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" J A S O N T H E R E S C U E R "

Infinity City series book #2, 7Mar94.

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N O W , L E T T H E S T O R Y B E G I N ! !

(Note: Pretend words in all CAPITALS are really in *italics*!)

1. HOME.

Jason left the happy occasion of his parents 100th anniversary party slightly early, feeling a little miffed at still not being able to talk them into having more children. He quietly left their little apartment above their family store, a curio shop of exotic items from around the Galaxy, and headed to his electric rent-a-car parked along the street here in the quaint little section of Infinity City known as Oldtown, where he had grown up. Jason had actually only recently returned to Infinity City. *1. (See footnotes at end of this chronicle.) With the extraordinary amount of money resulting from his last rescue mission of a stranded space vessel, he had purchased for his parents an anniversary gift of 100 years supply of the PILL OF LIFE. *2. They were extremely grateful, as the PILL was expensive, and their only source of income was from their little curio shop. Their old supply of the PILL was almost out. 'What would they look like if they started to age?' he wondered. Strange to think... Yes, it had been a happy reunion with them, in spite of the mysterious little audio tape they had acted so strangely about, now tucked safely into the pocket of his flight jacket.

Now, it was down to the shining Infinity City gold souqs to make his final purchases prior to sailing away tomorrow morning on his next rescue mission of a huge derelict colonial space craft, lost somewhere up in the Galaxy outside the black hole of Infinity City. *3. Miraculously, he had just finished all his provisioning that very day ahead of schedule and all that was left was to purchase a good supply of pure, soft buttery-yellow gold ingots for trading with colonists aboard the stranded ship he was looking for. Often in the past, the broken down ships that he had rescued had contained surprising and amazing cargoes that he would sell for high profits back on Infinity City.

He folded his tall, well-toned physique into his little, automatic rent-a-car and instructed it to take him to the Oldtown gold souqs. Jason had gone on the PILL before his aging began and perpetually looked like he was still a radiant young man in his early twenties. Exercising frequently, vigorously, almost religiously, he kept himself in the best shape that he could. This was a tradition among the Adventurers of Infinity City. It had another Grand Purpose for Jason, though. HE could not resist the challenge of a pretty lady (single ladies only, of course... usually). He had blue eyes and wavy almost-blond hair that would always blow around at the slightest breeze giving him a wild look; as if his personality was not wild enough. He tried to keep his hair short, but always preoccupied with preparation or execution of a rescue, it tended to get a little too long. Slightly sunken cheeks and a fair complexion gave him a misleadingly austere look when he was calm and a frightful grimacing scowl when he was roused. Jason was the epitome of the Infinity City Adventurer ideal. Wild, a little greedy, uncanny clever, light-hearted, passionate and always at odds with the ultimate authority of the Grand Dames. But, when it came to the actual execution of an Adventure, he was dead serious.

He also had a small secret tattoo that he would brag about to peak the curiosity of young ladies. It could be viewed in only the most intimate of circumstances. Jason was, after all, a

rogue.

His prize feature, to him, was a small scar down the left cheek of his clean-shaven face, won during a battle in his active duty with Infinity City's Militia Guard. In conversation,

especially with ladies, he would stroke his left cheek with a finger, to draw attention to the impressive little scar, hoping for someone to ask about the story behind it, which had grown into quite a remarkable tale, over the years.

He had even gotten to tell this, his favorite tale, twice during the evening at his parent's anniversary. An opportunity came to tell it a record third time, but his parents, bored after having heard it countless times before, demanded that Jason tell them all the exciting details regarding his UPCOMING rescue mission. He sighed and agreed. He took rescue missions very seriously (about the only thing he took seriously, his parents worried) and would have preferred to jabber away about the dangers and successful completion of some past mission already under his belt. But, his parents and friends were crowded around, leaning forward, eagerly awaiting something new, and they had all heard his other stories before anyway.

He told them about how, at the Infinity City Grand Library, he had performed exhaustive computer searches of news releases from all over the Galaxy to find anything about spaceships in need of rescue. He learned about a famous case, in which a huge space-liner full of over nine hundred colonists, from a modern world named CONOVER around RIGEL, had been reported missing eighty-seven years ago. The 'Heaven,' it was called. The purpose of its important voyage was to colonize a newly discovered planet, only a few stars away from RIGEL. The voyage should have taken only about ten years. (They only had primitive ion-engines, though, at least, with direct mass-conversion nuclear power.)

After it was reported missing, by the advanced scouts at the new world, search ships were sent out but mysteriously found nothing between the HEAVEN'S origin and destination. No debris, no trace, no radio distress messages. Conover loyally continued the search for decades! The regretful conclusion of the official investigation was that it must have gone off course and tragically had been lost.

Jason had his own exciting theory of what happened, though. Its course was near one of Infinity City's main Militia Guard patrol routes, around one of the "neighbors". *4. Jason's eyes widened and he grew animated telling the expectant crowd about a wonderful clue to the ship's mysterious disappearance. Only five years before, Jason, on active duty with the Militia Guard, had been assigned a patrol mission around that very same "neighbor." Before he left, he had received the usual briefing, but this one had an urgent addendum regarding a dangerous gravitonic whirlpool that had just been reported by an Adventurer newly arrived on Infinity City. Jason had remembered this because the report related an amazing account of how the Adventurer himself had gotten caught in the whirlpool, been slung out catastrophically near the speed of light and thus so slowed down in time that when he finally returned to Infinity City, though only a few ship-

board months had passed to get back, he discovered that 93 years had passed on Infinity City since he had last been there.

Time aboard a spaceship or anything traveling near the speed of light, adhering to the Law of Relativity, slows down and approaches a stopping point at the exact speed of light, which cannot normally be reached since this would take an infinite amount of energy. The sailships of Infinity City employ the probabilistic field shift method, reeling out gigantic sails of special molecularly laminated material that redirect the gravitons about the ship, utilizing the phenomenal effects of gravitons upon local probability.

The report prudently noted that his wise investments in the Infinity City Militia Bond fund had made him so wealthy, that he had moved away to retire on some obscure planet around RIGEL.

When Jason had seen the news report at the library about the missing colony ship and read that its course had been near his old patrol area, he had become very interested. When he read that the ship had been from RIGEL, he remembered the Adventurer's report regarding the whirlpool which had been very near to the ship's planned route. Jason surmised that the whirlpool had swung the ship way off-course, probably also slinging it so close to the speed of light that the crew were now living too slow to have transmitted a distress call yet. On the colony ship, it may have only been a few days or just A FEW HOURS since the catastrophe!

Jason told the expectant crowd, that he planned to sail off to the whirlpool and begin searching the gravitonic currents radiating out, for the lost ship. The original searchers, from the colony ship's home planet, had no gravitonic technology and so never searched these currents. The colony ship, according to Jason, was probably sliding along one of them at near light speed.

Everyone had grown just as excited as Jason about the story. Everyone except his two parents, who just stood looking at each other with a serious look of silent communication which Jason noted wryly most married people always seemed to develop. He asked, "WHAT, are you two thinking now?"

His mother conspiratorially asked his father, "Should we tell him?"

His father said with irritation, "I don't want to tell him. You tell him!"

"I can't! It was hard enough making that tape."

"Then, let's just give him the tape like we planned to anyway."

Jason asked, "What tape? What IS all this?"

His father addressed his mother, "Go get the tape, Maynyn" She went off to search for it. His father turned to him, but could not meet his gaze. "Jason, this story you just told us reminded us of something that happened a long time ago. Long

before you were even born. Something happened that... Well, that we aren't very proud of. And, that really turned bad, and...", his voice was beginning to shake. He stopped and took a deep breath. "You should know. During your last absence, we sat down and recorded a tape of the whole story. I just can't tell you about it! Now, look. Let's just forget it. This is a happy night." His mother returned with a small audio tape. His father said, "Here, just take this tape and listen to it during."

Jason tried to learn more about the mysterious contents of the tape, but they would say nothing. He finally just put the tape in his jacket pocket and change the subject, bringing up a topic he had hounded them about for years now. "You know, when I come back from an Adventure, something is really missing. Other Adventurers come back and are welcomed by their huge families. I just have you two. I was just wondering if you two had been thinking about what you promised me to think about. Remember? Before my last voyage?"

His father rolled his eyes, "Oh, Jason, not this again!"

Jason stubbornly drove on, "You promised that you would think about having more kids! I hate having such a small family. I love you two, sure, but I want brothers and sisters and nieces and nephews so much! You two need to get on the ball here."

His mother looked down in embarrassment, then walked away to go talk to some of the other guests. His father squinted at him. "There's nothing stopping YOU from getting married, Jason. You're 45." And then dryly, "I think you're just about mature enough."

Jason did not know if he was being serious or sarcastic. In any case, settling down was the lowest of his priorities at this point in time. "Dad, come on. I haven't found the right girl yet." He grinned his ear to ear grin. "I'm sure looking around a lot, though!" Then, returning doggedly to his obsessive quest for siblings, he cajoled, "Come on, why won't you have more kids? You both came from big families! Why not? What is the damn mystery here?!"

His father looked at him sharply, "You want to know the mystery? Why we don't have more kids? Listen to the damn tape and you'll find out! Now come on, let's forget about it. It's our anniversary tonight, everybody's having a good time. You gave us a wonderful gift. You're our wonderful son and you're about to leave again, so let's just have a good time, too... Hey, did you read in the JOURNAL OF RECENT ADVENTURE about your friend John One bringing back Van Gogh? That's incredible!"

Jason had not felt like small talk. Soon, he had said his good-byes and left.

Jason pulled his car away from the curb of his parents' little two-story curio shop and apartments. Looking up into Infinity City's nighttime sky, he noticed that someone was playing a laser show. Thick, fuzzy beams of pistachio green and hot pink drew wild geometric shapes through the nighttime mist being released at the very top of Infinity City's atmosphere. Infinity City was located midway between the first and second

event horizons within a black hole, about halfway toward the center of the Galaxy. It was roughly disk shaped and was surrounded by an artificial atmosphere, held in place by artificial gravity and heated by a revolving artificial sun. Probably the most stunning and complex creation of mankind, Infinity City had been built by the mysterious Original Builders many millennia ago.

Jason began to feel the usual home-sickness prior to leaving on one of his self-appointed rescue missions. Sometimes he was gone for many years. Finding lost ships always took a long time and never ending patience and persistence. And, sometimes the repairs could take over a year. His wonderful sailship cruiser was outfitted with an amazing workshop where he could perform electronic repairs, machining, software programming, even woodcraft (a hobby during the long months in space). He had even repaired one ship captain's noisy plumbing in exchange for some rare zoo animals which he had transported and sold back on Infinity City.

He spontaneously decided to stop by the WELL OF THE WISH and pay his respects to the Original Builders. *5. Legend had it that they had one by one all jumped down. He told the car to go there instead. The WELL was at the center of Oldtown and also the precise center of Infinity City itself, which meant that it

was exactly at the center of the Black Hole Normal Line. From outside a black hole, the event horizon is the shape of a spherical shell. Relative to the inside of a black hole, all event horizons are points. (See subsequent I.C. chronicles for interesting accounts of adventures within various other event horizons...) The Horizon Normal Line, an imaginary line between the first and second event horizon, plays a crucial role in astronavigation. When a sailship leaves Infinity City, its temporal point of emergence, back in the outside universe, is a function of the ship's exit angle to the Horizon Normal Line.

After a few minutes, the car pulled into the small parking lot outside the wall surrounding the WELL. A little old man, too poor to afford the Pill, sat snoring in the guard booth, his chin resting on his chest. Jason grinned and stole quietly past, through the open gate in the wall and into the translucent roofed-over interior. The lighting was subdued. He moved to the old black and red brick cistern and looked inside. At the bottom, far below Infinity City, was the second event horizon. Tonight, it was a bright white whirling star, that looked very far away. Some said what you saw determined your future. Jason did not believe superstitious nonsense. However, he had a reverence for the forces that kept the Universe running.

Looking into the WELL before a rescue reminded him of two things: The powerful forces of nature he would have to deal with in space. And, how the Original Builders, his forefathers, had bent these forces, no matter how immense, to their purpose.

He longed for a cigarette or a cigar, but they were currently banned and he had not yet found a supply anywhere. Oh, well. Smoking gave him bad breath, anyway...

He turned away from the WELL and left. Just as Jason exited

the gate, another car pulled up and out sprang Vincent Van Gogh with paintbrush and palette. He stormed toward the gate. Jason had just been introduced to him the day before. As he passed, Jason greeted him, "Hi, Vincent!", but Van Gogh ignored him and marched through the gate. TEMPERAMENTAL ARTISTS! Jason thought to himself. (See previous chronicle for a full account of Van Gogh on Infinity City...)

He hopped back into his car and told it to take him to the gold souqs. The car rolled off and after a few minutes, pulled into the busy street adjacent to the bright, flashy gold souqs. It was a busy night and the car took a while to find a parking place. Finally, Jason was able to jump out. The street was brightly lit from the intense indoor lighting reflecting a fortune in gold shining out of all the shops. He looked up at the dazzling store fronts, with all sorts of gold jewelry hanging in display. He turned, walked down the street a way, wishing he had brought sunglasses, and turned into one of the narrow, connecting alleys between each avenue of the souqs. This one lead to the second row of souqs. He was looking for a particular merchant, who always had an amazing variety and who would give Jason his usual "discount" without Jason having to waste any time haggling. He quickly found the store. It stood out among its neighbors, as if its owner took far more pride in his business. He went up to the large glass door and it slowly swung open automatically triggered by his presence. It was about three inches thick, made to withstand intrusion.

