when seen from Earth—”

Dr. Martinez waved his hand dismissively. “Never mind. If I get started on discussing astrography I won’t stop, and I have that lecture to prepare for. It was nice meeting you, gentlemen.

“And Mr. Brubeck?”

“Yessir?”

“Best of luck.”

Nextus

September 20, 112 AL

In the 112 years since Landing the Steaders had blossomed into a massive extended family, just as they had at the other Colonies they'd helped found. The family had never directly wielded political power, preferring to do its own thing for the most part. All of them had inherited the signature Steader Crazy to one degree or another. It didn't always lead to great wealth—if you had a passion you were expected to follow it. If that meant being a penniless hermit, that was okay.

But for centuries Steader Crazy had also led to crazy profit and crazy wealth. By and large, the family also regarded its wealth as a tool for the public good. Displaying any kind of avarice was a quick way to get shunned by the rest of the family.

There were times when Mikel wondered if Joe allowed that love of money to get the better of him. This was one of those times. “This is completely above board?” Mikel said, glaring at his brother suspiciously. “If it isn't I don't want *any* part of it and I'm walking out that door right now. Hear me, Joey?”

“Come on, Mikey. It's me,” Joe Steader said, his face a mask of innocence.

“Yeah, I know. That's why I'm asking.” Mikel folded his arms.

“I'm totally honest here. I got us in on the beta test. I have a dozen non-disclosure agreements for you to sign if you want to join,” Joe said.

“Fine, transmit them. I'll start looking for loopholes,” Mikel said. He added his public encryption key to sign them and sent the forms off to Nextus Nano, getting an approval milliseconds later.

“Don't bother. The only one I found was the one that allows me to get you in on it,” Joe said. “Now that you've signed let me show you what Nextus Nano's been up to! You're never going to believe it until you see it. Come on back to my place.”

Most of the Steader family still resided on Laurasia, but about a half dozen had made Nextus their home. Mikel and Joe lived on a two-hectare ranch, big enough to have homes for themselves, future family members, and all their stuff. As they approached the open garage Mikel rolled his eyes at the vehicle printer-assembler. A sleek white shape with a large red M on the hood was mostly complete. “Are you printing *another* full-sized Hot Wheels?”

“It's called the Mach 5,” Joe said. “From a Japanese anime. Something the decryption AI flagged for me this morning. Anyway, the stuff's in my model workshop.”

Model-building was one of Joe's *many* obsessions, which were simply being folded into his growing obsession with Twentieth Century popular culture. He treated every decrypted song, image, diagram, newspaper article, movie, video, *anything*, like freshly unburied pirate treasure.

Spread out on the table were a number of batteries in standard sizes. Battery tech had reached a plateau for centuries, much like quantum processing and memory. Joe handed one to his brother. It was a standard commset battery, flat and thin. It had a purple label with “C” marked on it, otherwise it was something any industrial fabber could produce for centimu.

“Sarium?” Mikel said. “They're using qubitite for batteries somehow? What kind

of advantage does it give? Instant charging?”

“I’d say it’s a trade secret, but when they go public they’re going to release the designs for these proof-of-concept batteries and other products into the pubdom. They’re keeping the patents to the *refining* methods for the full five years, though. Should be long enough to turn a huge profit,” Joe explained. “Put it in your handset.”

Mikel popped out the battery that was installed, put in the sarium version, then rebooted it. He had to reboot it two more times when he saw the Estimated Use Time indicator. “Five *years*? Thirty years of standby? That can’t be right!”

“That’s just the C-class, Mikey,” Joe said. “The B-class is an order of magnitude better than that, and A-class another order above *that*. Imagine a commset battery that doesn’t go dry for *fifty years* of constant use.”

“Or a skimmer that doesn’t need liquid fuels anymore,” Mikel said. “Why think small? How about lifting an orbital shuttle on battery power alone? It’s just...this is impossible.”

Joe handwaved. “It’s subspace physics, bro. They’re calling it zero-point energy extraction, but who knows? Batteries are just the beginning. Read the white paper.”

“I will. But...holy shit,” Mikel said, getting a sudden headache. He sat down on Joe’s workbench. “Holy shit. This battery tech...the biocrude companies are going to go belly up overnight if they don’t convert...”

“Game changer,” Joe said. “Completely disruptive technology. The mining methods will be pubdom, too. Nextus Nano will make bank on the refining license for five years, then go down in history with names like the Bjornssens, Albert Einstein, Itzhak Savini, and Chul Rau.”

With all the NDAs and agreements they’d signed, buying or selling Nextus Nano stock or making any kind of investment in industries related to the new tech before the official announcement was an explicit no-no with fines and prison time attached. The foreknowledge would be enough to make their own bank when it became legal to act on it—and the investment software everyone used could react right down to the microsecond when the time came. There weren’t any coded bureaucratic loopholes here.

“You know, I got a call from Clint earlier,” Joe said. “He’s kept on top of what Nextus Nano’s been up to, went to some geology lectures in Uplift. I hated to say no, but...I did. Once it goes public I’ll invest in whatever Q mining company he starts, but I said I can’t invest in it *right now*.”

“That’s *really* close to the line, Joey,” Mikel said. “I guess the NDA means I can keep this in my commset for the beta testing, at least.”

“They’re going to announce next week, so it doesn’t matter much,” Joe said. “Just don’t blab to anyone between now and then.”

“My lips are sealed,” Mikel said, putting his commset back in his shirt pocket. *Hooboy. Interesting times...*

*Nextus Fairgrounds
March 3, 113 AL*

“Ladies and gentlemen! Children of all ages! Welcome to the grand re-opening of Brunel’s Star Circus!” Illuminated by the spotlights, Isabella Brunel held her cane aloft and announced in her best Ringmistress’s voice to the completely full audience seats inside the Bigtop. Real canvas hung from the ceiling and walls gave a very effective

impression of the smaller one that had served as a substitute for the past few months.

Isabella was being projected via hardlight to the five other Bigtops now on the surface of Zharus. The rebuilt *Mad Hatter* and *White Rabbit* had respectively landed at Florencia and Neo Francisco just the day before. Gondwana had gotten one of the new Pinnaces at Cape Nord to cycle around the fast growing polities surrounding the Dry Ocean. The rest of the refitted circus fleet had gone to various locations in-system, from Rhodes Station orbiting Colossus to Xolotlan Hab far out in the Oort Cloud.

Around her, performers from every corner of human space put their hearts into their acts. The crowd cheered at the Parade of Animals from Kepler, Ibn-Rushd, Eridani, and Old Earth. Isabella was in her element. The cheers from the crowd filled her. Her adoptive father, Isambard, had groomed her for the role since childhood. It was at times like this she missed him most. She could still remember him watching with pride from the grandstands as she made her spiel. But she'd long since mastered the knack of suppressing her tears until she was alone. After all, the show must go on.

"From Earth to Eridani! Ibn-Rushd and Kepler! Centauri and Proxima! Wednesday and *Zharus*!" The crowd roared when she got to their own colony, as usual. She took a few seconds to get a close look at the audience. There was a contingent of very strange women, all wearing 'specs, who had basically taken over one segment of seating. Her own HUD contact lenses identified them as being from Sturmhaven. Despite being on Zharus for months she'd never seen anyone from that particular city-state. The men they had with them were done up like literal prize horses, in masks and finger-restricting hoof-gloves.

Fetish gear that's been around forever, Isabella thought. A few of the women were dressed in a rather more revealing version of her own ringmaster costume. She didn't know much about Sturmhaven and wasn't sure she wanted to. That city-state had a half dozen travel advisories and economic sanctions slapped on it. There was a long-standing rule for the men of the Circus to avoid it completely, and that was enough for her to do likewise.