Inside was a flaming, dazzling fortune in golden glory! Finely worked jewelry with and without precious gems hung everywhere. The decor this time was all wood flooring & paneling, with bamboo furniture. The soft, light toned wooded

wall panels seemed to glow with a life of their own reflecting the hanging long gold chains, bracelets, rings, and more. The overhead lighting was tuned to make the gold as instinctively alluring to the human eye as possible. Jason felt the excited stupefaction that always overcame anyone surrounded by the most ancient of mankind's treasures. Gold was still precious, too expensive to synthesize, even for the "alchemists" of Infinity City.

Several young clerks genially waited on customers. Jason looked for the owner and saw him just coming out of the back room

The owner, a Mr. Abu originally from the Earth, spotted Jason and recognized him immediately. He moved toward Jason and greeted him, "Ah, Mr. Jason, my friend! It has been so long! Over one year! I read about your latest rescue in the JOURNAL. *6. Breathtaking Adventure, my friend, breathtaking!" He was wearing the customary robe of the Infinity City gold merchant, bright starched white. On his head, he wore laurel leaves of very thin gold, each leaf tipped with a tiny, sparkling diamond.

Jason said, "Over sensationalized, I'm sure, Mr. Abu. How have you been? Prosperous year?"

"Ehh... I get by, I get by. My wife, she leaves me with nothing. All profit goes directly to her. Why do I work so hard?!", he shook his head in mock-misery. He was very old and

had deep lines about his eyes and mouth that made him look a tragic figure, which he often used to play upon the sympathies of lady clientele. The PILL OF LIFE did nothing for wrinkles. He obviously had avoided the Infinity City plastic surgeons, opting instead for the distinctive look of wizened age, accentuated by his drooping, long pointed nose and long, gray pointed beard.

"Well, that's why I'm not married," Jason said with a sly grin. "Tomorrow, I'm sailing away early in the morning. I need some gold for trading. I haven't much time. Can I get my usual discount?"

"Yes, of course, my friend!" He leaned close to Jason, looked this way and that, then squinted one eye and said in a low voice, "I will save you even more, Mr. Jason! I have found a vendor who is just new and trying to undercut his competition. His prices are so low, he must be insane. Maybe some offworld syndicate trying to muscle in, eh? Who knows?! Come, let me show you some things I think you will like."

"Did you get any bulk ingots?"

"Ah!" His bushy old eyebrows shot upwards. "I knew you would be back someday to ask just that very question! Yes, I did. Twice as many as you asked for the last time." He put his arm around Jason and lead him back into the private showing room.

2. DALTON.

Jason and Mr. Abu were outside the gold souq chatting about the usual wild goings on of Infinity City. Jason's purchase was in a secure leather satchel at his feet. His hand held firmly to the shoulder strap. As they chatted, a boy just into his youth,

dressed in old clothes, confidently sauntered past them and into the shop. Mr. Abu stopped talking in mid-sentence and suspiciously watched the boy through the display window, out of the corner of his eye. His gaze narrowed with deeper suspicion.

"What's the matter?" asked Jason.

Mr. Abu grunted, "After all these years in this business, I now have a sixth sense about trouble. That boy. He's been hanging around here for days now. Just a child of the streets, probably. Maybe a laborer over in the industrial district."

"He looks too young for that," Jason observed.

"Street child, then. Infinity City, the most advanced city in the universe, still with street kids and bums! I will never understand," he shook his head and pulled a little control box from a pocket up his sleeve. He pressed a button. He shook the little box in Jason's face. "This transmitter will alert my clerks to be wary. Look how much of my merchandise is in open

displays! Ah, but to touch is to buy..."

"Where's the police? I haven't seen one patrol all night here."

"Bah!" and he spat. "There must be some big convoy in at the space field. They always yank the souq police for extra customs duty. We pay our taxes! We deserve full protection! I have heard there are only three patrolmen assigned to the gold souqs now. This is why the kid has come here. Well, he will find that my staff have eyes in the backs of their heads!"

They secretly watched the boy as he strolled around the store with his hands behind his back, ostensibly admiring the stunning displays of gold broaches, earrings, charms and other fine items. More than once, as he would slowly walk past, other customers would sniff at the air in puzzlement, and then make faces of disgust.

Finally, the boy, noting the ever-watchful eyes of the clerks, headed back the way he had come. As he stepped outside, he apparently tripped and bumped into Jason leaning back against the store front. He looked up at Jason, to excuse himself, their eyes met, and then for a moment they just looked curiously at each other. The boy was thin, with unkempt, dark brown hair, dark eyes, dark complexion. To Jason's puzzlement, there seemed something hauntingly familiar about him. As Jason opened his mouth to ask him who he was, the boy quickly excused himself and walked away, disappearing into the next alleyway down the street.

"Do you know him?", the gold merchant asked suspiciously.

"No, not at all!", replied Jason.

"You looked at him as if you knew his face."

"Something about him. Thought I'd seen him before, I guess."

"Yes, maybe working around the space field. Jason," he said, touching Jason's arm. "Check you pockets."

"What? Why?", Jason asked baffled.

"Pickpockets. Have you never heard of them??"

Jason groaned, then smiled as he felt his valuables safe and secure, "Look, all tab-lock pockets. I have a tough enough time opening them, let along a thief."

"What about that open breast pocket?", Abu said, pointing to a pocket in Jason's flight jacket without any tab lock, meant for sunglasses.

Jason began, "I don't keep anything there...", then he remembered the tape from his parents. He had put it in that pocket! He checked the pocket. It was empty. The tape was gone.

Instantly enraged, he cried, "Hold this!", tossed the handle

to his bag of gold to Mr. Abu and then sprang off in the direction the boy had gone. He, decided the boy would heading deeper into the maze of souqs. Jogging up to the alleyway, he turned into it, heading toward the 3rd avenue. The alley sides were two stories high and featureless, except for low footlights, at regular intervals. Each side of the alley could be touched by extending both arms. The boy was not to been seen.

Jason emerged into the 3rd avenue. He looked to the left. Nothing, just more souqs with ornate signs hanging from elaborate glittering, golden metalwork hangers and shoppers leisurely strolling along the boardwalks before all the storefronts. He looked to the right... The boy! He was walking up the street and, as Jason watched, turned into the alley leading to the 4th avenue!

Jason ran up to this alley and peeked around the corner. He saw the lad walking down the alley with a bouncing confident gait, slapping a bulging trouser pocket smugly. This must be the tape. The tape was in a little black metal box. Jason thought that the boy would probably think it contained gold or some other valuable.

As soon as he reached 4th avenue, he turned to the left. Jason decided to surprise him. He turned and ran back up 3rd avenue, to the next alley and then ran into it, running as fast as he could to pop out of the alley just as, he calculated, the boy would reach it.

He burst out of the alley, expecting to confront the boy face to face. But, the boy was not there! Jason looked up the avenue and there was the boy, leaning against the corner, next to the alley he had just left, examining the little black tape box! He took one look at Jason and jolted with surprise. The tape case flew up in the air. The boy deftly snatched it back, then sprang forward, dashing across 4th avenue toward the mouth of the alley to 5th avenue.

Jason started after him, then decided to veer to his left and go through the alley across from the one he had just left. Maybe the boy would turn left at the end of the alley.

Just as the boy entered the alley, he quickly stole a glance in Jason's direction then continued forward. Jason ground to a halt. If this kid is smart, he thought, he'll see I'm heading for the next avenue, so HE'LL double back! Jason veered slightly to the right and ran to the storefronts next to the alley the youth had taken. He leapt up to the old-fashioned wooden boardwalk and pounded off toward the alley to hopefully catch the boy should he double back. The boardwalk was only wide enough for two or three people. Eveninggoers gave him haughty looks as he rudely slid past them.

He was almost to the alley, when a man and woman, arm in arm, stepped up from it to the boardwalk, having just crossed from the opposite boardwalk. Jason veered slightly to the left to pass the couple as he jumped into the alley, hopefully to land dramatically right in front of the boy. Unfortunately, in the doorway just a step ahead, Jason was unable to foresee the two men carrying out a heavy crate, containing an extremely heavy

solid gold statue of a Militia Guard sailship. The lead man, who was very fat, was backing out, chomping on a fat, illegal cigar and had not seen the child's toy laying in the doorway. He stepped out toward the boardwalk and right on to the toy. His foot slipped forward, back under the crate. He lost his balance and began falling backwards, right into the startled couple now opposite the doorway.

The big fellow would have been seriously hurt by the heavy crate falling on him, had Jason not, running at top speed, crashed into him. As the crate crashed down to the boardwalk, the two toppled past it and into the mouth of the alley, the fat man landing with a loud grunt, the cigar still in his face. Just as Jason crashed to the ground, landing on his back, he saw the boy, who had sure enough doubled back up the alley. Without pausing, the boy leap gracefully through the air, right over both Jason and the fat man. As the boy landed, he twisted around, his longish black hair sweeping over his face, and looked down at Jason. He laughed merrily, shaking the tape box in the air triumphantly, and dashed off up 4th avenue.

Jason dislodged himself from the fat man, who had begun swearing and cursing profusely because the red-hot tip of his cigar had fallen into his shirt. The man and woman had nimbly dodged back from the falling crate and were now standing on the edge of the boardwalk curiously watching the two men lying in the dirt, the fat man frantically grabbing at his shirt to dislodge the heater.

Jason jumped to his feet unhurt and tore off after the boy, who was racing across the avenue diagonally, making for the alley on the opposite side. He was very fast and disappeared into the alley before Jason was even halfway across the street. Jason, thinking once again to outsmart the lad, veered back up the street toward the alley directly across from the one in to which he had fallen. He had a hunch that when the boy reached the 3rd avenue, to fool his pursuer, he would turn in the direction of Mr. Abu's gold souq heading back the way he had come, instead of getting farther away. Jason ran into the alley, running faster and faster.

By the end of the alley, he was running at full speed. He spread his arms wide thinking to emerge right in front of the lad, but again the boy was not where he had predicted. Quickly looking around, he caught a glimpse of the boy disappearing down the alley across from the one he had emerged from. He was heading back to the 2nd avenue.

Jason was now getting winded. He ran on, though, crossed the 3rd avenue and ducked into the alley heading for the 2nd avenue. When he emerged onto the 2nd avenue, he looked this way and that, but there was no sign of the boy. He tiredly turned around and pumped back down the alley to check for him on 3rd avenue. But, the boy was gone.

Jason shook his fists in the air, stamped on the ground and growled out several curses. He then took a few deep breaths then trudged up the 3rd avenue and over to the alley the boy had taken.

On his way up the alley, toward the 2nd avenue, he suddenly heard a hooting siren some distance away. It sounded like the anti-theft siren of a rent-a-car! HIS rent-a-car!

He dashed off in the direction of the sound, leaving 2nd avenue and heading back into the first alleyway he had taken. He emerged out of the alleyway onto the sidewalk along the main street, brightly lit up by all the dazzling gold souqs to both sides. Electric cars whizzed back and forth before him. He looked in the direction of the siren sound and there was HIS rent-a-car with all lights blinking in rhythm with the siren. Inside, someone was struggling to get out. Jason had left the car unlocked, since he had the key to make it go and there was nothing valuable inside. The current occupant of the rent-a-car must have tried something unauthorized, for car had automatically locked him inside.

Jason grinned, rubbed his hands together and walked over to the car. Placing one hand on the roof, he smiled and waved with the other at the trapped victim within. It was the boy who had stolen the tape! The boy stopped thrashing around and looked up at him furiously. Then, he suddenly looked terrified and very afraid. Staring up at Jason, he folded his hands together and shook his head slowly back and forth, with a pleading look in his eyes.

Jason watched with arms folded, looking sternly unimpressed.

The boy stared at Jason and his face grew blank. Then, he slowly reached into his shabby coat and withdrew the box with the tape. He looked at it, then held it up, offering it to Jason, behind the closed window of the car door.

For some reason, Jason was moved. He took out his keys and opened the door, making sure he was blocking any possible escape by the boy. This silenced the annoying alarm, the car even welcomed him back with its mechanical voice. The boy slowly, meekly, silently handed him back the tape. Jason took the tape, looked at the boy's sorrowful expression and then looked down at the tape, wondering what to do next. But, the boy decided things himself.

Quick as a cat, the boy turned to the dashboard, opened a panel and punched an emergency button. The button was designed to allow a passenger to instruct the car to immediately leave any scene of imminent danger at full speed. The car tore instantly away, its forward acceleration enough to slam shut the open door, with Jason's keys still stuck in the lock on the outside. Jason took a frustrated step in the direction of the car. The car key, simply being inserted into the electronic door lock, had been enough to enable driver control!

Jason stared dumbfounded. The last thing he saw was the boy, staring back with a curiously serious expression, and then the car disappeared around the very next corner. In frustration, Jason jammed the tape back into his pocket.

He walked back to the souq to get his satchel of gold, then used the telephone to report the stolen vehicle and request that another drive itself over to the souqs for him.

But wait! The keys! The damn kid had driven away with the keys to Jason's sailship! Fortunately, he had spares in his wallet. He decided to head directly to the space port as soon as the rent-a-car replacement arrived. There was no label or anything on the sailship keys linking them to his ship, so there was little danger of the kid breaking into it, at least not right away, with all the dozens of other sailships currently in port. But it would be best to proceed to the ship, then tell his ship's computer not to let anyone but him in until he had the locks changed. The locks were only there in case of computer failure anyway. Fortunately, the computer could override the locks electronically.

3. LIFT OFF FROM INFINITY CITY

Jason rolled up to his wonderful sailship in the rent-a-car, got out, tugged the leather satchel of gold out of the trunk and hoisted it to his shoulder. He told the car to return to its dealer and it rolled away. He was very tired. It had taken a long argument over the gold souq's phone to talk the rent-a-car company into sending a replacement. They acted as if it was HIS fault that the car had been stolen. Then, in exasperation, he had waited over an hour for the replacement rent-a-car.

Jason looked up at his beloved sailship rising majestically before him. What a beauty! It was shaped like an upside-down bowl, about 20 meters at its greatest diameter, dark gray in color, with several landing legs elevating it a foot or two above the tarmac of the space port. The conning tower bulged out at the top, containing the gravitonic propulsion systems and the pilot room in the center. There was a ring of round view ports near the top below the conning tower and other view ports, here and there around its lower perimeter. At the very top and at four locations around the lowest perimeter, gravitonic sail-pods bulged out, housing the struts that moved in and out, along which the fantastic gravitonic sails were run up and unfurled.

Jason trudged up to where the main hatch was located. It was smoothly flush with the sailship's side and was not even easy to see, unless you were close. Jason spoke, "Hi, honey! I'm home! Open up..." The ship's computer had transponders all over the surface of the ship, that monitored all types of input, including audio. The computer recognized his voice. Its sophisticated, pattern recognition neural-network long ago having learned to filter away his nonsense and translate his colloquialisms. The hatch slowly swung open rotating forward, the hinge on the bottom, lowering silently to the ground at his feet, forming a ramp from the tarmac, up into the ship.

Jason lugged the gold up the steep ramp and into the air lock. The air lock was a small, cubic chamber with several storage lockers containing equipment for extra-vehicular activity such as repairs or docking with other space craft.

He ordered, "Let me in!" The outer hatch began to rotate slowly closed. This particular air lock had a safety feature

built in preventing both the outer and inner hatch to ever be opened at the same time, which would fatally suck out the ship's air in the vacuum of outer space, or admit the poison soup many planets had for atmospheres.

The outer hatch clanged shut, then, with a hissing sound magnetically sealed itself tightly shut . Finally, the inner hatch unsealed and swung smoothly open to the side revealing the large wedge-shaped cargo hold. Below the pilot room, the ship was divided into four quarter sections. The cargo hold occupied one of these. Jason walked in feeling he was home. He was!

He sniffed the air. It smelled fine! FINALLY!, he thought with great satisfaction. He had been having trouble with the cleaning system for the last two years, ever since the ship's last major overhaul. The ship had only three little hard-working robots and too much of their time was spent cleaning. After the many upgrades to the ship, it had taken two years for him to get the robots' cleaning schedule software programmed to a point where everything got cleaned as fast as possible, and in just the right cycle to prevent any source of stench, a tricky problem for any space ship due to the completely recycled environment of food, waste, humidity, and all the 'junk' emitted by human bodies. But, finally it was working and the ship smelled fresh as new! Everything was just balanced. He thought, 'Any change to the balance would probably screw up the damn software again!' But, there were no big changes coming. Except for one big one that he did not know about yet!

He went over to an empty storage locker, crouched down, then stashed the gold securely so that it would not jostle loose during liftoff, or through the passage out of the first event horizon. Then, he remembered something and stood up quickly.

"Computer," he said addressing the ship's sophisticated control system. "There's no one in the ship besides me, is there?"

The ship's computer answered in a pleasant, female voice, "No."

"Has anyone else but me been in the ship?"

"No."

Satisfied, Jason wondered what to do next. He probably should have gone to bed. It was 9 P.M. Or, he could actually lift off now. Everything was ready!

He stood there in the cargo hold rubbing his chin. And, the more he thought about it, the more excited he felt about the prospect of being up in deep space again. Master of his own fate! Tearing through the gravitonic currents in his wonderful, late-model sailship. Adrenaline and other hormones started to course through his veins. The miraculous PILL kept a man young feeling forever! Unfortunately, this tended to result in rash decision-making on the part of some men of Infinity City. So much so, in fact, that political control had, through the eons, and for the sake of security, been taken over by Infinity City's

grand ladies: the Grand Dames.

With a little chuckle, Jason suddenly headed toward the center of the ship, the apex of the pie-shaped cargo hold. Here, a door opened into a high, circular central chamber with three other doors, the one on his left opening into the hardware workshop, the one across from him opening into the living quarter and the one on his right opening into his "software sanctum." A vertical ladder recessed in a shallow slot in the wall ran up one side of the chamber, from the floor up to the ceiling and on up through a hatch which opened up into the pilot room. The "floor" was actually an elevator, designed for moving the heavy components of the gravitonic sail system and other equipment into the conning tower of the ship. The sail control systems occupied most of the conning tower, surrounding the small pilot room at the center.

Jason always used the ladder because frequent exercise was important, during the boring months of space travel, to keep a clear head. The hatch in the ceiling automatically slid open, recessing into the bulkhead, as he neared it. He clambered up into the little pilot room and the hatch slid closed again.

A shiver of excitement ran through him, as he looked around the pilot room at all the sophisticated control panels, computer displays and all the panels containing the powerful gravitonic generators and other systems rising all around behind. IT'S ALL MINE! he thought to himself, with swelling pride. He had started life humbly. For his first rescue mission, he had to borrow a dangerous old, barely space-worthy sailship. But, it had been a financially rewarding Adventure as were almost all of his following rescue missions. He had purchased this amazing craft only a few years ago. It was not only his ship; it was his home.

He looked up. The roof of the conning tower was a transparent dome. Through it, he saw the night sky of Infinity City. High overhead, very far away, was the red "eye" of the first event horizon, his target. Streaming down from it were soft, multicolored streamers of crushed matter. Beyond the space port, he could see an excursion skip floating along, with hundreds of bright, twinkling little lights all over the open basket carrying the passengers. The gravitonic sails billowed above.

WHAT A CITY OF MAGIC! He thought. And, yet, it was the challenge and mystery and Adventure of outer space that attracted Jason.

Grabbing the back of the luxurious, thickly upholstered control chair in the center of the pilot room, he swiveled it around and plopped down into its accustomed comfort. He pulled the arms of the control chair inward and rested his arms on the pads, the fingers of his right hand resting on the main control keyboard and the fingers of his left hand surrounded by the dozens of critical special function buttons. His feet were on foot-rests with controls for rapidly swiveling the chair left or right, to face any of the control panels surrounding him. Above the control panels, at eye level, were several computer display screens. From this central location, he controlled every

function of his ship: The gravitonic sail propulsion system, the ship's environmental and life-support functions, defensive and offensive capabilities, even the service robots and external mechanical manipulators. And, yet it was all dormant, still and dark, completely turned off, until he, the spirit, the life-force controlling the ship, decided to turn it on. The talented designers of the ship had made the pilot room an amazingly efficient and intuitive interface between man and machine.

He looked around with satisfaction and happiness, feeling that strong emotional attachment humans have always had with their vehicles.

He grinned, shook his fists with excitement and cried, "It's all mine! COMPUTER! ACTIVATE ALL SYSTEMS!"

The pilot room burst into immediate life! Panels lit up with countless little lights and meters indicating the entire condition of the ship. The many flat, computer screens snapped into instant life, showing windows of graphical data with fields of various bright colors. He heard the sound of cooling fans whirring up to speed. And, then the low, powerful rising hum of the gravitonic systems in the surrounding panels.

His wonderful, fantastic ship was now alive! He felt it! After years aboard the ship, he was intimately familiar with

every detail of its design and operation. What a perfect extension of the body! What a perfect vehicle for the mind! What a... WHAT WAS THIS?

Out of the corner of his eye he spotted a small, flashing yellow light at the environmental control panel, indicating a minor malfunction. He looked closer and saw that it was just a broken sensor of some cabinet in the living quarter. A non-critical system. He punched in an acknowledgment and the little yellow light stopped flashing. There would be plenty of time to fix that once he was outside the black hole. The trip to the whirlpool would take about four months! There would be plenty to do. Repairs about the ship. New talents to cultivate. An abridged copy of the Infinity City Library to explore and study. The ship's computer was an intelligent companion, but still not human. He would be alone. That was the tough part. All of his activity had one main purpose: To keep his mind off loneliness.

Ah, well. Someday, he knew that he would meet the perfect girl. The perfect companion for his infinite life. Someone to understand him completely, to enjoy the same things he enjoyed, to always take his side. He simply could not understand why it was taking so long! Maybe on this trip, he would meet some sweet, little colonist, sweep her off her feet and talk her into coming back with him to the splendor of Infinity City.

Jason was now anxious to lift off. He quickly checked all the panels. Everything else was fine. "Computer, perform all pre-flight tests, now," he commanded. The computer's main response screen displayed the details of the pre-flight testing of all systems, which simply verified the status already displayed by all the surrounding control panels. The testing now in progress was actually carried out completely by the ship's

backup systems, which also included a backup computer, to check out their redundant functions. This was a tough, safe sailship; the best that the money from his missions of rescue could buy!

Once all primary and backup systems checked out, it was time to coordinate the liftoff through Launch Control in the space port's control tower, the tallest structure in Infinity City. Jason activated the closed circuit TV connection to the tower and directed its display to the screen before him. The crest of the family responsible for the space port appeared. He scowled. AREN'T THEY EVER THERE IN PERSON? This meant that the last voice he would hear from Infinity City would be that of the space port computer. Oh, well... A flat voice spoke from the screen, "Infinity City space port control. Please identify."

"This is J. Jason, commanding class-E sailship, ID: Jason-Rescue-Three. Request immediate, asynchronous launch..." Jason's full name was JASON JASON. His father's full name was JASON ALEXANDER WYNN. Jason had decided to take as his last name the patronymic, his father's first name, instead of his father's surname, a fashionable practice of Infinity City at the time Jason was an adolescent. He took the name JASON JASON reflecting his sense of humor, which often seemed to go a little too far. Also, this avoided the attachment of JR. to his name, which would have dampened his pride. Many individual men of the larger Families or 'Houses' took the patronymic to keep their Family or 'House' identity a secret for various political, business, or romantic reasons.

Jason's family, as far as he currently knew, consisted of just himself, his mother Maynyn and his father Jason (Sr.), not big enough to be considered a Family or a 'House.' However,

there was an importance to Jason's family that he would learn in time...

"Immediate, asynchronous launch granted. Next scheduled launch in seven hours, 35 minutes. First horizon status: Normal."

BOY, WAS THAT A MISNOMER! Jason punched a special function button initiating the launch program that he had set up a few days ago, instructing the ship to lift off and follow the imaginary Horizon Normal Line through the first event horizon and out into the Galaxy, arriving into the 'Present'.

Time within a black hole is independent of time outside in the Galaxy. When leaving a black hole, the angle between the ship's exit trajectory vector and the imaginary NORMAL line between the first and second event horizons (Within the black hole, both horizons appear as points.), the HORIZON NORMAL LINE, determines the point in time at which a ship arrives outside in the Galaxy. The farther a sailship's angle of trajectory from the normal line, the farther back in the past it arrives. The closer to the normal line, the closer to the actual, unraveling present. There was no known way to travel into the future theoretically because it had not 'unraveled' yet.

Then, he would manually pilot the ship along the unpredictable, trans-Galactic gravitonic currents until he

reached the whirlpool that, he theorized, had tossed the colony ship off-course.

The gravitonic generators whined as they spun up to the power required to overcome the artificial gravitonic field enveloping Infinity City. Jason felt the vibration of the sail struts being deployed. From four points along the lower periphery of the sailship, and also from four corresponding points around the conning tower, the gravitonic sail struts rose above the ship in angular geometric patterns like long, thin spindly metal fingers. Jason looked up and could see the struts rising smoothly on all sides, sub-struts angled between the main struts, connecting and giving the entire gravitonic sail support structure enough strength to withstand the turbulent gravitonic currents of space.

The screen from the control tower spoke, "Jason-Rescue-Three, flight plan received and validated. Have a safe Adventure! Do you wish to log an expected return date or duration of Adventure?"

HEY, THAT WAS NEW! "What's that for? Is there an official search plan, now?"

"No. Our family has simply agreed to relay the information to the INFINITY CITY JOURNAL OF RECENT ADVENTURE, to be published only if the craft does not return before the expected date, or within the expected duration of Adventure."

Why publicly announce you are missing? Well, for legal and business reasons it made sense. The length of a voyage was often kept secret so competing Adventurers could not figure out the destination. But, signaling publicly that you were delayed might help your affairs from getting too tangled up until you got home.

Well, it was difficult to predict how long he would be in space. First, he had to find the colony ship. Then, repair it and return home. But sometimes he was invited to stay aboard a friendly spacecraft, enjoying the hospitality of the grateful

folk on board, until they grew anxious to be on their way. There had been one fantastic episode with a transport ship full of several hundred single women bound for a mineral-rich new world of almost all men.

Now, clicking power relays and complex humming and buzzing accompanied the reeling out of the amazing gravitonic sails. As they were run up the struts, they billowed slowly out between, moved by the gentlest of breezes due to their thickness of only a few molecules.

The computer sent a sharp charge of electric power into the sails, pulsing with just the right phase characteristic to cause a resonance contraction of the sails, snapping them into place for a crisp launch.

His computer spoke, "Request final launch command." The voice it used in the pilot room or when there was trouble, was male.