"Over six hundred years of tradition!" Isabella announced. "It's going to be a hell of a show! Now, my fellow ringmasters will announce their own unique acts! Thank you, Zharus, for the warm welcome!"

Each Bigtop had a Ringmaster or Ringmistress of its own, so once she was done with the overall Opening Ceremonies speech she allowed them to take control of their shows. She thanked the Nextus audience for the warm welcome and re-introduced *Alice's* very own Ringmistress, Ursula, before stepping aside and taking her own seat out of the spotlight.

The big, beautiful woman from Wednesday took a bow. "Thank you kindly, Bella. Ladies and gentlemen! In the Center Ring, our famous clowns, the comedy duo Frick and Frack!" Ursula announced.

While Ursula announced the various acts, she scanned the crowd for their reactions, and Isabella in turn watched her do it. It was important for a ringmistress to keep her eyes on the audience, to adjust her own attitude to keep the crowd interested in each performance that followed. Ursula did what Isambard had called "Walking the Rings," using a different cadence depending on what kind of act it was, and she did it well. The Human Cannonball, tightrope walking, and the other daredevil acts were the most popular—at least until the equestrians arrived.

The audience *roared* as twenty horses and their Eridanite wranglers galloped

and danced around the Rings. Horses were pretty rare to see out this far. Isabella always thought it was ironic that one of man's longest-domesticated creatures was now such an oddity almost everywhere man lived, but not many colonies had thought it worth the extra space and investment in huge cryo chambers to carry them along when they settled. (Eridani had been the most notable exception.) Even with faster-than-light travel now, importing them was generally left only to the super-rich. They always got a big reaction everywhere *but* Eridani and old Earth—and even in those places, they could still appreciate a good show.

Then Isabella had a chime in her earpiece. “Yeah, Frack?”

“Look up in row twenty, section B10,” the happy old clown said. “There’s a face I haven’t seen in person for a long time. Seen him on the news viddies, but...”

He sat up in the stringers—the general admission seats—with the Steaders, rather than the expensive star backs up front or the stalls in the middle: a lanky, raw-boned man with greying brown hair and whiskers and a weatherbeaten Stetson that Isabella would know anywhere. Clint Brubeck had been often in the newsfeeds lately, media celebrity that he was. Seemed he’d recently picked Zharus as where he wanted to settle down. Isabella had been too modest to contact him on a lark, given how many years had passed.

She noticed him watching the horses with a more analytical eye than the average circusgoer. *That fits. Same ol’ “Unca Kent.”* She hadn’t even mentioned to Mikel that she knew him. Isabella had been a five-year-old girl when Scout Clint Brubeck, at the height of his career, had needed a little help from the then-new Star Circus—and been able to help it in return.

The Steader brothers sat on his left. To his right, a sensibly-dressed lady of about Clint’s age with shoulder-length blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail sat with a tub of popcorn in her lap. *And that must be the ‘Allie’ he used to tell me about—the one he named his last ship after.*

“I’ll be right up once we’re all out and over,” Isabella said. “Thanks for the heads up, Frick.”

Cape Nord

“Seamus Odell, *this* is your *tourist* Man Card!” The Cape Nord tourist guide shoved it in his face with the pretentiousness of a military drill instructor showing a new recruit his weapon. He was built like a brick with flat-top hair and far more muscles than anyone had a right to. “*Don’t* lose it!”

Seamus looked at it blankly. It wasn’t smartpaper, or even laminated. Just a little paper card with his name scribbled in ballpoint pen on a line, and a (fairly low) point value. Adding insult to injury, they’d spelled his first name “Shamus.” “All the Strong Men got *permanent* ones.”

“Well, yes,” the tour guide said. Then said nothing else, as if the reason was self-evident.

Seamus wasn’t actually here for tourism. That was just a side benefit. The sleek Pinnacle *King of Hearts* was one of the new additions to the Circus flotilla, a replacement for the one destroyed by the pirates, and he had wanted to see it firsthand. The Pinnacles themselves were hardly small at 300 meters long, and fully FTL-capable. He was mainly here to see if the new dedicated engineering staff were starting to settle

in. There was already friction between them and the old hands. That rift would only grow if something wasn't done, and as someone who had joined under the old system but didn't *like* it, Seamus felt it fell to him to try to smooth things over. He thought he'd done reasonably well so far, and was "rewarding" himself for his devotion to duty with a trip into the polity. He hadn't originally meant to quote the word, but now that he was confronted with the reality of the place, he felt like setting the punctuation in bold 72-point type—with appropriate finger-wavy hand gestures.

I don't even understand this place. The snowy city-state of Cape Nord, on the far northwestern point of Gondwana, was situated in a massive cave system partly dug out by one of the great terraforming machines—the same type of Neumon Formers that had also helped make Ibn-Rushd more hospitable. In this case, the machine's robotic extensions had dug in to make it easier to reach the metals and rare earths that were in short supply on Zharus's surface. Cape Nord was a mining town, though since the "Q-Rush" had started, it felt a lot less crowded than it should have been. *Guess miners will go where the minerals are.*

Cape Nord put Men first, like the patriarchal societies of old. They emphasized the capital M repeatedly in the tourist literature without directly explaining what that meant. In Cape Nord there were Men, and there were men. *Only* a Man could carry a Man Card, and a Man had to keep proving himself so he either rose in rank or didn't lose points and go *down* a rank. His tourist card gave him an honorary rank of 4 out of 5—near the bottom.

On the advice from one of the Cape Nord tourism yelps, Seamus hadn't cleaned himself up after inspecting the lifters, the polywell fusion generators, life support, or the other machinery he was interested in on the new Pinnacle; and he'd worn one of his tool belts into the polity instead of leaving it on the ship. He'd also stopped using depilatory cream for three days before coming. It felt more than a little silly, but the guides were quite clear—the more he fit the ridiculously outdated stereotype of Manhood in vogue here, the better off he'd be.

Fixing things—especially things that could go into orbit on their own power—was Manly. *But not Manly enough to get a permanent Man Card*, he thought. He wasn't sure he cared, but he also felt vaguely offended by the whole thing. *What, I'm not Man enough for you idiots?*

He still had a few hours to kill before the Circus's own suborbital shuttle left for Nextus, so had decided to see a few sights. He had to admit that those sights often had interesting curves, until he realized that they usually had the *same* curves. The women of Cape Nord might have been stamped out of a single busty mold, aside from skin color and facial features. *Maybe I'll call a cab and just go straight to the aerodrome...*

A sort of morbid curiosity won out, though. The place couldn't be as bad as Sturmhaven was reputed to be down south, could it? There were no trade sanctions on Cape Nord, but there were warnings that women needed to make clear they were tourists. That much was enough to make Seamus's skin crawl. But on the other hand, he was at least *nominally* a Man, which meant he'd be better off here than he would have been in Sturmhaven.

Near the Circus grounds a number of entrepreneuring entertainers had also set up shop, trying to imitate the 19th century style but giving their own local twist to it. There was a prominent display of the Wonder of Sarium, the new batteries that Seamus wasn't allowed to purchase. Occupying the best spot was a group who called themselves

The Shame Squad. There was quite a crowd in that direction. Visible on their stage was a coffin-like autodoc, the kind that acted as support for nanotech medicine the galaxy over. There were similar models on the Circus's ships. *And they even work now. Miracles never cease.*

A large holographic sign in an ornate script declared: *Today! See the Future of Cape Nord men! Sponsored by Nordic Sarium Energy and Quantum Nanosculpting (A Nextus Nano company).*

Seamus noted the lower-case m there. Apparently when a Man did something that made him lose his Man Card, he lost a great deal of social status. So much that he became a legal non-entity, losing his right to vote and own certain kinds of property. Many small-m men simply left Cape Nord altogether. The Star Circus apparently had obtained a few former citizens of the city-state the last time they'd stopped here fifteen years ago. None of *them* were even on the supercontinent.