He loved this moment! He eye-balled all the control panels. Everything was ready for launch. He thought to himself: GOOD-BYE, INFINITY CITY! GOOD-BYE, MOM & DAD! He remembered the tape they had given to him. He'd have to listen to it after he was out of the black hole.

He tapped the button marked LAUNCH. A sharp humming vibration sprang up as the breakers dumped the full power of the gravitonic generators into the sails. Telltale meters jerked and swung, indicating the jump in power consumption and change in sail status.

Then, the ship lifted up and off the space port. Jason loved the feeling of vertigo as Infinity City's gravitonic field pushed against him, trying to pull him back down, as his majestic ship rose steadily higher. Outside, through the transparent dome, he saw for a brief few seconds the colored lights of Infinity City at night spreading away on all sides. Then, they disappeared below the edge of the ship, as he moved higher and higher.

"Jason-Rescue-Three proceeding normally on validated course," reported space port control.

The ship, with its arching, gravitonic sails towering high above the ship, pulled out of Infinity City's atmosphere, gained speed rapidly and swung around toward the imaginary Horizon Normal Line. Just as it neared this, it suddenly swung about, now exactly along the Horizon Normal Line, heading in a straight line toward the red point of the first event horizon, the only path that would lead a sailship out of the black hole, into Present Time, as opposed to going back to a past time. His view of the inside of his black hole now dwindled as thick protective plates rotated together covering the transparent top of the conning tower.

Anyone on the disk-shaped world of Infinity City watching with a telescope would see the ship and its huge sails, grow smaller and smaller, compared to the red, first event horizon. Then, the ship would appear to begin turning red itself, seeming to merge with the first event horizon, until it could be seen no more.

4. OUT OF THE BLACK HOLE

Anyone watching the black hole from the outside would see a black sphere, about the size of a small planet. Actually, there was not anything to see. The black hole swallowed everything that touched it, even light. The shell surrounding the black hole WAS the first event horizon. The black hole was surrounded by a halo of fiery red-appearing intense radiation of many wavelengths, as particles from a distant star (about which the black hole slowly orbited) accelerated to oblivion as they passed the first event horizon. Nothing that went in ever came out again, except for the sailships of Infinity City. To them, the black hole was just a gravitonic valve between the Galactic universe on the outside, and the quirky micro-universes on the inside.

If someone watching could now actually "see" the shell that was the first event horizon, they would see it suddenly dimple deeply inward, like the effect of the blunt end of a pencil pushed into a balloon, forming a deep depression extending toward the center. This was the phenomenal effect of a sailship's amazing gravitonic sails, backwashing the torrent of gravitons back up and out of the black hole, pulling in a depression in the first event horizon as the backwashing gravitonic flow reduced the black hole's universe ripping effect.

As soon as the depression reached the black hole's exact center, out popped the tiny sailship, right there at the center, to be slung out into the universe by the receding depression in the event horizon as it inflated back up to once again form the perfect sphere of the first event horizon.

Jason's ship was now out in the limitless velvety blackness of mid-Galactic space. Far-away bright stars surrounded him on all sides as he left the dull glowing red of the black hole far behind. So many stars in fact that in some areas they appeared as cloudy swoops and swirls. The black hole's orbital primary star was safely far away but still the brightest Jason could see. Leaving a black hole was much safer and easier than entering one. A sailship naturally followed the most tranquilly gravitonic currents out, which were actually the path of least resistance, graviton-wise.

Jason, still at the helm of his ship, instructed the computer to verify their temporal coordinate by checking the configuration of several known land-mark stars. Knowing the path these stars continually followed, the computer could accurately calculate exactly the position the stars should be in for any point in time within a few ten thousands of years on either side of the present. The check took a few minutes, as recessed crystalline telescopes slid open here and there around the outside of the ship, and scanned the starscape. Everything checked out. The computer reported that they were at the top of time, the universal Present.

Jason had always avoided travel into the past. There were strange paradoxes that could occur. Like meeting oneself. That was a disaster of unthinkable proportions, to be avoided at all costs. (See subsequent I.C. chronicles...) But, it had happened. Only once every few hundred years. The stories were fantastic and frightening, and told by Grand Dames over and over to young men in the hopes of subduing their dreams of back-bouncing Adventure. *7.

Jason began searching for a major gravitonic current in the direction of his destination, which was the whirlpool that

supposedly had tossed the colony ship off-course. The ship's sensors detected a huge, lazy current on the other side of the black hole's star, which headed off toward the direction of the whirlpool. Great! He could take advantage of the nearby gravitonic stellar wind, and tack easily over to it.

His ship was so delightfully automatic! It automatically measured the gravitonic wind from the nearby star, calculated the most efficient path, reconfigured the sails to catch the 'stiff breeze', and moved off swiftly along. He could, of course, slide direct control rods out of the arms of his command chair, and take over manual control. This was always necessary when entering a black hole. But, usually, Jason enjoyed and took pride in the ability of his sophisticated, modern sailship.

After a quarter hour, the primary star swung past the ship, and was left behind. After an hour of travel the ship alerted him that they were converging on the big gravitonic current. He made some final adjustments in the operating program he had just set up, then initiated it. The computer automatically swung the ship about, drifting on the last few wisps of gravitons from the star, and into the wide, tubular, gently meandering current that seemed to go on for many light-years.

Tremendous waves of medium speed gravitons caught the sails, and the ship sailed off at many, many times the speed of light, but with no slowing down of local time flow since it moved by probabilistic-shifting instead of the more widespread action-reaction propulsion (which increased a ship's time-slowng kinetic energy, and prevented it from traveling faster than light). He instructed the computer to warn him if there was trouble, or if the current dissipated too much, or radically changed course. It seemed steady enough, though. Hopefully, he could follow it for days. He set the ship's automatic lighting to mimic Infinity City's day cycle, since that was what his circadian rhythms were currently synchronized with.

Jason now felt very tired. It would be late night back on Infinity City. What a day this had been! His parents party, the strange tape, the WELL, seeing Van Gogh one last time, that kid at the gold souqs, and best of all, a thrilling launch into space. He heaved himself out of the command chair, kicked a wide button near the hatch in the deck of the pilot room, and the hatch slid away. He was too tired to go down the ladder, so he called for the elevator. The floor of the central chamber quickly lifted up until flush with the pilot room deck. He stepped onto it, stood straight with his arms safely at his sides, and was lowered quickly down to the deck at the bottom of the chamber.

He opened the door, on the opposite side of the central chamber from the cargo hold. Inside, was the living area. Galley, entertainment, laundry, medical machines, toilet, exercise machines, storage for personal effects, and everything else not related to business.

The room smelled good, too! This was the hardest room to keep clean, and free from bacteria and spores.

He told the computer to lower the bed. With the hiss of pneumatic pistons it slowly swung down from the ceiling, suspended by four cantilevered beams. He whipped his clothes off, tossed them to the floor, crawled into the bed, and commanded, "Kill the lights, sweetheart!" Ah! the comfort of his

familiar, custom-crafted bed. That wonderfully inevitable feeling of sleepiness enveloped him, and he drifted off.

The conditioning at the Militia Guard academy was said to last forever. Officers of the guard were trained to awaken at any indication of threat. Jason awoke to the click of metal. He did not move right away, or even open his eyes. His mind cranked up to speed, and his first impression was of some minor mechanical problem that the computer did not think important enough to awaken him. Then he heard it again, coming from the direction of some storage cabinets. Jason slowly turned his head in that direction but could see nothing with the lights out. When he slept, he liked it pitch black, and allowed not a single stray photon.

He heard the sound again, and this time, an eerie feeling made the hair on the back of his neck rise. Then, he heard a soft scrape.

He whispered as quietly as he could, "COMPUTER, LIGHTS ON 1% SLOWLY." And then he waited. Lights at the top of the walls slowly began to glow, and in their barely discernible light, he saw the dark silhouette of a person creeping slowly out of one of the storage cabinets. He whispered, "LIGHTS ON 30%." The lights snapped up immediately to 30%. Not enough to hurt the eyes at night, but enough to see a young boy frozen in a crouch, with one foot behind him still inside the large storage cabinet.

Jason sat bolt upright in bed and yelled, "Who the hell are you?! Computer, have the nearest robot grab this guy!" A small cleaning robot burst out of its storage chamber, and rolled toward the boy extending a manipulator arm menacingly before it. The boy gasped, and quickly ducked back inside the storage cabinet, his bare foot disappearing inside just as the door slammed closed.

The robot came to a stop, and said, "Target pattern no longer detected. Immediate program now in endless-loop."

Jason muttered "Acknowledged," to keep it from repeating its message. He sat there staring at the closed storage cabinet. He still felt quite sleepy. Had he dreamt this? No way. That was the kid from the gold souqs. He'd evidently gotten into Jason's sailship using Jason's key to the ship on the rent-a-car key-ring. But how had he found Jason's ship so quickly? And, why had the ship's computer allowed him, a perfect stranger, entry? The computer should have alerted the port authorities, or had a robot grab the kid.

But wait a minute, he thought. He had never actually sat down and programmed the computer to react in any of those ways. He had naturally just always assumed that the manufacturer of the ship had done that. "Computer, why did you let this kid in?"

"There is no child on board."

"Well, then, who is in that storage cabinet there??"

"Jason Jason."

"That's me! Who do you think I am, then?"

"You are Jason Jason."

"Computer, you sense TWO Jasons?"

"Yes."

The computer thought the kid was him! That's why it didn't do anything. But WHAT made the computer think the kid was HIM? Whatever the answer, the big question was: What was to be done with the kid?

Turn around, and head back to Infinity City? He'd have to go through the damn black hole again. And entering was a very rough ride, hard on his ship, sometimes even resulting in costly damage. It was to be avoided. And the landing fee the space port charged! Then, there would be an official inquiry. And the kid's parents! What if they accused him of kidnapping, or worse?!

Or, he could toss the kid out into space. An amusing idea, but he would never do that. Maybe he would TELL the kid he would do that, though. What a problem this was going to be!

He groaned, crawled out of bed, and pulled on some clothes lying near his feet. Then, he went over to the storage chamber. "Hey, kid! Open up. I won't hurt you..."

Nothing.

"Hey, kid. Can you hear me?"

Nothing.

Jason shrugged, squatted down, grabbed the handle, and pulled open the door. Suddenly, there was a hiss from the darkness within, and deodorant spray blasted up into his face. He jerked back cursing, lost his balance, and fell over backward. The boy jumped out of the cabinet, and raced toward the door, long black hair flying. Jason jumped up to follow, but the cleaning robot had rolled over, and now, deciding Jason was the intruder, grabbed his leg in a painfully tight grip with its manipulator arm. The boy opened the door, and jumped to the stairs leading up toward the pilot room.

Jason weaved back and forth trying to maintain his balance. The little robot (the green one, most stubborn of all) clung to his leg, trying to pull him over to its storage chamber. "Computer, tell the Green Robot to let go of my leg!"

"Acknowledged." Green Robot let go. Jason went toward the door shouting, "Computer, lock the pilot room!"

Jason entered the central chamber just as the boy reached the top of the stairs, and started pushing at the hatch. Now locked, it would not open. He cried in a high voice, "Computer, open this hatch!" To Jason's astonishment the hatch opened for

him!

Jason put his hands on his hips, and thought, THE COMPUTER STILL THINKS HE'S ME, TOO! He stroked his chin in concentration. LET'S SEE. WHAT'S THAT MASTER COMMAND PASSWORD? OH, YEAH... "Computer," he spoke aloud. "Acknowledge master password: Jason four Jason three Jason two Jason one Infinity City!"

The computer responded! "Master password acknowledged. Associated identity is Jason Jason, birth place: Infinity City, birth number: 55437, birth date..."

"Cut!", he interrupted. "Lock off all pilot room controls!" The computer acknowledged. WHEW! NOW THE KID COULDN'T HURT ANYTHING.

He said wearily, "Computer, lift me to the pilot room." The floor began to rise, moving Jason upward. He looked up. The kid had closed the hatch! He said, "Computer, open the pilot room hatch."

The computer reported, "Cannot. An unidentified person is standing on it. Hatch drive servo lacks required torque power."

The elevator brought Jason within reach of the hatch, then came to a stop. He reached up, knocked on it politely, and asked with mock sweetness, "Hey, kid, may I come in?"

Nothing.

"Computer, open the hatch!", he ordered.

"Cannot. The same unidentified person is still standing on it."

"Come on, kid. Get off the hatch!", Jason cried. The computer repeated its previous explanation.

Jason temper suddenly exploded, "KID!!", he thundered. "WILL YOU GET OFF THAT DAMN HATCH?!!"

OH, THIS KID!, he thought with irritation, grinding his teeth as he forced himself to calm down. How to get the damn kid off the hatch?! He could tell the computer to evacuate the air out of the pilot room! No, that would waste air... He could raise the temperature... COME ON, GET SERIOUS! he told himself. Ah! A simple idea...

He grinned, "Computer," and he reached out and gripped the ladder embedded and running along the wall. "De-energize ship's gravity."

The ship's gravity was the result of gravitons pouring down over it, generated by special cells located here and there all over the maneuvering sails. Energized by an electric field with just the right alternating phase caused them to divert a small fraction of the surrounding gravitonic current down over the ship, providing it with artificial gravity. Normally, the computer automatically adjusted the controlling electric field to maintain a constant Earth-normal artificial gravity no matter how

the strength of the gravitonic current fluctuated. The computer now cut the controlling electric field.

Jason felt himself suddenly go weightless, as if the ship had been dropped down a hole. WOW, WHERE DID UP AND DOWN JUST GO?! His feet drifted off the elevator. He twisted his hand in the opposite direction against the rung of the ladder he was holding, and his feet drifted back to the elevator. "Computer, as soon as this hatch opens, re-energize gravity. Now, open the hatch!"

The hatch snapped open, and Jason looked up to see the bottoms of two bare feet just as the computer said, "Gravity re-energized."

With a cry the boy instantly fell down through the hole, landed on Jason, the two of them falling to the floor of the elevator in a tangled heap. To prevent them from harming

themselves, the computer had slid the floor downward a ways as they fell on it lessening the impulse of their impact.

Jason disentangled himself, and stood quickly. "Whew! Kid, you need a BATH!"

"So do you!", the boy snapped back as he got up from the floor, and sprang up the ladder toward the pilot room again.

Jason snapped, "Close that damn hatch! Lock it!" The hatch slid closed again. The boy yelled for it to open, but this time, he was not Jason, and the hatch stayed closed. He looked back down at Jason from where he stood perched at the top of the ladder in the wall just below the hatch.

Jason looked up at the boy. "All right, kid. Start talking! What's this all about? Or, do I have to get rough with yuh?!"

The boy snapped back, "Eat dirt, beak-face!", glaring defiantly down at Jason.

Jason fingered his nose absently, and looked up at the skinny, mop-headed boy. He reminded Jason of an angry little elf. This was an absurd situation. Jason, in spite of himself, suddenly burst out laughing.

He then ordered, "Computer, lower the elevator back down, and lock all central chamber doors." When the floor reached the bottom of the central chamber, he turned toward the living quarter door. "Open this one, and close and lock it after I walk through." He looked up at the boy. "Good-night, kid. See you in the morning. Hope you like sleeping on a cold, hard elevator floor!" He walked through the door into the living quarter, and the door slid shut as he heard the boy begin to protest.

Jason turned to face the door, waiting. He heard the boy scramble down the ladder, and then begin pounding on the door, shouting, "Hey, I can explain everything! Don't leave me locked in here, mister! I'm sorry! Let me talk to you..."

"Are you going to behave?"

There was a pause. And, in a very calm, but still boyishly high voice he answered, "I will be completely cooperative, and happily submit to whatever decisions you make."

Hmph. That was better. Jason opened the door. The boy stood looked up at Jason, smiled, and stuck out his hand. "Good evening, sir! My name is Dalton. At your service!"

Jason took his hand automatically, shaking it slowly. Something told him he was about to be "conned." Looking into the impish adolescent face, with the big grin, and the dark but twinkling eyes, Jason felt himself being charmed. Yep, that was his heart he felt warming up, all right. And, that was bad! But there was something familiar about this kid... He had the same peculiar feeling as at the gold souq. He just could not put his finger on it.

He turned around, and gestured over his shoulder, "Come on in. Tell me your story. Computer, drop a couple of chairs." Two shiny blue pneumatic chairs folded down from the ceiling with a hiss, inflating fully before coming to rest on the floor. Jason collapsed wearily into one, bounced up and down a few times then came to rest. Dalton lowered himself slowly, and sat politely in the other, his hands folded in his lap.

"Dalton, you say? What are you doing in my ship???"

Dalton spread his hands, shrugging and grinning in embarrassment. He shook his head, "Gosh, I don't know what to say!" He suddenly dropped his hands, and hung his head. Then he slowly lifted it revealing the most forlorn look Jason had ever seen. They looked quietly at each other.

Jason rolled his eyes, and said calmly, "I won't hurt you... But, why'd you sneak into MY ship, kid?"

He earnestly piped in his high voice, "I don't know, sir. I knew which ship was yours because I watched you land a few weeks ago. I was helping out with the loading of another sailship, the one next to yours, when you came walking over."

Jason, upon landing, had seen a familiar ship nearby, and knowing the captain personally, had walked over anxious to see a familiar face after having just spent many months alone in space. Well, this explained how he had found his ship so fast.

"So you had seen me before. But, why did you stow away? And," he frowned in puzzlement. "How did you get into my ship? How in the world did you get the computer to think you were me?!"

Dalton brightened, and excitedly explained, "That was easy! I'm always talking with these dumb sailship computers. They're so cooperative, it's easy to fool them. When I first entered the ship, after using the key I got from your car, your computer told me 'Stop, intruder!' or something like that. I knew your name, because I asked around after I first saw you... You made me think of... You seemed like... Anyway, I told your computer

that I was you, and to reset its identity pattern."

"It didn't ask for the master password?"

"No! I asked about that. It said that you programmed it to assume that anyone using the key was automatically Jason Jason."

That was right! He had done just that. But, only so that in case of emergency he could get the ship activated as quickly as possible. Also, he hated going through the identity check every time he entered his ship, especially during all the frequent entries he made while refurbishing his supplies. Basically, it was his fault -- he'd made it easy for the kid to break in.

"Yeah, that makes sense... But why, uh, Dalton? You've stowed away on a SAILSHIP! Do you know how much trouble you're in? And me, too! Your parents will be very worried by the time we tack back up this current, and get back to Infinity City. They may think that I kidnapped you!" But now, the boy was hanging his head again. Jason frowned with concern, and asked, "What's the matter?"

Dalton looked sadly back up at Jason, his dark eyes welling up with tears. "I have no parents, sir. I don't have ANY family anywhere."

No family?!, Jason thought in amazement and pity. Infinity City was extremely family oriented. It always had been. Family rights were even specifically supported by the Constitution. Especially, the rights of children. Families were the basis for the political system. Everyone had a family! Someone winding up alone would get themselves adopted into a family, no matter how old they were. Humans simply could not live in a black hole without the security, stability, and comfort of families running everything. No family?

"You have no family? Not even an adopted one?"

"No, Jason. Can I call you Jason, sir?"

"Yeah... sure, kid."

Dalton explained, "I can't get adopted. Nobody wants me. My parents weren't from Infinity City. They weren't with me when I landed here, I mean, back there."

"You aren't from Infinity City?"

"No, Jason..." And Dalton proceeded to tell him the strange tale of his life, and how he had come to Infinity City.

Dalton said he had only come to Infinity City five years before. He had arrived with an Adventurer who had just dumped him off at the space port, abandoning him. Rejected, and deeply hurt, Dalton had wandered away to live out on the streets of Infinity City with the other misfit kids.

Every space port town around the Galaxy had its share of

misfit space kids. Some were callously abandoned orphans. Some were runaways from abusive situations. Some were runaways from slavers! The SOCIETY FOR ABANDONED CHILDREN, an intergalactic organization of mercy, tried to find homes for these children. But many, addicted to life on the streets, avoided all offers to rejoin society. On Infinity City, the street kids secretly moved about like ghosts. Most citizens weren't even aware they existed.

No one would help Dalton, thinking from his accent, that he was just some off-world brat of some crewmember of one of the many ships temporarily at port. But Dalton HAD very definitely belonged to the sailship for a long time.

He had grown up on-board the sailship of a dashing Adventurer from Infinity City. Dalton, and his father worked aboard the ship as it traded around the Galaxy, stopping at many worlds, but mysteriously never on Infinity City. The Adventurer would not even talk about Infinity City. Trouble with some girl, Dalton's father had told him.

Dalton's own father had had trouble with a girl. Dalton's mother, who Dalton had never even known. His father had told him that he had signed on with the Adventurer, on some obscure planet when Dalton was only a baby. But, his mother had chosen to stay behind! Whenever Dalton had asked his father about his mother, the man would either grow angry or depressed, but would never talk about her except to say that she had not wanted to go with them, and could not look after the infant Dalton for some reason. Dalton and his father left with the Adventurer, who saw nothing wrong with a man dragging a baby on-board. Due to the perpetually nomadic lifestyle of spacemen and spacewomen, they were all used to children underfoot.

The story got stranger. Dalton saw many different worlds around the Galaxy. He loved life aboard the Adventurer's ship. But, as he grew older, he began to notice a certain strain between the Adventurer and his father. Especially, when he,

Dalton, was around. The Adventurer used to look at him in a funny way, and then sometimes grow angry with his father. It got worse and worse. Finally, it came to a terrible end.

Just up from a successful trading stop at an agricultural planet, the Adventurer and Dalton's father were sampling a huge supply of liquor they had purchased to trade elsewhere. Dalton's father was now something of a partner with the Infinity City Adventurer, due to his bargaining skills, and cleverness when dealing with port authorities. At first, they had been quite happy over such a successful venture on the planet. Dalton heard them laughing through an open hatchway at the end of the corridor leading to the cargo hold. Dalton had snuck to the hatchway to see what was causing such unusual glee. Dalton, only nine years old, did not understand drunkenness, and watched with fascination as they swayed back and forth, slapped each other on the back, and said unusually nice things about each other.

But, then they began talking about some girl. And, then they fought! And, to Dalton's horror, the Adventurer smashed a bottle against his father's head. His father fell over, and hit

his poor head again against a sharp metal storage container. Dalton would never forget seeing so much of his father's blood, so bright red!...

The Adventurer was the legal sovereign of the ship. He told the crew that only in self-defense had he hit Dalton's father, who tragically had fallen against the container. Dalton did not know if this was true. Certain members of the crew, upon learning that young Dalton had witnessed the fight, had asked him secretly about it. But, all Dalton, still in shock, could remember back then was his beloved father lying on the deck of the cargo hold with his blood pouring out.

The Adventurer held a burial-in-space ceremony. He was very sincere, and even shed tears. Everyone missed Dalton's father. They jettisoned his body away. Up to this time, Dalton had been in a daze. But, upon seeing his father's body in a clear plastic box ejected out into space, Dalton finally broke down sobbing and crying.

Seeing this greatly affected the Adventurer. After that, he began treating Dalton in a completely different way. He gave him much attention. Was kind and gentle and generous. He even taught him all about the ship.

But, without his father, Dalton was heartbroken. He grew quieter and quieter, and got so thin he saw his bones sticking out. This made the Adventurer very distraught. He acted more and more as if he felt responsible for Dalton and his unhappiness.

Finally, the Adventurer asked Dalton if it would make him happy if they found his mother. Dalton looked at him, amazed at such a concept. He said he would like to meet his mother, but did not know where she lived. But, the Adventurer said she was in a ship, and he knew its course!

This was amazing! Dalton brightened up. The Adventurer changed their course, and they sailed for many months. The crew did not like this change in plan because it meant a suspension in trading, and also a suspension in their percentage of the profit. Unlike the ageless Infinity City Adventurer who had a large supply of the PILL OF LIFE, most of the crew were aging, and in a hurry to make their fortunes. But the Adventurer ruled the ship alone. Unfortunately, catastrophe struck again.

They had been following the course that would lead to Dalton's mother for a very long time. Day after day went by. The crew were tense and bored, growing restless. Someone carelessly fell asleep at the helm one day, and the sailship got sucked into a gravitonic whirlpool!

They were extremely lucky that the sails had not blown up in an atomic explosion. The moment the ship came under the influence of the whirlpool, the Adventurer had noticed something peculiar about the ship's artificial gravity. Arriving in the pilot room, he found the duty officer fast asleep, with the computer hopelessly engrossed in a game of chess with itself. The Adventurer terminated the game, and the computer immediately signaled imminent catastrophic danger. They were being sucked

into a gravitonic whirlpool, where the graviton density was great enough to cause gravitonic sails to implode so rapidly that they broke down in an atomic explosion destructive enough to vaporize their sailship.

Instead of trying to maneuver out of the whirlpool, he immediately reeled the sails in.

It was a rough ride! There was much damage as the tidal forces of the whirlpool tried to squash and stretch the ship. But, finally the ship was slung out of the whirlpool. Unfortunately, though, the ship had instantly gained an enormous amount of kinetic energy. Now it went flying through the Galaxy so close to the speed of light that Galactic time was now going faster than time in the ship. They discovered this when the crew checked the stars to see where the ship was. They found the landmark stars moving dozens of times faster than normal, some so Doppler-shifted that many were either deeply blue or red!

The ship had serious damage. Some of the gravitonic sail systems were beyond repair. The Adventurer ordered a course set for Infinity City, the only place where he could put in for refitting gravitonic systems. It took them a year of ship time to "limp" back to Infinity City with the gravitonic sails in the shape that they were in.

The capricious Adventurer's attitude changed once again. He blamed Dalton for the accident, and the forced trip back to Infinity City. It had happened because they had been looking for his, Dalton's, mother. The Adventurer became very icy toward Dalton and the crew. It was clear that he did want to go to Infinity City. He told no one what it would be like entering the black hole. That had been another rough ride.

And, once landed at the space port, the Adventurer had dumped Dalton, now 10, out of the sailship, ordering the computer not to let him back in. Dalton was immediately taken in by other homeless boys who all worked odd jobs around the busy space port. And, that is where he had been for the last five years. Working the space port, and recently, picking pockets at the souqs. It had been a rough, bitter, and very lonely time. Dalton's voice took on an eerie edge for one so young as he talked about it.

When he was done with the story, he just sat looking at the floor. Jason was struck numb by such a sad tale. He looked at the boy, dark tousled hair, head bowed, with his arms wrapped around his skinny knees. Jason felt a sudden strong tenderness. It was something he had never felt before. Was this what a father felt for a son?

Jason thought to himself about Dalton's miserable situation: The poor little guy has no one back on Infinity City. Maybe, it

WOULD be fun to have a bright kid along. And, there's just something about him that gets to me. Maybe I'm getting old... Nope! I took the PILL just the other day...