Okay, I have to see what's going on here... If nothing else, it was a rule of thumb for *all* circus employees to check out and report on anything that showed signs of drawing crowds. They had to get new acts from somewhere.

The woman on stage was obviously not from Cape Nord. She didn't fit the mold, though her own curves were almost as impressive. Still, she was no Isabella, except perhaps in the eyes. She had a showman's eyes, sweeping back and forth across the crowd looking for just the right moment when interest was at its peak to go into her spiel. Seamus was no showman himself (thank God), but he'd watched 'Bella and the others enough to be able to tell a good one, and this gal seemed to have the same sort of knack.

"I have a sad duty to perform today," the woman announced, in a tone of voice that was anything but sad. "The un-Manning of a Probie who was given a final chance at True Manhood and *blew it!*" The crowd jeered for half a minute. She raised her hand, holding a smart paper broadsheet. "According to the House Rules, a Man who writes romance novels is no Man! Especially when he lacks the courage of his convictions *and* writes under a *female pseudonym.*" More jeers, more shouts.

Seamus ran a quick search on the name from the advertising posters that hung everywhere. Not just *any* romance novels, but *best-selling* romance novels. If the sales figures were right, half the women in Sturmhaven must have bought a copy. *And some pretty large fraction of the men, too.*

"Today, after 'his' failure to renounce 'his' works, we naturally revoke his Man Card!" she continued, provoking cheers. "But, at 'his' *own* insistence, we will take it *one step further!* If 'he' wishes to be part of the Mysteries of Womanhood so badly, Nextus Nano will *grant* that wish!" The woman gestured at the autodoc chamber sitting upright on the stage. "Today, you will witness the amazing new technology made possible by sarium and the brave Men out in the Dry Ocean right now, bringing us the raw materials to make it possible!"

Seamus perked up. If there was one thing guaranteed to catch his attention as an engineer, it was the words "amazing," "new," and "technology" in close proximity to each other. He peered at the autodoc with new interest.

"Bring this...*parody* of Manhood to the stage, please," she said. She seemed to Seamus to be laying it on a bit thick, but the crowd was eating it up with a spoon. Seamus heard Isabella's voice in the back of his mind from one of the many circus commnet broadcast lectures she'd given on showmanship. *Rule one: know your*

audience.

“Now, everybody knows what our medical nanotech is capable of,” she said. “It can heal what would, in the past, have been mortal injuries. But it can also...make changes far more fundamental.”

Meaning...? Seamus wondered. Then he put the pieces together. *Oh, God. They're not...that kind of deep body change takes weeks! Sometimes even months!*

The accused was brought up to the stage—in the nude. Nobody flinched in the slightest. Cape Nord celebrated, idealized, the male form, like the Ancient Greeks. Nudity wasn't a problem. The man himself might have also come from a certain mold. He was all angles, muscular, with a strong cleft chin. The kind of person the locals would least suspect could do what they had convicted him of.

“Let it be known that this...man...was one of the First, before his transgression was discovered and placed on Probation,” the woman said. “No Woman would speak for him! Do you have any last words in that body, you sorry excuse for a male? Do not make excuses.”

“All I'll say is that I would rather be an utter paragon of Womanhood than play these stupid reindeer games any further,” he said. They closed him up inside the coffin without further ceremony.

Seamus groaned inwardly. *Lord, what a bad actor.* But the enthusiastically jeering audience didn't seem to notice.

“Now, just a few months ago, this process would take weeks—or even *months*,” the showwoman said. “Today, with the power of sarium infusing our patented medical nanites, the process will take only *thirty minutes* to begin! So stick around if you want to see how she turns out. In the mean time, feel free to visit our concessions, and stop by our sponsor, Nextus Nano's booths, to pick up some pamphlets with more information on the process.”

Making his way through a Cape Nord crowd this thick was an exercise in frustration. Despite all he'd done, Seamus was obviously of low rank, and only got one of the smartpaper pamphlets five minutes before the time would be up. What he read emphasized the body-sculpting capability of the process. It didn't exactly have the technical details he craved, but it seemed to be a combination of sarium-powered nanites to make more changes at once, and a highly-efficient cooling system—an adaptation of the same cryo tech they'd used to ship the colonists out, in fact—to pipe away the waste heat before it could cook the meat.

Too bad it relied on that sarium wonder-tech. They'd never let the Circus get their hands on it, let alone take it off-planet with them. *Unless those Steader boys can pull some strings, maybe? Worth an ask, anyway.*

“Gentlemen! Gather around the stage!” the showwoman announced.

Seamus found a place with as clear a view of the stage as he could manage and zoomed in with his 'specs. *Well, here goes...*

“The Man is gone,” she said. “In his place, the Woman known as Iphigenia Rose, author of a dozen romances, finally in the first intimation of her *proper* form.”

The front of the coffin hissed open in a cloud of steam, as if it was something out of a Mary Shelley book, revealing...not what Seamus quite expected. The person inside was clearly female, in that she had feminine parts in the right places—vulva, small perky breasts, a lack of body hair, softer facial features—but there was barely any hint of the curves other Cape Nord women possessed. She was still very androgynous.

The audience seemed nonplussed. There was a loud murmur that Seamus had heard before when shows didn't come off as expected. The woman's act was poised on a knife edge. Things could turn ugly.

But she wasn't fazed. "Oh, I know what you're thinking," the woman continued. "She's *technically* female, but still looks too much like the man she no longer has any right to be. The genitals are easy enough to change—such a small part, after all—but the greater physique takes more time. Luckily, it's time we have!" The woman turned and pointed, her voice taking on mocking tones. "Back in you go, you pretender! And this time don't come out until you're *ready!*" The crowd cheered its approval at this deserved scolding.

The new woman bowed her head submissively, and stepped back into the coffin, which sealed around her while hissing even more "steam". It was an obvious special effect—Seamus knew autodocs didn't do that even if he *hadn't* recognized the way dry ice fog looked and acted from the time he'd put in maintaining the circus's own effects when he wasn't working on the lifters. But that didn't lessen his appreciation for the showcraft involved.

"As for the rest of you, come back this evening!" the woman continued. "If you thought what you just saw was astonishing...well. Dangerous curves lie ahead! If you haven't yet had the chance, be sure to stop by the Nextus Nano booths on your way out. I'm especially looking at *you*, you pretenders out in the audience. I *know* you're out there, you sneaky little Probies *just* holding onto your Man Cards by your fingernails. We're here all week—we can help *you*, too! Sign up anonymously on our 'net site. Financing is available."

And they'll probably do you for free if you don't mind being paraded around on stage, Seamus thought sardonically. *They need to get new meat for their "demos" from somewhere.*

"And if you know a man who might be interested...well, you know where to send 'em!" the woman finished. "If you can't make it back tonight, we'll be doing this again tomorrow with another unmanly man. See you soon!"

The crowd dispersed, with few lingering longer than they needed to, just enough time to pick up pamphlets in smartpaper and pure data formats. Seamus snagged a download himself, and appended it and his specs' recording of the woman's spiel to a comm message back to Isabella. Given what he'd just seen, it was possible she might even want to fly up here herself to catch the evening's unveiling in person, or maybe come up for some other day's show. Seamus got the feeling that, as many unmanned men as there were likely to be, they might just be here a while.

The Circus always acquired the best examples of cutting edge consumer technology of each Colony world as part of its general showcase. They now had crates of the AI animal pets that were popular on Laurasia, the other populated supercontinent. They even purchased little things like locally-made tablets, smartpaper, even groceries. There was a new kraken aquafarm on the *Alice* for an example of a local delicacy, like Keplerian chalam fruit. Things commonplace on Zharus, but exotic to the people on Kepler, Proxima, or Eridani. The sarium tech export restrictions being what they were, though, Seamus doubted they'd be adding this to their collection.