Jason said softly, "Hey, kid." Dalton looked up questioningly. Jason paused, and regarded his face closely. There was something about Dalton's looks. Something familiar?

Dalton's triangular shaped face had delicate features that gave him a sensitive, thoughtful look. His skin was clear, and without a blemish. Jason had a flash of insight and imagined Dalton growing up to be tall and lean; and good-looking just like himself! But something still seemed familiar about him. Maybe he had seen him around Infinity City before. Oh, well. Jason decided he liked the boy very much.

Jason reached forward, took hold of the boys shoulders, and said, "Dalton, my young friend, how would YOU like to learn to fix space ships? I could use a good partner!"

Dalton looked up at Jason with a look of disbelief that turned into innocent wonder. Then, he jumped to his feet, grabbed Jason's hand, and began shaking it up and down, grinning from ear to ear. Jason looked up and saw tears of joy in Dalton's eyes.

5. THE SEARCH

The two hit it off like no two PARTNERS ever had before. The potential between them was limitless. Jason, for all his wildness, was extremely intelligent, and endlessly knowledgeable. Dalton was filled with boundless energy, and his mind was an ever-thirsty sponge for learning. Dalton, forever thankful at being rescued from his miserable life on the streets, was now the eager protege. Jason, delighted to have such an amusing little companion on the long voyage who was so eager to learn about the ship, the universe, and life, and who practically worshipped the ground he walked on, fell into the role of mentor and teacher.

Jason was appalled at Dalton's lack of basic education. He sat him down in the pilot chair, and had the computer run tutorial after tutorial covering self-psychology, physics; electronic, computronic, & mechanical engineering, and of course, software. Then there was the history of Infinity City, the worlds of the Galaxy, the politics of Mankind, and more. Dalton was fascinated by all of this. And he felt so strongly motivated to please Jason. Jason had allowed him to stay, rescuing him from his despairing life at the bottom of Infinity City. Jason was the first person, since his father, to take any special interest in him. Dalton felt like life was beginning all over for him.

And then, when Dalton thought nothing in the world could beat his new life, Jason made it still better. He began teaching Dalton the workings and operation of the sailship! The gravitonic systems, the pilot room controls, the amazing automated tools in the workshops! Dalton was in love with the sailship. Its systems became second nature to him. He amazed Jason one day when he showed him a clever yet simple plan for diverting energy from the powerful gravitonic sail generator to the atomic particle-beam defensive weapon system which had a much smaller generator that took an excessive amount of time to charge up between firings. Jason, impressed after his review of the

plan, concluded Dalton had definitely earned his position as

junior partner.

Using the materials and tools of the workshops, they built a secondary pilot chair for Dalton that they attached to the top of the ladder entering the pilot room through the floor. From there, Dalton watched in rapture as Jason would periodically pilot the ship out of one gravitonic current, and into another on a more direct course toward the area of the whirlpool. Sometimes, sophisticated tacking maneuvers were carried out when the sailship was forced to beat its way through opposing gravitonic eddy currents the size of entire solar systems. Jason even let Dalton sit in the main pilot seat, and take over manual control of the ship for basic lessons in gravitonic sailing.

Dalton was an excellent pilot. He never grew tense or careless. His exuberant joy at piloting reflected reminded Jason of his early days in Militia Guard patrol duty.

Jason would sit in the secondary pilot seat watching Dalton smoothly maneuvering the ship through training exercises, rapidly chattering orders to the computer, his high voice breathless with excitement. And Jason would feel his heart warm with nurturing pride. THIS must BE WHAT IT'S LIKE TO HAVE A SON, he thought to himself. I ALWAYS THOUGHT IT WOULD BE ALL WORK AND A LOT OF YELLING...

Months went by. Jason noticed that the usual loneliness and anxiety of a solo trip were gone. It was so much fun showing this kid the ropes. How strangely rewarding it was observing that hungry little mind growing and growing, asking question after question without tire. Jason looked forward to each day. Dalton had boundless energy, and was perpetually good-natured. And yet he always maintained the strangest amount of self-control, and dignity for someone so young. When Jason had been Dalton's age, about 15, he was always in constant trouble, with girls, with school, and with his parents. Jason would sigh when he would think back to those times, and then remind himself as he always did on long rescue missions that though he was alone, he was now completely FREE. But now, he was NOT alone anymore at all! From now on, he would always have a junior partner.

For recreation there were endless computer games. Jason tried to show Dalton some woodcraft techniques using the equipment in one of the workshops. But, Dalton preferred playing around with the computer. He could safely do all the programming he wanted by using an exclusive area of the computer's atomic memory reserved just for him, without affecting any other part of the important computer, critical to their safety.

For physical activity Jason would string a net across the cargo hold, which had plenty of room. The net, about as wide as an arm-length, was positioned midway up the wall. They would don knee, elbow, and wrist padding. Then, they would tug on spongy-soled polymer boots and half-gloves, kill the ship's artificial gravity, and play 'free-ball', bouncing and ricocheting all around the cargo hold while throwing the heavy freeball back and forth past the net. Though Dalton's height and size of foot were small, Jason had several pairs of polymer boots, and half-gloves

that fit him. Jason liked to keep the ship fully equipped for entertaining female guests, especially those that were excited by the energetic activity of a satisfying free-ball session.

Dalton was wild about free-ball, and trounced Jason repeatedly. He was just too fast! Jason almost always came away with a new bruise or two, but it was so much fun. He felt like a kid himself!

The object of freeball was to score the most points in a given amount of time. Players jumped back and forth between floor and ceiling throwing the ball past the net, and then catching it after it bounced off the far wall, and came back past the net again. Play went in turns with one player serving and the other player receiving. (In the Militia Guard version of the game, they were referred to as "attacker" and "defender.") If the ball touched the net or anything but the walls or players, it was out of play, and service would go to the other player. If the non-serving player intercepted the ball, before it passed the net and returned to the serving player, the intercepting player would get to serve. If he intercepted the ball BEFORE it bounced off the back wall, he earned a DEFENSIVE POINT. If the ball made it safely back to the hands of the server, that was an OFFENSIVE POINT.

The appealing challenge of the game was all the moving about in zero-gravity. Players wildly flew back and forth between floor or ceiling or the back wall, landing and then immediately springing away toward the most predictable route of the ball. The heavy ball itself immediately altered a drifting player's course the moment it was caught or thrown. It was a thrilling game with many addicted followers.

Whenever Dalton picked up something new, in his rapid education, that was particularly impressive, Jason would reward him with an extra-vehicular excursion. Dalton would turn red and almost burst with excitement each time Jason casually mentioned that it was time for another "walk in space."

Jason maintained three spacesuits fitted for himself, but these were too big for Dalton. However, Jason just happened to also maintain a few suits sized for women, which he had used in the past for entertainment purposes involving certain acquaintances he had made with personnel aboard disabled space vessels. One fitted Dalton well enough.

They would put the suits on, and activate them in the cargo hold. The ship's computer would monitor the sensors all over the suits, checking for any problems. If and only if the suits were functioning perfectly, the inner hatch of the air lock would open. In they would go. The inner hatch would then slide closed, and the air would be pumped out. Proper operation of the suits would again be closely monitored.

A large compartment, at once side of the air lock, could be pulled open to reveal the means of locomotion in space. Spacebikes! A space rider would straddle the 'bike, then clamp

the circular restraining bar around the waist. Jets folded out on all sides. Using blasts of steam, they were capable of translational movement in any direction, and had gyroscopes for control of angular attitude. The controls were located on the restraining bar. The extremely high power jets required little water. The controls were not mechanical. They were just simple inputs to the spacebikes' sophisticated on-board computer, which had many functions for making space movement easy, such as angular and linear momentum control. Also, the spacebike computer's were slaves to the master ship's computer. This way, any command given by the wearer would be ignored if the ship's

computer predicted that the command would cause trouble, such as a command to crash into the ship, or a command to hit the gravitonic sails, or a command to crash into another spacebike.

Dalton and Jason had thrilling times chasing each other around the ship. The freezing jet steam sprayed out veils of tiny ice crystals that sparkled in the ship's outer spotlights. Sometimes, Jason would release one of the repair robots, equipped with propulsion jets. He and Dalton would play "follow the leader" with the little repair robot programmed to execute wildly random maneuvers that Dalton and Jason would try to follow.

Their time in space was endlessly rewarding to both of them. There was so much to do between Dalton, and his own studies, that Jason never found the time to listen to the tape from his parents, and eventually forgot all about it.

After almost a year they had covered most of the distance to the whirlpool. They both were growing anxious to find the missing colony ship. Jason's desire to save the poor colonists, if they were still alive, had infected Dalton with equal intensity. Jason regarded this rescuing of space vessels in trouble as his life's work, and felt very proud at actually now having a protegee to share his skills with. Dalton regarded Jason as the most amazing man he had ever heard of, his hero!

In the evenings, after a long day of activity, they would enjoy a meal of space-rations prepared by one of the little robots. Neither Jason nor Dalton cared much for cooking, Jason finding that the chemicals exuded by cooking in space required too much of the robotic cleaning system's time and resources, anyway. They would lounge around the living room waiting. Suddenly, one of the ship's little robots, canister shaped, usually the green one, would come blasting out of the cooking cabinet, roll up to either Jason or Dalton, then open up its small storage slot. From inside, they would pull out trays of food, and drink packets. When finished, they would stuff the empty trays and packets back into the slots, and the robot would roll over into the cleaning cabinet, pluck out and throw away the refuse, and then clean its slot and manipulators with sterilizing ultrasonic vibrations and ultraviolet radiation. The rest of the evening was spent enjoying various pastimes.

Jason dabbled with his acoustic musical instruments: guitar, saxophone, a terribly tortured clarinet, and a flute. Music to Jason was a magical way of charming a ladies heart. Dalton had

not developed the patience or any desire to work at an instrument day after day. He preferred, in the evenings, the excitement of donning a virtual-reality helmet, and doing battle with aliens, and space pirates.

Virtual-reality was produced by a special helmet covering the eyes and ears, and interfaced to a computer. The computer generated four-dimensional visual images and stereo sound to synthesize any kind of reality. Entertainment VR pitted the wearer of the helmet against all sorts of famous foes. Knowledge VR synthesized the images and sounds of other worlds. Many computers permitted the wearer of a VR helmet to travel within the computer's own memory to make software programming easier by taking advantage of the human brain's ultra-sophisticated visual processing ability.

Jason could not stand virtual-reality. It gave him severe feelings of anxiety, and made him feel like his mind was trapped. He much preferred physical reality.

Sometimes Jason would sip rich coffee from around the Galaxy, and grow talkative. Dalton enjoyed listening to Jason's exciting tales of past rescues. After he had heard all the stories, he began asking technical questions regarding other space ships and their missions, endlessly interrogating Jason for detail after detail.

And then Dalton began to change, and so too did the topics of their evening conversations. Jason first noticed the change by observing Dalton periodically looking off into nowhere, with a strange, dreamy expression. Then, his voice began to sometimes crack and break, as it grew lower in pitch. And then, worst of all, he began asking Jason embarrassing questions about GIRLS.

Normally, Jason loved ribald discussions regarding the opposite sex, but this was different. Dalton's innocent questioning made Jason uncomfortable and he responded with only obscure 'technical' explanations, not really satisfying Dalton's curiosity at all. Sometimes Jason would grow exasperated and cry, "Go ask the computer!" But, other times Dalton would finally cajole Jason into talking about one of the finer ladies in his life, and he would jabber away happily with his own distant, dreamy expression.

6. ATTACK!

They were now in a dangerous part of the Galaxy. They passed by the black hole of one of Infinity City's NEIGHBORS -- another world inside a black hole, but run by bloodthirsty tyrants bent on learning the secret of the PILL OF LIFE from Infinity City. Countless Infinity City merchant and Adventurer sailships had been attacked and boarded, the occupants tortured for the secret of the pill that gave immortality. But, to the grievous misfortune of the victims, the secret of the PILL was a

vastly complex medical science that no single person could comprehend.

The pre-programmed aging process controlled by human DNA was a long and balanced program sculpted by primordial evolution to adapt life to the ever-changing environment of Earth. The counter-program to counteract all this without adverse side-effects required a complex protein synthesis of mind-boggling complexity. The PILL OF LIFE, too complex for reliable self-replication (and, unfortunately, long-term storage), had to be ingested monthly. The technology for producing the PILL required the cooperation of three different Families, involving hundreds of personnel. The NEIGHBORS knew nothing of this. They only knew that the people of Infinity City lived forever, and held the secret of the PILL.

Jason had the computer begin scanning on all sides, round the clock, for undesirable sailships. It was not many days before the clanging encounter alert bell was suddenly heard throughout the ship...

It was morning. Jason and Dalton were wolfing down large quantities of breakfast -- Jason, amazed as ever at Dalton's ever-growing appetite, wondered where the slim boy put it all.

When the bell went off Jason knew what it probably meant. There was no regular shipping in this area due to the dangerous proximity of the Neighbors.

Jason looked up suddenly at Dalton, wagged his eyebrows up and down, and hissed "Could be a Militia Guard scout or ... MAYBE PIRATES!" with a cunning grin. He then launched out of the living quarter for the pilot room. Dalton, excited and scared all at the same time, followed on his heels.

Jason saw the flashing message "APPROACHING SPACECRAFT!" on the main viewscreen and strapped himself into the pilot chair and ordered Dalton to do the same at his chair; it could be a bumpy ride if it turned into a chase; the local gravitonic currents -- perhaps due to the whirlpool somewhere in the region -- had grown short and winding. Jason checked the gravitonic radar display and focused in on the reading.

"Jason!", Dalton cried excitedly. "Let's do it all in virtual-reality! It'll be easier!"

Jason could just picture himself inside miserable V-R getting nauseous from all the rapid, swirling colorful action. His brain just would never stand it. "I don't trust it, kid. I'm sticking to the old-fashioned way. Jump into V-R if you want but keep a comm channel open so you can hear me if I need you."

"Aye, Captain!", cried Dalton with growing excitement. He pulled his V-R helmet over his head. Jason looked around at Dalton and noticed with amusement that Dalton had painted silver lightning bolts all over it.

"Dalton, can you hear me?", Jason asked quietly. He saw the helmet nod quickly.

Inside his virtual-reality, Dalton had first called up a vast, multi-colored display of the internal workings of the sailship -- which he had fallen completely in love with. He quickly reviewed all systems for proper operation -- he would monitor the sailship and support his Captain no matter what! Dalton then ordered the computer to display a small three dimensional representation of surrounding space so he could watch their own sailship and the approaching one -- he 'hung' the little sphere-shaped display at eye-level and to the side, but close enough so he could reach out with his virtual-hand and turn it to see what was going on at any angle.

Jason turned back to the command console spread before him and rubbed his hands excitedly -- action! He reviewed the information regarding the approaching ship now displaying across his main situation viewscreen. There was no point in contacting the other ship by gravitonic radio. What turbulence the graviton-belching ship was leaving behind! Definitely a non-Infinity City clone and almost certainly a pirate sailship from the neighboring black hole known as The Gouge.

Unlike the advanced world of Infinity City, floating on an enormous man-made disk-planetoid within its black hole, inside The Gouge was a huge collection of thousands of old sailships and space stations girdered and guy-wired together with great collections of gravitonic sails billowing out all around precariously holding the entire mass roughly in the middle of the black hole. It was a Galactic pirates' cove, a haven for the Galaxy's outlaw privateers where they came to buy and sell -- or retire, permanently attaching their old unspaceworthy sailships

to the great floating mass of other ships, many of these converted to stores, shops, inns, and taverns where the successfully retired space buccaneers and their descendants lived and worked, some descendants never having left the black hole.

The Gouge, home to any privateer ruthless enough to have somehow commandeered a sailship from elsewhere in the Galaxy. Usually, these craft were from Infinity City -- several worlds had learned to copy the design of the Infinity City sailship, though Infinity City continued to design and build the best. Infinity City Adventurers often lost their marvelous sailships through debt, theft, or attack. Astronomically valuable for their faster-than-light speed, most lost sailships wound up in the hands of privateers who -- becoming outlaws -- usually sought refuge within inhabited black holes. Within The Gouge there was more than refuge. Here, the privateer could deal in any stolen or illicit merchandise imaginable. Here was where they brought and traded their booty from thieving raids. Here were the only repair facilities for a privateer living completely outside Galactic law. And, here was one of the largest centers for the human slave trade in the Galaxy.

But the most valuable commodity traded within The Gouge was not stolen precious commodities, or the almost universally banned experimental DNA alteration drugs, or even the vast collections of well-trained sex slaves. The most valuable commodity was information on the Pill of Life from Infinity City. For though a privateer could quickly amass vast fortunes raiding around the Galaxy in faster-than-light sailships, they had no cure for aging

because Infinity City did not sell to criminals. And the Pill was not available on the black market because each individual required a unique prescription exclusively produced on Infinity City. And the Family that distributed the Pill from Infinity City was bent on monitoring the activities of every single subscriber throughout the Galaxy to prevent the immortality of tyrants. Unfortunately, the controlling Family could never control the Galactic-wide rumor that there existed a secret generic Pill that anyone could use, an irresistible untruth believed by all aging pirates.

Jason's craft had been sighted by a fat privateer loaded with cargo from a raid on a frontier world where they had left all of the colonists dead. The privateer could easily tell by Jason's smooth, ripple-free progress through the gravitonic current that Jason was sailing a fine ship from Infinity City. The privateer's old craft was a clone of a clone of a genuine Infinity City sailship and no match in speed for the real article so attack was not practical. Prudently, lest Jason's craft turn out to be a scoutcraft of the Infinity City Militia Guard, the privateer had taken a handy off-shoot branch from the current he was on and had headed away from Jason's sailship, taking a longer way around to The Gouge.

The privateer had been close to The Gouge anyway and arrived soon with the exciting news of a sailship fresh from Infinity City in the vicinity. A gang of old idle pirates formed a quick alliance around their favorite table in a tavern aboard an old ship that had not left The Gouge black hole for over 100 years -- so rickety was it that all patrons wore spacesuits with helmets dangling down their backs in case the old craft, surrounded by the vacuum of space, busted out an air seem. They quickly mounted spacebikes or similar vehicles, rocketed back to their own craft, then sailed out of The Gouge in search of this valuable craft from Infinity City which might just contain a huge supply of the fabled generic Pill of Life to counteract their aging.

Jason increased power to the gravitonic generator to full to allow rapid maneuvering, though he continued sailing onward at the present cruising speed, the generator filling the pilot room with its low throbbing hum. He then quickly readied the sailship's weapon systems: the potent atomic particle-beam antimissile system and electromagnetic deflector fields for defense, and a trusty high-power gravitonic cannon for offense. As usual, the antimissile system took a long time to charge its high-energy particle capacitor. Power for the cannon was always available from the ship's gravitonic sail system, though the ship would temporarily slow whenever power was transferred.

Jason ordered the computer to display in three dimensions the structure of the local gravitonic current containing himself and the approaching unidentified craft, still at a great distance though much less than a light-year. (An average Infinity City private or merchant craft took about a day to sail one light-year. The fastest scoutcraft of the Militia Guard was about three times faster. The largest sailships, the Guard's Destroyers and Ships-of-the-Line, took about two days to traverse a light-year. Gravitonic bolts fired by cannon were actually waves that traveled from 10 to 100 times faster than an average

sailship depending on the characteristics of the gravitonic medium.)

The computer quickly displayed the branching structures of all known local currents in thin, translucent white over a light blue background. Jason saw his ship, a tiny dot in the middle of the display, and the pirate approaching from behind down the same current. Farther behind and off to the side at a distance of just over one light-year was The Gouge black hole and its little yellow companion star. There were no other stellar objects though Jason reckoned the great whirlpool must be within just a few light-years.

His computer had drawn the 3-D map from information downloaded back on Infinity City from the latest Militia Guard scouting missions. These maps would be handy, even life-saving if Jason would have to flee. But Jason did not want to flee! Part of him wanted to turn and fight. One less pirate would do the Galaxy good. Jason had had several such encounters during his active duty with the Militia Guard. But the stronger side of him desired to continue with the mission to rescue the colony ship. So he chose to continue forward and leave the slower ship behind. However, he allowed himself to be... cautious.

The pirate was behind -- perfect! Jason lowered the powerful gravitonic cannon beneath his sailship and set the automatic targeting control for the approaching craft -- in his mind he pictured the snub barrel of the mighty cannon swinging around to aim at the mysterious ship. Jason ground his teeth wolfishly. At the first hostile action from the pirate, Jason would blast the pirate's gravitonic sails with a thin, extremely powerful beam of unstable gravitons -- shredding the fragile sails and hopefully shorting out the pirate's gravitonic generation system, knocking the pirate below the speed of light and stranding him. If Jason found himself in a particularly hostile mood he might turn back, draw within range, then destroy the pirate with a few shots from the particle-beam weapon, perfectly effective against a sitting duck like a disabled sailship. But would that be a proper example to set for his protegee now viewing the precedings within his V-R helmet?

But then coming up behind the pirate another sailship appeared. It was moving fast! Surprised and puzzled Jason watched his situation screen as the faster sailship approached

the first. An Infinity City scout craft or destroyer? He checked the radar information coming back. Definitely an Infinity City ship! That's why it was so fast. But its gravitonic radar signature was too small for one of the great Militia Guard destroyers, and too big for the tiny, rapid scoutcraft. Jason scratched his jaw in puzzlement. Was the faster ship attacking the smaller ship? As Jason watched he coolly loaded the coordinates of the faster ship as a secondary target for the gravitonic cannon.

On the situation screen, Jason watched the faster sailship quickly approach and then pass by the other. It was approaching up the current rapidly toward Jason, less than an hour away. He did not like the looks of it. Jason typed commands at the communication console and beamed a coded recognition signal back

down the current toward the approaching ship. It cut so smoothly through the gravitonic current that it HAD to be a ship built on Infinity City. But there was no response -- definitely not run by anyone from Infinity City. That left the identity clear: ATTACKING PIRATES!

Jason now had three options: Continue as before, turn and attack, or speed up to maximum and flee. Unfortunately, Jason did not know if the approaching ship was attacking. Conceivably, it COULD be an Infinity City craft with communication trouble.

With a growl of frustration Jason ordered the computer to make all sail and accelerate forward at full speed. The sailship began to rock back and forth and sometimes vibrate due to the gravitonic resonance reflections between the ship's gravitonic system and the twisty-turny current. Dalton's voice issued from the pilot room's amplification system. He was complaining shrilly why they were running instead of blasting the approaching ship. Jason ignored him and watched the image of the unidentified ship closely. It was fast, real fast!

Suddenly, a small orange dot appeared on the display in front of the strange ship and shot ahead of it heading toward Jason's ship. The computer used orange to represent any unknown object with offensive characteristics. That much faster-than-light it could only be a highly destructive gravitonic plasma bolt similar to what his own cannon could fire. Jason quickly fed the coordinates of the approaching bolt into the particle-beam weapon and fired. The display showed Jason's ship leave behind a small green seemingly stationary streak. Far from stationary it was a particle emission travelling at near light speed. However, compared to the sailships super light speed, its movement could barely be seen. The approaching gravitonic plasma bolt from the enemy, however, would hit the particle beam and explode into a messy cloud of unstable gravitons -- plasma bolts were 'dumb' weapons, just energy bolts that could not be steered once launched. There were many torpedo weapons available but few equipped with gravitonic systems for faster-than-light speed.

Jason coolly watched the situation screen. Dalton, within his virtual-reality, held his display sphere before him in his virtual-hands, peering closely within at the simulation of what was going on around him, as if he were actually holding in his hands the reality of it all.

Tensely, they watched the gravitonic bolt leaving the pirate quickly behind, heading straight for their ship. The particle stream, left behind as their faster-than-light ship flew forward, was in the direct path of the bolt.

The gravitonic bolt quickly approached the waiting particle stream, connected, then disappeared from the screen, to be replaced by a slowly expanding black region. Jason smiled. Then frowned. His particle weapon was still not fully re-charged. Damn thing was so slow -- effective, though. He watched the enemy sailship finally approach the little blackened region then nimbly curve around it.

Jason realized with a start that the enemy was slowly

gaining -- it was a faster sailship! The original pirate sailship, much slower, was falling way behind. And then behind it ANOTHER sailship appeared. Jason ordered the computer to color all clone ships brown and Infinity City built ships red. The rapidly approaching ship turned red, the original ship turned brown, there was a pause while the computer awaited data from the radar system. The newest ship turned red! And yes, it was shooting down the gravitonic current just as fast as the one already approaching Jason -- No! It was faster, and within moments it passed the slower brown colored sailship.

Jason's particle-beam system signaled full re-charge just as the nearest of the two red approaching ships fired another grav' bolt. Again Jason fired back a particle-beam to intercept the destructive bolt. This appeared on the display as another streak left behind his sailship.

Not waiting for further developments, Jason now fired his own gravitonic cannon, a powerful Benchley Mark-III with a 10-inch coherizer. It ship swayed slightly and momentarily slowed as power diverted from the gravitonic sail system to the cannon. The bolt tore backwards heading for the approaching ship -- it would connect in seconds! Jason held his breath in anticipation watching the image representing his own bolt shoot backwards, passing the stationary particle-beam streak he had previously launched, and passing the approaching gravitonic bolt from the enemy ship which, moments later, was destroyed by their particle-beam streak. He continued to watch his cannonfire hearing Dalton cry: "Come on! Hit 'em!"

But just as the bolt grew near, the enemy ship brought itself hard over, out of the way, and was missed -- the bolt from Jason's ship passed by and eventually shot out of a curve in the gravitonic current quickly dissipating beyond in empty space.

Jason swore under his breath while bringing the sailship smoothly around a tight curve in the gravitonic current. That would buy them time for the atomic particle weapon to recharge. He checked the map -- the first enemy would be around the bend in only a minute or two! Then Jason noticed that just up ahead there was another gravitonic current branching off from the one they were in. He had a hunch he could duck into the branching gravitonic current before the enemy rounded the bend behind -- the computer verified this as true. There were more curves in the current ahead. Jason regretfully decided it would be best to shake these pursuing pirates -- three was too many. "Stand by for a rough maneuver, Dalton! We're sailing into that current branching off just ahead! We're going to lose 'em!"

Dalton barely heard Jason. He was too busy reviewing the onboard weapon systems, straining his brain to come up with even more improvements. There must be some way... There WAS some way -- he KNEW it but the answer was just out of his conscious reach...

Just before the branch, Jason rapidly slowed the sailship, the gravitonic generator screaming in response as all the energy that was in the sails came funnelling back in to it. Jason brought the ship hard over into the new gravitonic current, gave

out one loud "HA!", then noticed the flashing alert message on his situation viewscreen just as the computer announced: "Two approaching ships in this current."