When you got right down to it, the Circus portion was almost an afterthought. At its core, it was still the Colonial Expo, displaying the best each colony had to offer the rest of human space. But Isabella's father had been canny enough to realize that while

some interested adults might come to an “expo,” *everyone* came to a circus.

Looks like I might be here a while longer, Seamus thought, scratching the itchy stubble on his face. He decided he’d had enough and returned to the *King of Hearts* to rub on some cream and wait for Isabella’s response. *And a shower. I need a shower...*

“Come clean, Clint,” Joe Steader said once they were behind the scenes. “How in the *hell* did you keep Chauncey in working order for *two weeks* in the middle of all that q-dust? As your biggest investor, I *have* to know. Our lips are sealed, buddy.”

Clint scratched at his long mustache thoughtfully. “T’ be honest, don’t rightly know yet. Might have been that I never cracked open the cockpit, or maybe that I kept the hardlight deflectors up the whole time.”

“You’ve even got *hardlight* in that monster?” Joe said. “I know most of what they wrote about you was centimu-dreadful drek, but the more I hear about how you’ve really modded him, the more willing I would be to believe he really *could* turn into a star fighter or shoot dreadnaughts out of the sky with one mighty blast.”

“I’ll have you know the part about the dreadnaughts is true,” Clint deadpanned, then winked. “Anyhoo, I went out there with as much non-electronic survival gear as I could carry, thinkin’ I’d need it after Big C bit the Q-dust. But somehow it never got t’ that point. Good thing, too. There’s a few claim jumpers out there who’ll be a little more careful where they try jumpin’ next.”

“And more of them in MRS custody who won’t be jumping anywhere for a while,” Mikel said. “Especially the ones who’re having their legs regrown. Can’t say I envy you sitting in that tiny cockpit for two weeks, though. Phew!”

Clint snorted. “Ol’ Chauncey is a luxury condominium on the inside compared to some places I spent longer’n that. Should tell you sometime ‘bout the time I laid low in a meter-an’-a-half sewer pipe fer three weeks on Eridani.”

“You have,” Joe said. “About four times.”

“Well, see? There y’ go, then,” Clint said.

“Unca Kent!” Isabella waved at the three men. The ringmistress was making her way to them along the mostly-empty row of seats after the show had emptied out.

Clint turned, then grinned, reaching out to sweep up the ringmaster into a big hug. “Was wonderin’ when you’d show up. Good to see you again, Isabella. Sorry ‘bout what happened to your Dad. Y’know, I think you’re gettin’ a bit too old for me to call you ‘Belly’ anymore.”

“You two know each other?” Joe said.

“I was about to ask the same of you guys,” Isabella said. “The galaxy isn’t *that* small and you’re like old friends.”

“Actually, it *is* that small,” Clint said casually. “I know. I’ve scouted it.”

“He has,” Allison put in. “I was with him for part of it.”

“This guy—indirectly—is why I’m such a twencen *otaku*,” Joe said. “When I was, oh, maybe twenty years old I was on Eridani with Mikey here. Met a guy named *Mick Steader*. Newly-minted Scout, just off Earth the year before. Asked us for a million *mu* or whatever, because we were third cousins four times removed or something. I knew he was joking, but I gave it to him ‘cause I’m just that crazy. In exchange he gave me that cache of viddies, books, and music Clint there pulled out of the ground in Old Texas. Worth every centi-*mu* a thousand times over.”

“And I ran into ‘em later on,” Clint said. “Or they me. They made a point of

trackin' me down just so they could ask me just *where* in OldTex I'd got 'em from, in case there was more. This was a few years after my stretch with the Circus. Never got 'round t' mentioning that to 'em."

"We *did* find some more stuff down that hole, when we went to Earth," Joe said. "They gave us a military escort during the whole deal. Complete with the pocket-sized IDEs they switched to using after they got rid of Chauncey's bunch. Still can't believe that. It's not like anyone on that planet wanted the stuff we were looking for. Then there was that *hot* Captain Gates..."

"And an even bigger cache in Old Singapore," Mikel added as his brother's mind wandered off. "Encrypted up the wazoo, though. Still working on that."

"Ain't that a bitch?" Clint said. "Pardon my French, Isabella."

"No big deal," Isabella said. She smiled, her dimples showing. "And you can still call me 'Belly' if you want to."

"I found a few things here an' there on the colonies m'self," Clint said. "While these jokers went an' poked around in holes, I think I hit up every library, antique shop, an' flea market from here to Neorus. Come t' think of it, I reckon we should probably compare our collections at some point. Don't think we've done that since I got here."

"That might really help our metadata indexing," Mikel mused. "Sure thing. I'll arrange to give you access to what we've decrypted."

"Why don't we go have something in the new cookhouse?" Isabella suggested, spreading her arms as if to introduce the newly refitted *Alice* to them.

"Sounds good t' me," Clint said. "Like what y' done with the ol' place. Was really sad t'see the shape things were in when it got here."

"You couldn't walk back here without tripping over junk," Isabella said. "Colossus-Rhodes Yards did a wonderful job. Next week I'm going back aboard the *Great Eastern* for the re-launch and shakedown."

"Give Cap'n Perez my regards when ya do, if she's still with ya," Clint said. "Lead the way, Belly."

"Follow me. One moment." Isabella took one last look around the empty space, then put her finger to her ear to cue the PA. "All out, all over, everyone. Great job!"

The six Bigtop landers were so massive that the actual "tent" arena inside only occupied a small portion of the overall volume. Only about half the space was dedicated to performances and exhibits. The rest contained support machinery, cargo bays, and living space for the 500 performers and crew.

Since the refit had practically rebuilt the *Alice* from the inside out, there was far more space than anyone was used to. Corridors were clear to move about in, though some had actually complained that losing the old cluttered space had somehow made it less homey. It would take time, but they would get used to it. To facilitate getting up to snuff, the Circus had hired an extensive pure engineering and maintenance staff. Keeping the flotilla in top shape would be their *only* duty—though if they *wanted* to go into show biz in their spare time, something could be arranged.

"Can I ask you something?" Isabella said. She picked a serving tray out of the cookhouse dispenser. The Steaders were well known and barely caused a ripple among the circus folk by now. Almost everyone made way for Clint Brubeck—except for Frick and Frack, who just winked (and favored Allison with a friendly leer).

"That's askin' me somethin' already, young lady," Clint drawled, smiling back at

the clowns in return. “But go ahead.”

“What is the deal with this ‘sarium’ stuff?” Isabella said. “One of my engineers caught a show this afternoon in Cape Nord...”

“The ol’ presto-chango, eh?” Clint said. He chuckled, filling a mug with strong black coffee. “Double-N’s really been doin’ some clever promos lately. Tailorin’ ‘em to every polity’s own little quirks. You’d think they were gettin’ *advice* from some publicity geniuses.” He glanced meaningfully at the Steaders, who did their worst to look innocent. “You should see what they’re doin’ in *Sturmhaven*.”

“Or better yet, you shouldn’t,” Allison said, wrinkling her nose. She had freckles everywhere, Isabella had noticed. Even on that nose. She could have easily had them taken care of, even back on Proxima where she’d come from, but she hadn’t. Made sense Clint Brubeck would be attracted to a person who was completely comfortable with herself as she was.

“We want to take some examples with us, but my negotiators are getting nowhere in Zharustead,” Isabella said. She quickly moved down the serving line for a post-show chocolate treat. “It’s worse than the Eridanites and their cybernetics. Completely stonewalled.”

“You can’t really blame ‘em, I reckon,” Clint said. “If the rest a’ the galaxy knew how good sarium really was, well...did y’ever read about how it was on Centauri after they figured out what cavorite was good fer? The population of the place quintupled overnight, and about 90% of ‘em was carpetbaggers who stayed there just long ‘nuff to trash the place for a quick buck. Took twenty years after they figgered out how to synth the stuff ‘fore the planet was even halfway cleaned up. The cav caves are a big ol’ tourist trap *now*, but you know what they used t’ look like? I was there ‘fore the cleanup had all the way finished, and I’ve seen the tri-dees of ‘em at their worst. And nobody’s got a clue if you even *can* synth Q yet. Odds are agin’ it.”

“Plus, the fact that you’re here at the right time that the stuff’s *just* been released as a consumer product makes the Zharus Interstellar Trade Authority even more antsy,” Mikel said. He’d only taken a bag of potato chips and some chalam-flavored drink bottles. “Maybe when we get back they’ll be more amenable.”

“In what? Fifteen years?” Joe said. “You’re going to be gone a long time, Mikey. Gonna miss you.”

Mikel snorted. “You won’t have time to miss me, with all this Q-mining business going on. That, and the way you jet-set around I wouldn’t be surprised if you came to half our shows anyway. The family starship has a good turn of speed on her, and we’ll be taking the long way around.”

“So, yer gonna see the galaxy from the circus train?” Clint said.

“I’m no Scout, Clint, but I think this’ll be an adventure of a lifetime,” Mikel said.

“Yeah, I reckon it’ll be that,” Clint said. “Times I wish I’d stayed on a little longer m’self, but scouts do what they do.” He nodded to Isabella. “Like what I’m seein’ of yer horsey stuff these days. Maybe not everything’s how I’d do it, but leastways you got the people treatin’ the horses right now.”

“They could do better if they *just* focused on the horses,” Isabella muttered. “That’s a problem I’ve got to solve.”

“Still?” Clint shook his head. “Told yer pappy double-duty was a bad idea, but he was sure he could make it work out. Didn’t argue the point. His show, his rules.”

“How did you end up in the Circus, anyway?” Mikel asked.

“Well, not rightly sure I should say,” Clint said. “Don’t wanna spoil the story for when I write my memoirs.” He chuckled at Joe and Mikel’s sour expressions. “Well, all right. Just came off a run of bad luck at the time, barely limped into Neorus ‘fore the engines gave out completely. They didn’t have a shipyard back then like I hear they do now. They had pretty much nothin’.” He grimaced. “So I was gonna be stuck fer months waiting on my parts order to get to Eridani, then them to send back the parts I needed.

“But just so happened, the circus was in town. So I went there lookin’ to take my mind off things. Seemed like a nice ‘nuff show, but when they got to the horse part I saw they didn’ know what they were doin’ at all. The yokels were impressed ‘cuz they didn’t know anything about horses, but I saw ‘em pulling the horses’ mouths too hard, giving ‘em conflicting signals, doin’ all the kinds a’ stuff you shouldn’t ought ta.”

“The circus didn’t have a real horse master at that point, just a few people who thought they knew a few things,” Isabella supplied. “Dad had only just changed it over to being a circus a couple of years before.”

Clint nodded to Isabella. “So knowin’ a thing ‘r three ‘bout horses as I do from my upbringing an’ that one time I spent a while on Eridani, I went right down after the show an’ volunteered my services. Took a little bit a’ convincin’, but we came to an arrangement. I’d do some wranglin’ an’ some trainin’, an’ help ‘em find a real horse master at Eridani. An’ they’d haul me an’ my ship with ‘em ‘til they got there. Was just three stops away.” He chuckled. “course, woulda been faster in the long run just to wait for the parts. But not *half* as much fun.”

“I was five years old. Couldn’t pronounce ‘Clint’ so I called him ‘Kent’,” Isabella said.

“Clint told me about that,” Allison said. “Glad to get the chance to meet you at last. You’re older than I expected, but that’s my fault...easy to lose track of time these days.”

“So how’s the ol’ show running these days, apart from the obvious?” Clint asked.

“I’m...starting to make some headway into my corporate culture issues,” Isabella said, mindful of where they were. “It’s going to take time. I’m not going to force anyone to choose between their twin duties, but I’ve made clear that the most skilled in certain jobs will get assignment preferences. Engineers are engineers, magicians are magicians.”

Clint nodded. “Good deal. As I taught your horse hands back in the day, makin’ a big heavy beast change direction quickly isn’t easy.”

“There’s still been a lot of grumbling,” Isabella said, looking at the other circusfolk in the cookhouse—they were more focused on Clint than herself. The tables around them had already filled up. “But, not enough to put the brakes on my reforms just yet.”

“This is the big top,” Clint said. “If there *wasn’t* grumbling, that’s when you’d ought to be *really* worried. Brubeck Mining’s gonna be a mighty ship herself right quick, so I need to learn a few things, myself.”

“He keeps saying that,” Allison said. “I’ll believe it when I see it. Right now there are exactly two employees. He’s the chief cook and I’m the bottle washer.”

“Building mining equipment takes time,” Joe Steader said. “And hiring the right people. Qubitite mining is brand new, so nobody knows very much about what works and what doesn’t. There’s at least a hundred other startups Clint’s competing with, and more daily. It’s like the way the oil drilling industry in the Nineteenth, or the automobile

industry in the early Twentieth. A big free-for-all. I love it!”

“Yeah, you would,” Allison said. “I’m kind of worried, myself. That place is deadly.”

“Deadly places are my stock in trade, m’dear,” Clint said grandly. “I’ve come through far worse.”

“I was with you on a couple of those close scrapes, hon,” Allison said, leaning against her husband in a show of confidence.

“So trust me in this one.” Clint grinned. “Besides, I’ve got Chauncey, and he’s never let me down yet.”

“I have to admit, he didn’t let you down for two weeks in the heart of the Dry Ocean, and that’s pretty spectacular,” Joe said.

“So, while you’re here, let me show you around,” Isabella said. “I think you’ll appreciate some of the renovations, and I know our current horsemasters would love to meet you.”

“I’d like that,” Clint said. “I’ll be honest, been feelin’ a bit homesick for the old place.”

“You’re welcome backstage any time,” Isabella said.

“When I’m not workin’ in the Q mine, I might just take you up on that,” Clint said, putting aside his empty coffee mug. “Let’s go.”

Cape Nord

When Seamus ventured out again the tourist guide at the gate took one look at him, snorted, then asked for his Man Card. “I’m deducting fifty points for the shave, twenty for being too damned clean. At least you don’t smell like a bunch of flowers,” he said.

“You can take that moronic bit of substandard cardstock and stick it up your ass,” Seamus said.

The “Manly Man” actually *smiled*. “Okay. I’m adding twenty points back for that snappy retort.” He penciled that in and handed it back.

“Whatever,” Seamus said, shoving it in his pocket. It wasn’t as if the score really meant anything on a tourist card. It was mainly for the benefit of the rubes who wanted to have the “real Cape Nord experience.” Even if you fell into little-M “man” territory, what could they do to you? He planned on tearing it up in front of the guy when he left the city-state anyway.

The crowd had begun to gather around the Shame Squad’s stage again when he got there. Fortunately it wasn’t a long walk from the Pinnacle since many of the booths had closed down for the day. The autodoc chamber hummed on the stage, a holographic progress bar floating above it...99.3%.

“Gentlemen, craftsman, esteemed scholars, family men, eternal bachelors, and ladies!” the saleswoman announced. “The Lady Rose is nearly ready! I’m happy to see so many of you decided to return to see the results. You will *not* be disappointed.”

Get on with it already. I don’t want to stay out here with these meatheads longer than I have to. Seamus folded his arms impatiently and waited.

A half dozen women holding various articles of clothing, from lacy underthings to a slinky dress and shoes, awaited the debut of Iphigenia Rose. The autodoc hissed dramatically and emitted more dry-ice steam. Then the cover hissed open.

If Seamus had been drinking anything he would have done a spit-take Frick would have found hilarious. She was...perfection, not stamped out of the same mold like so many of the Cape Nord women around the plaza. Lustrous blonde hair cascaded in waves over her shoulders. Perfect breasts, perfect waist and hips. Her face was breathtaking, blue eyes casting smouldering looks at the Men—and right at Seamus himself.

“As you can see, the ‘man’ is gone,” the saleswoman said. “Nothing of him remains. Welcome, Iphigenia Rose. Your sisters will induct you into the Mysteries of Womanhood. What do you have to say to the Men here?”

Iphigenia only smiled. Her voice matched her sultry looks perfectly. “All I’ll say is...*I win*, boys. It’s a new game now.”

“Quiet now, girl. Some things aren’t meant for the ears of Men,” the saleswoman said. “Now put some clothes on and go mingle a little. Then you have a lot to discuss with your new sisters. You are no longer a part of Man’s world.”

Her attendants quickly dressed Lady Rose in a sultry red minidress, though not in heels, and painted on her makeup. It seemed like blasphemy to cover up such a face like one of the Circus’s clowns, but they did it. The results were still stunning.

“How do you feel, Lady Rose?” the saleswoman asked. “A new life is before you.”

“Like myself...for the first time *ever!*” the new woman said. Cheers and applause sounded from the female half of the audience. The male half was rather quiet, as if they weren’t quite sure what to make of this.

“Hey, does that machine swing both ways?” a husky female voice from behind the stage called. The whole crowd, as one, looked in her direction.

“Indeed it does!” the saleswoman assured. “But that’s a different presentation. Please see me after we’re done here.”

I’ve seen enough, Seamus thought. He started back towards the Pinnacle. *But I’m not even sure what I’ve seen*. The refitted Star Circus had state-of-the-art autodocs and nano-medicine that could theoretically do what had been done to Lady Rose over the course of eight weeks, but in practice they couldn’t be without an autodoc for that long. *Holy shit...*

“My book signing table is set up over near the popcorn stand,” Lady Rose said. The lines were already forming up as Seamus left.

The tourist guide assigned to the Pinnacle intercepted him upon reaching the gate. “Did that...really happen back there?” His tablet was showing a view from a camera in the Shame Squad booth—Lady Rose autographing her books. They were apparently broadcasting it live as an infomercial, complete with a comm code crawl across the bottom of the screen. There seemed to be an awful lot of men standing in line along with the women, undoubtedly each armed with the magic Man-point-preserving phrase, “It’s for my girlfriend.”

“Did what happen?” Seamus said, feigning ignorance.

“You damn well know what I’m talking about, maggot!” the Cape Nordan shouted.

“If you can’t believe your own eyes, then you’re not going to believe this either,” Seamus said. He took his Man Card out of his pocket, then methodically tore it into tiny pieces and blew them off his palm into the guy’s face. “You and your *entire city* can go fark itself.”

“A shrimp like you doing that to me shows some gumption,” the tourist guide

said. He smiled brightly, as if addressing an equal for the first time. “Congratulations.”

Seamus’s specs beeped with an incoming data packet. It was a digital version of a Man Card—marked *permanent*. Seamus stared cross-eyed at the display in front of him, then glared at the guide. “That...you...of all the...” He trailed off into a frustrated growl.

“Nice pitch there,” the guide said. The specs beeped again with an indicator saying, “+10 points, Manly growling.”

“Oh, fark you,” Seamus said, then turned and stalked off.

“Come see us again soon!” the guide called cheerfully after him, before turning to the next tourist.

Nextus Fairgrounds

July 1, 113 AL

“Have I ever told you about Old Man Brunel?” Frack asked one afternoon in the cookhouse over lunch. It was coming up on a year since their seat-of-the-pants landing, and the staff had long since fallen into a routine—but now it was charged with the not-entirely-comfortable awareness that its days were numbered. The ships’ refurbishment was long since complete, and the show’s audience numbers had fallen off as everyone who wanted to had already seen it multiple times. It was almost time to be moving on.

“Numerous times,” Seamus said, monitoring the cargo loading on his specs. It was a great story, so it was no big deal—and since he already knew it by heart, no distraction from his task. Which was probably why Frack brought it up. “Mike hasn’t heard it, though.”

“I’m always game for a good story,” Mikel said.

“The *Eastern*’s an old ship,” Frack said. “But they knew how to build ‘em back in the first days of colonization in the last years of the twenty-second. She brought the first colonists to Proxima and made several round trips even before the first FTL drive was retrofitted. They replaced the fusion drive with gravitic impellers at about the same time. She’s a grand old ship. Once her days transporting colonists were finished they turned her into the Colonial Expo, showing every Colony the best of what the others had to offer.

“Now, Old Man Brunel, he loved the idea of the Expo, but didn’t think it was exciting enough. The whole thing was never supposed to turn a profit, so he bought everything for a song then turned it into the Star Circus. Her original builders wouldn’t recognize her.”

“And you and Frick were here from opening day,” Seamus said.

“Damn straight! Now, Old Man Brunel, he wanted everyone onboard to have something to contribute to the Circus. Everyone had to have an act. Said it made everyone feel more like a family,” Frack continued. “A family of thousands. Kinda like the traveling circuses of old, like Circus Vargas or Barnum’s. Maybe a little Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, too.”

There were examples of wildlife from a number of different worlds on the Bigtops, not just planets that had been colonized. Six-legged, four-eyed, methane-breathing beasts larger than elephants. Analogues of mammals, birds, and reptiles from every Colony, now including farmed Zharusian kraken served by the butchers. Each colony had a dedicated Zoo, showing not just its animal and plant life, but how the hardy humans had adapted.

The *Alice* had the alluring, alliterative Zharus Zoo.

“Unfortunately that idea really didn’t work out that well in the long run,” Mikel said..

“Goes to show that just because you have vision doesn’t mean you’re always right,” Frack said. “Isambard was a close friend of mine, but I have no illusions about his management skills. Me and Frick were the first clowns to join up on Proxima. The man knew how to run a circus. A starship? Not so much. Captain Perez and her predecessor didn’t seem to care as much what he did, as long as they kept control of the *Great Eastern*.”

“It was Captain Perez and the rest of the core ship crew who ultimately repelled the pirates, or so I understand,” Seamus said. “But not before they’d killed Mr. Brunel and a bunch of other crew trying to defend the *White Rabbit*.”

“I’m not going to criticize the leadership or response of something terrible I wasn’t present for,” Mikel said. “Sounds like a clusterfark all around. I’ve seen some records.”

“The Calliope will be ready for them when we reach Kepler this time,” Seamus said with an evil grin. The Calliope was what they had named the *Great Eastern*’s new weapons systems that were now being tested in the outer system. This time everything, even the Bigtops themselves, would have some kind of armament and the best shields they could put on them. “They’re going to have a *nasty* shock.”

“I sure damned hope so!” Frack said, hitting the table with his fist, making the grape gelatin on his plate jiggle. “I want to be there when we give ‘em what’s coming to ‘em. It’s the only reason why Frick and me haven’t retired here. *Damn*, I love this planet.”

It was a common refrain among the circusfolk. They loved Zharus, and the Zharusians loved them right back. A good portion of the crew *had* decided to retire here, or take an extended vacation until the next time the Circus came back through, so the Ringmasters were hiring many new performers—though not so many that they wouldn’t be able to take on others as they made their rounds to the rest of the Colonies.

“So, what Nextus goodies are on today’s cargo manifest, Mike?” Frack asked.

“No sarium batteries, if that’s what you’re asking. Still working on that. But, lots of other things. I have a half dozen mil-spec examples of powered armor for each Bigtop. Good for spacesuits and defense. But mostly foodstuffs, skimmers, a couple high-end personal liftercraft, and native plants for the Zharus Garden.”

Fifteen days left until the Star Circus left the system and there was so much to do. Everyone needed training on the new equipment, there were hundreds of new faces to get to know, then there was the fact that Zharus felt a lot like home to Seamus.

The Q-Rush, like the Gold Rushes on Earth and the Cavorite Rush on Centauri, was bringing in new people to Nextus at an incredible rate. Few stayed; most moved on to the natural leaping off point, Uplift. Within weeks that city-state had ballooned from twenty thousand to two hundred thousand, far faster than the city-state’s government could purchase climate dome emitters or build supporting infrastructure—it was the Gold Rush San Francisco of Zharus. It was a chaotic, exciting time to live on this planet.

“I have a surprise for you, Mike,” Frack said. He reached into one of his costume’s many pockets and took out a fist-sized fruit with a soft burgundy skin.

“Is that...” Mike Steader said.

“First of the chalam crop,” the happy clown said. “I snatched a pod from the

Kepler Garden on the *March Hare* yesterday.”

“So that’s where you went,” Seamus said. “Frick was going nuts. You weren’t answering your comm.”

“I was incognito and out of makeup, doing the tourist thing in Landing,” Frack explained. He opened a butterfly knife and started to slice the alien fruit. An intense chocolatey aroma filled the cookhouse. “I haven’t let him see me without my face on for twenty years. But we don’t do everything together, you know. It’s not healthy.”

“Hey! He’s got chalam!” someone said.

“Hope you’ve brought enough for everyone, clown,” said another sourly.

Frack laughed and fished in the pockets of his more-baggy-than-usual trousers again, pulling out over a dozen additional ripe fruit. “Of course, everyone! Gather ‘round. Enjoy the fruits of our labors!” He handed a creamy slice to Mikel. “Our honored benefactor gets the first bite, though. A million thanks, Mike.”

“I’m a Steader. It’s what we do,” Mikel said, taking it. The entire fruit was edible, from rind to core. He nibbled off the end, savoring it.

“Now, what’s this nonsense about you not being with us when we leave?” Frack asked.

“I’ll join you folks on Wednesday as soon as I finish my business here,” Mikel said. “I’d love to launch with you, really. But there’s a timing problem. Other business I have to take care of. Getting my affairs in order before I leave is taking longer than I’d planned for, and since you’ll be Wednesday-side for at least a couple of months for your ‘encore performance,’ well. You don’t need to wait for me. Circus has a new schedule to keep, after all.”

“Well, there’s that,” Frack said.

“Your possum belly will be waiting, Mike,” Seamus said. Despite their distance, he nonetheless felt a warm fellowship toward the billionaire in that one moment at least. “Welcome to the Greatest Show in the Galaxy.”

July 15, 113 AL (2463 AD)

Seamus cracked his knuckles and sat at the lifter control panel in the *Alice*’s new Control Cabin like a concert pianist ready to make the opening keystrokes to a masterpiece. The lander didn’t have a proper Bridge like the *Great Eastern* herself did, but still needed a central control room for ascents and descents. It hadn’t had one before, but so many things had changed during the Circus’s year-long stay on Zharus. Like so much about the Circus, it was a dual-use space; during showtime, the control panels would switch out with video editing boards for producing instantaneous souvenir recordings of their shows for sale to the rubes as they left the tent.

“All lifters showing green. Power output nominal on all six reactors,” Seamus commed to Isabella. “We have ATC clearance. Ready to launch.”

Closing ceremonies had been...difficult, emotional. Zharus felt like home after nearly a year. Isabella had officially named it Winter Quarters during the ceremony. In olden times, that was the place where a circus settled down during the off season. It would be twelve to fifteen years before they would come this way again, with the current schedule.

“Take us up, Seamus,” Isabella said. From an open gangway, she and the rest of the performers waved goodbye to Nextus.

“Hardlight aeroshell in launch configuration,” one of the new engineers said from her station. The hardlight emitters were new and would lower the energy requirements for maneuvers in an atmosphere.

The three previous launches Seamus had been part of had been filled with tooth-rattling vibrations so bad that the lander had actually shed parts during the ascent. This time the only way he knew they’d left the ground were the slight increased power requirements of the inertial dampers and the ground slowly dropping away on the viewscreen. “We have cleared the tower, Commodore.”

“Closing up. I’ll be in the Concab in ten minutes, Seamus,” Isabella said. “I’m getting out of this monkey suit.”

The geometric precision of Nextus’s layout soon became visible beneath the ascending *Alice*. Full acceleration into orbit had to wait until they were well clear of the atmosphere. The lander was just too massive to go very fast below a hundred thousand meters.

“Transient power spike in Lifter 26,” the engineer reported at eighty thousand meters.

“*Really?*” Seamus fumed. “After all they did...”

“Already filed a fixit request,” she said.

“Thanks, Suchi. Keep an eye on it.”

“Will do, Seamus,” she replied.

Aside from that one power spike the ascent was uneventful. The *Alice* met the *Great Eastern* in high orbit, as before. The other five Bigtops and other craft had already docked. The *Alice* was traditionally the last to return to the core ship, symbolic of the *Wonderland* protagonist’s going back up the rabbit hole to the real world.

“That’s a *big* ship for her age isn’t it Seamus?” Suchi asked.

“Captain Perez will give you gauchos a history lesson once we’re underway,” Seamus said. “But yeah. One of the biggest. And you’re all a part of that now.”

Isabella finally arrived, wearing the orange jumpsuit spacers still often used during planetary launches. “Everything’s going well?”

“We had a single glitch, but nothing we can’t fix,” Seamus said.

“Lifter 26?” Isabella asked, raising one eyebrow.

“The favorite is fresh, so I don’t think it’s the lifter itself,” Seamus said. “Old power conduit, most likely. Didn’t turn up during systems integration tests, though.”

“Captain Perez calling,” Suchi said.

The Eridanite Captain Nina Perez appeared on-screen. She was pale and bald, with cybernetic implants on her scalp like many of the people from that dichotomous world of bucolic ruralism and high technology cities. “You’re looking good, *Alice*. Dockmaster AI’s ready for you,” she said.

“All aboard the circus train,” Suchi said with the enthusiasm of a gaucho. “Docking clamps deployed. No problems reported.”

“It’s unreal, isn’t it?” Isabella said. “I can’t remember a launch smooth like this, *ever*.”

“Get used to it, Commodore,” Seamus said.

“I’ll be *glad* to,” Isabella said with feeling. “Still feel like pinching myself, though.”

The launch was the quick part. Now they had to match orbits with the core ship (or “circus train”) and dock, a process that would take several hours and didn’t need

handholding from Seamus. He had some time to return to his quarters and relax.

“So, why didn’t I have anything to do during this launch?” Jorge growled from the corridor.

Seamus facepalmed. Jorge had been scarce, to say the least, since he’d been let go as the *Alice’s* Tentmaster. “Maybe because you don’t *belong* here?” he said acidly. “I thought Captain Perez reassigned you to the *King of Hearts*.”

“I’m the Tentmaster of this Bigtop!” Jorge growled, thrusting his chest forward like the Victorian strongman he projected.

“Not any more you aren’t. Are you seriously going to do this, Jorge? Really?” Seamus said. “Because I could’ve sworn I was looking at a middle-aged man and not a hotheaded teenager. Or did you spend all your off time palling around with the townies in Cape Nord?”

“Plain fact is I didn’t need you for the same reason all the other ships don’t. Thanks to our benefactor, everything *just works* for once. And we have full-time engineers to do the work otherwise. That is, unless you want to give up being a strongman and go full time. If you lose your gloryhound tendencies you’d be a really good engineer. I admit that.”

Jorge clenched his fists for a moment, then relaxed a little bit. “I don’t want to choose! This is crazy! Old Man Brunel set up the double-duty roster for a reason! “

“To prevent a two-class system from developing,” Isabella said. “I’m not doing away with that, Jorge. I’m just removing it as a requirement for joining us. Now it’s more of a...*suggestion*.”

“I have a *tonne* of suggestions,” Jorge retorted.

“After what you pulled during planetfall, you’re lucky we only *demoted* you, Jorge,” Isabella said. “The only reason we didn’t just leave you in Cape Nord is that you’re both a good engineer and a good performer. But if I find out you’re hiding anything else from me I’m going to put you in cryo until we reach the next stop and leave you there. Understand?”

Jorge seemed to deflate under the scolding. “I’ve...uh...yeah. I understand, Commodore. I really do,” he said. “I’m already gonna catch hell from Commander Davis over not being on the *King* as it is.”

“And you should,” Seamus added. “Good God, man! What’s wrong with you?”

“I’ll just go ahead and take a couple hundred points off my Man Card for being an honorless fool,” Jorge said.

Seamus rolled his eyes. *God save me from idiots who take those stupid things seriously*. He was still trying to come to terms with the fact that, after the serious points audit that came with being assigned a permanent Man Card, he’d ended up with almost as many as Jorge himself. *And God help me if he ever finds that out*. “We’re not on Zharus, don’t worry about that foolishness,” he said. “That’s an order from a superior officer.”

“Yes, sir,” Jorge said with only a little bitterness. “I guess I should have stayed on the *King*.”

“Then what are you doing here?” Seamus said, pointing at the deck plate under the strongman’s feet. “What did you think would happen? Captain Perez assigned you there because you’re actually a good engineer—at least, when you’re not taking credit for other peoples’ work.”

“I helped get *Alice* on the ground safely. I wanted to be here for the launch,”

Jorge said.

“And to belittle her new Tentmaster,” Isabella said. “This isn’t going to escalate between you two, is it?”

“It’s been almost a year, Bella. I could’ve done any number of spiteful things to Seamus, but I haven’t,” Jorge said.

“I’ll give you a few points on that Man Card they gave you for your self restraint,” Seamus said. “Cape Nord suits you.”

Jorge smiled broadly. “I bought some land there, you know. I think this is my last round in the Circus. Seems like a good place for a Man like me to retire.”

It does suit him, Seamus thought. He’d picked up the trick of putting *just* enough emphasis on the M to make it sound like a capital letter. He resisted the urge to order Jorge to double-check Clamp Seven, because that would just be spiteful. *And being spiteful isn’t Manly*, he thought wryly. *After all, I’ve got my own points to worry about.*

“If we’re done glaring at each other, we have three hours until docking and I’d like to get a little R&R in,” Seamus said.

Jorge moved out of the way sheepishly. “Uh, sorry.”

“See you back here then, Seamus,” Isabella said. “I need to comm Mikel about our rendezvous plans for Wednesday...”

The Circus always tried to keep the number of the crew constant, though this time they’d had to add a few hundred engineers. Of the more than 5,000 aboard, 250 had decided enough was enough and left the Star Circus—either formally tendering resignations or simply not showing up for the launches. The net gain was still 200, with 400 new faces aboard, distributed between the various flotilla ships.

Since his promotion, Seamus’s “R&R” consisted of getting to know these faces, like Suchi’s. A fairly basic expert system handled duty rosters, training, and the like, otherwise leaving Seamus with time to be an engineer.

The Tentmaster’s Quarters was in the bowels of the ship, near the spherical polywell fusion power generators. They were also a little larger than the standard crewman’s, having enough room for a full desk and its own bathroom. Since the *Alice*’s recommissioning it’d slowly gained a lived-in look, with faux wood paneling on the wardrobe doors. It was sure lit better than the old quarters, but just about everywhere on board was. Now they could finally fab replacements again when they went out.

He picked up a tablet from the desk then laid in bed, turning it on to reread the technical specs on the *Great Eastern*’s upgrades for the fortieth time. “Music...” he said to the room’s entertainment system. *Something from the Trove...ah, I know just the thing.* There were only a couple dozen songs decoded, but one had to start a collection somewhere. “Hard Rock mix.”

Time passed quickly enough that it took a comm from Isabella to break him out of it. “Five minutes to docking, Seamus. Then remember we have that little change-of-command ceremony in the Gangway with Captain Perez.”

“On the way, Commodore.” He set the tablet down and jogged to the new turbolift. “Concab,” he told it.

Once there he changed the main panel to monitor the dozens clamps rather than the lifters. Seamus glared at the indicator for Clamp Seven, daring it to do anything, anything at all.

Just like the launch, the docking was completely uneventful. In his five years aboard the *Alice*, it was also a first. From the look on Frick and Frack’s faces, they were

just as stunned.

Frick dabbed his sad face with a handkerchief (though not, Seamus noticed, mussing any of his makeup). “I don’t believe it.”

“The old girl isn’t the same anymore,” Frack said. “Not that I miss it.”

“The old *Alice* had character,” Frick insisted.

“The old *Alice* tried to kill us a half dozen times, Frick,” the other clown bantered.

“You got me there, Frack,” Frick replied.

“With me, Seamus,” Isabella said.

The next part was a bit of necessary ceremony. As Commodore, Isabella was in overall command of the flotilla while the Bigtops were undocked. Once they were all secure, the *Great Eastern* was a single vessel again. A starship could only have one Captain to have a clear chain of command.

That Captain met Isabella and Seamus after the docking rings connected. Commodore Isabella Brunel saluted. “Captain Perez, command is yours.”

The pale, bald woman in the silver jumpsuit returned the salute. “Thank you, Commodore. Command is duly and formally transferred.” Then she actually *smiled*—a rare sight for the normally-reserved Eridani captain. “For the first time in half a decade the *Great Eastern* is whole again, and better than new. Let’s not waste any more time; we should get underway. Zharus Orbit Control has cleared us to depart. Come with me to the Bridge.”

Once there, Captain Nina Perez sat in a velvet-lined chamber studded with overhead laser transceivers, and shut her eyes. In a sense, Captain Perez *was* the ship. Scuttlebutt had it her cybernetics were just as powerful as the rest of the ship’s systems combined. She needed no helmsman. The massive starship responded to her thoughts, quickly and smoothly.

“Course for Wednesday set. Impellers at at full thrust. Three hundred gravs of acceleration,” Captain Perez reported to the crew. “That’s fifty gravs faster than before, everyone. We’ll reach the system jump point in four hours. Engineering, spin up fore and aft Alc-Drive rings for submergence. Secure all stations for FTL travel.”

“Aye aye, Captain!” the Over Engineer replied. “I want all Tentmasters down here now. This means *you*, Seamus.”

“Keep your shirt on, Bede. I’m on my way.” Now that the *Alice* was docked, he and all the other ships’ engineering crews had new primary duties helping out aboard the core ship, under the authority of its Chief Engineer. They would also keep their respective ships’ systems maintained, but since the landers weren’t being used for more than crew quarters and menagerie stables between planetfalls that wouldn’t take up much of their time. The post-lift orientation meeting was another long-standing tradition of the circus, though with all the new changes and refits *this* one promised to be something to remember. But he still had a few minutes before he absolutely *had* to be there.

Seamus glanced at the blue orb of Zharus on the viewscreen, swiftly receding from view. He almost wished he could stay, and not just because it had become so much like home over the last year. It would be an exciting time to live on the planet in general. After all, they’d just made a huge breakthrough, affecting practically every field of technology and science. Who knew what else they’d have invented by the time the Circus passed this way again? *Maybe I’ll retire there myself someday. But not after this round. Or maybe even the one after that.*

But for now, there was still *way* too much to be done to think of retirement. Seamus took himself off to Core Engineering to get reacquainted with his once-and-present boss.

THE END