Jason could not believe his eyes. About as far away as the last two ships had been, now there were two more before him. "All stop!", he ordered the computer. "Give me their configuration!", he demanded and saw to his frustration the data displayed from the gravitonic radar analysis: Two clones -- more pirates! And he could see the two ships speeding up. Suddenly, he saw on the situation screen each of the two new ships launch a gravitonic bolt heading straight for him. "Full gravitonic power!", Jason shouted as he swung the sailship around in a tight arc, the entire ship shuddering under the strain of the surging gravitonic field pouring down from the sails.

The two gravitonic bolts were coming down fast as Jason sailed back at full speed for the original gravitonic current. His particle defense weapon was fully charged again but he felt sure he would make the other current before the approaching bolts would hit. However, they were coming on fast! The situation display showed them as blinking tiny yellow dots traveling down the current far faster than Jason or the enemy ships. He noticed that the enemy ships, though clones of true Infinity City craft, were moving much faster than the first pirate craft he had seen, though they were not as fast as Jason's sailship at its current top speed.

Jason watched the display breathlessly as his ship quickly approached the junction with the other current while the approaching bolts rapidly grew closer and closer. "Jason, are they going to hit us??", he heard Dalton cry with surprise.

"Hell, no!", Jason barked without taking his eyes off the display.

In another few seconds they were at the junction. Jason cut grav power to one quarter and blasted into the other current already bringing his ship about in a tight arc that made the ship surge violently in several directions. Jason glanced at the situation display and at first could not make sense of what he saw. Then the computer announced, "Second ship proximity! Danger! Second ship maneuvering too chaotic for extrapolation -- cannot auto-manuever. Recommend immediate manual evasion. Danger!"

Jason roared, "Computer, zoom in on local situation!" The image on the screen expanded in a split second to show, still in three dimensions, just what was going on: Jason's sailship had come flying out of the branching current back into the original current right into the path of the other approaching pirate ships -- the current was turbulent and narrow at this point, less than one light-hour in diameter, not much maneuvering room for faster-than-light craft. As shown by the pirates erratic course, they both had panicked, cut power, and were currently out of control, jerking this way and that to avoid fouling their fragile sails with each other and Jason. Jason quickly sized up the situation, let his intuition get a feel for it, then sharply swung his ship out of the way in just the right direction to avoid the other ships and the edge of the current -- all without requesting

astronavigation assistance from his computer. Then at full power he sent his sailship blasting up the current and rapidly away from the branch.

Quickly, Jason swung the pilot chair to the left over to the gravitonic cannon console and tried to target the wildly maneuvering pirate. He could not! It's movements were still out of control. Jason turned back to the situation display with his left hand still at the cannon controls. "Computer, display cannon targeting cross hairs! Zoom in on proximity sailcraft 50%... 25% more!" He kept the cross hairs on the weirdly moving ship. What was the pirate doing?! Then Jason felt the pattern -- the pirate must have fouled his east and south sails with the larger central one and was trying to jerk the ship over to free them up. Jason estimated the direction in which the pirate ship would next surge... aimed carefully... and FIRED! He felt with satisfaction the ship shudder as power was momentarily sucked away from the gravitonic sail system and diverted to his powerful gravitonic cannon.

Jason watched his cannon bolt on the display quickly heading toward the pirate. Sure enough, the pirate surged over in the predicted direction and was hit by the cannon bolt!

Jason's eyes were wide as he stared at the display anxiously waiting for any sign of destruction. The little blinking yellow bolt of his cannon shot had disappeared. And now, the pirate ship was stopped with no more movement -- Jason's gravitonic cannon bolt had destroyed his gravitonic system! "We got one, Dalton!", Jason muttered.

"Great shooting, partner!", he heard Dalton cry.

Several things now occurred on the display screen. The slow pirate that had been dawdling up the current behind all the action finally caught up and was almost at the branch. The remaining pirate ship near the branch regained control and swung around after Jason. The two pirate ships from the other current, popped out and arced around toward Jason's ship. Four pirate craft were now in hot pursuit of Jason and Dalton, and not far behind!

Then, from the disabled fifth ship, a gravitonic bolt was launched! "He's STILL got power from his generator!", Jason cried in surprise, while swinging over to the antimissile console to target and launch a particle-beam at the rapidly approaching gravitonic bolt.

He launched the beam with a vicious growl then swung back to the situation display where he noticed, with a shock, that the other four pirate ships had opened fire launching more gravitonic bolts. Dismally he checked the particle-beam's charging time: slow as ever. There would not be enough time before they struck -- he would have to try evasive maneuvering and hope for a miracle. The bolts were less a minute away...

Then, Jason twisted around to face his junior partner remembering that a miracle was indeed available. At the same time, Dalton lifted his V-R helmet from his head, his dark hair tumbling out and around, his dark eyes were wide with concern.

He cried, "Jason, there's two gravitonic bolts heading toward us..."

Jason cut him off: "Yeah, I know... Dalton!", Jason hissed leaning forward, staring in blue-eyed intensity, his face gaunt with strain. "Your plan to charge the particle-beam from the main gravitonic cannon -- can you still do it? Do you remember it??"

Dalton's face broke into a delighted grin. "Yeah, of course! That's what I was about to ask permission to do! Uh, can I?"

With exasperation Jason cried, "YES!", then reaching over smacked the V-R helmet back down over Dalton's head. He then whirled around, grabbed the manual controls, and brought the sailship hard over to try to avoid the oncoming gravitonic bolts from the approaching pirates.

The bolts had approached rapidly. Fortunately, the pirates' attack was uncoordinated and the three bolts had been simply aimed at Jason's position instead of a more effective distributed pattern. Jason avoided them easily but paid a price: Jerking the sailship sideways across the gravitonic current cost him forward movement -- the pirates he had rapidly pulled away from were now closer. After avoiding their cannonfire, Jason swung his sailship around and sped off down the gravitonic current at maximum power. The distance between him and the pirates began to increase again.

The three pirate sailships out in the lead were not as fast as Jason and he slowly pulled ahead. He suddenly realized that he had disabled the fastest of the pirates with his cannon back at the branch -- what stroke of luck!

Trailing behind the three was the pirate Jason had first encountered -- much slower but still armed with a dangerous gravitonic cannon. Jason was thankful none of them seemed to have multiple cannon.

Jason watched the situation display closely -- the locations of the pirates were quickly scanned by his gravitonic radar and translated into images. Then, the slowest pirate, now far behind the advanced two, fired his gravitonic cannon again. Then again and again! This huge amount of gravitonic power quickly slowed the pirate's craft to a standstill. Jason realized the clever pirate had noted Jason's loss of progress avoiding the cannonfire.

As the first gravitonic bolt quickly passed the three advanced pirates, they too again opened fire, though only firing a single bolt apiece. Three gravitonic cannon shots were now racing toward Jason's sailship with several more from the slower ship flying up from behind. In a few moments he would again have to swing his sailship around killing his forward movement.

"Dalton!", he growled while beginning the maneuver. "How's that modification coming? -- Dalton? Dalton!!" Jason craned his neck around and saw Dalton's arms waving and jerking around

before him as if he was manipulating invisible objects. "Dalton! Can you hear me?!"

Within his virtual-reality domain Dalton sat entranced with the sailship's design details all floating around him in rich, colored detail. He mumbled, "I hear you... I'm on it... Soon -- soon..." Concentrating furiously, he was rapidly giving the ship's computer instructions for his new modification, but was prudently ordering the computer to model and test each step along the way. Dalton would be affecting too many of the ship's critical systems without at least having the computer perform validity tests. With a burst of intuitive brilliance, Dalton had realized he could do more than just redirect electrical power from the gravitonic system to the particle-beam system -- he could redirect GRAVITONIC power as well!

While Dalton's arms frantically moved about manipulating the symbols that interfaced to the ship's computer, Jason turned back to his command console and swung the sailship back and forth avoiding the oncoming gravitonic bolts. This time, he noted with a growl, they had not all aimed at his exact location but had targeted randomly which made it more difficult to avoid their fire -- when Jason finally turned the ship and again sailed away at full power he found they had moved in far closer just a few light-days behind -- they were only MINUTES away!

Jason's sailship again began pulling away from the pirates. Jason found himself sweating hard. How soon would they fire again?? All models of gravitonic cannon he'd ever heard of took power from the mighty gravitonic sail system. You could fire often but it took power from your sails and slowed you down. But these pirates hardly slowed at all! Jason dismally concluded they must have installed greatly oversized gravitonic generation systems to allow greater offensive capability.

And then again they fired! And while Jason brought the sailship hard over again, the slower pirate ship now far behind also fired. The advancing pirate ships were getting so close that Jason had only seconds to determine the trajectory of the cannon bolts then jerk the sailship out of the way. This time, he avoided getting hit by only seconds. He brought the ship around, and again cranked the gravitonic generator to maximum power and flew down the gravitonic current close enough to one side to allow the cannon bolt from the slow pirate to harmlessly streak by.

"Dalton! I need that fix!"

"It's almost ready, chief! It's got something extra! I'm just fine tuning the interface configurations now..."

"'Something extra'?", Jason repeated. What could that... Then, displayed on his situation screen, he spied another branching gravitonic current not too far ahead. Its characteristics indicated it was smaller than their present current. Usually, the smaller the gravitonic current, the more branches led off -- like the structure of a plant's root system. If he could duck down gravitonic currents with more and more branches there was a good chance he could lose his deadly pursuers! Jason made ready to take the approaching branch.

Then, to Jason's horror, the screen suddenly showed one, two, three more ships appear out of the branching current just ahead. They paused for a moment, then turned and accelerated quickly toward him!

Jason knew what was coming. He set his own gravitonic cannon at 1/3 charge and fired three times at the three newly ships before him. The draw on his own gravitonic power slowed his sailship down to a standstill. It did not matter anymore -- he was surrounded with no place to go -- cornered. However, when cornered Jason turned into a dangerous animal...

Jason growled over his shoulder, "Dalton! I need that particle-beam!", and pulled the gravitonic sails back to allow only quick maneuvering. He kept an eye on the three new ships while swinging his own ship around to fire on the approaching pirates behind.

The newest ships scattered as soon as they detected Jason's cannonfire, but not before firing their own gravitonic cannon.

Jason's powerful gravitonic generator had charged enough to allow him to send three bursts back at the pirates behind. Then he had to jerk the ship hard over to avoid the cannon bolts only seconds away from the pirates in front; luckily, like the first pirates, these had foolishly all targeted the point of Jason's previous position; he easily avoided their fire.

But now they fired again! They had come to a stop and apparently planned to divert all of their mighty gravitonic power to blasting away at Jason with their cannon. Then he saw the other two pirate sailships fire again then come to a stop also. He was now trapped between seven dangerous pirate sailships -- three behind plus the slower pirate hurriedly catching up, and three in front -- the largest collective force he had ever heard of! And they were all firing on him!

They were not trying to destroy him -- they wanted his precious Infinity City sailship and any supply of the Pill of Life he might possess. If just one of their gravitonic cannon bolts struck his sailship, his gravitonic sails would vaporize and his wonderful sailship would become a sitting duck to be easily boarded, looted, and towed away. He and Dalton would be killed, if they resisted -- or worse; sold into slavery if they did not.

Dismally all too aware of these possibilities Jason now determinably swung his ship back and forth, desperately avoiding the cannonfire from two sides while from time to time getting off bursts of his own.

The pirates were no longer stationary themselves but were forced to reduce their own cannonfire as they swung their own ships back and forth to chaotically avoid not just Jason's blasts but also the crossfire from the pirates on Jason's opposite side. The slowest pirate -- the very first Jason had seen -- had only just arrived on the scene when a cannon shot from the opposite side that Jason had just barely avoided came streaking in. The captain of the relatively slower sailship could not maneuver away

in time and came to an abrupt halt as the gravitonic bolt struck his ship, blasting his delicate gravitonic sails to atoms.

Again and again the pirates fired on Jason. Due to their general disorganization and confusion, Jason was able to avoid their crossfire by quickly maneuvering away from each bolt, and also periodically firing his particle-beam antimissile system with its dismally long charging cycle. But he could not keep this up forever! All the pirates would have to do is employ any simple coordinated attack and Jason would not be able to dodge in time. They could even wait for him to grow weary and sleep! Jason would have to take turns with Dalton. But how long could they withstand a siege on both sides from this pirate armada?

As if to hammer home the dilemma of the situation, a near miss overloaded Jason's east sail. Jason heard a loud hiss from somewhere in the gravitonic systems as a breaker clamped down, safely shunting the overload out of the sail system.

If Jason tried to flee by sailing out of the gravitonic current to the side, he would slow down to a crawl on the meager gravitonic drifts outside a true current, leaving himself an easy target for the five active pirates.

He could storm past the group of pirates in front, and hope to escape down the nearby branch. But at close range he would not be able to avoid their cannon. And all six pirates would be firing on his fleeing sailship.

What could they do?? Jason skillfully swung his sailship this way and that, fired his gravitonic cannon again and again, fired the particle weapon each time it had charged. He was only just able to keep the pirates at bay. His uniform was soaked with sweat. Jason blinked and wiped his drenched forehead on his sleeve. He cursed under his breath. This was too much! How could he keep up this pace?? He could not turn it over to the computer; there were too many decisions he had to make solely based on intuition.

And then suddenly, the pirates stopped firing. Jason peered at the situation screen intently, grinding his teeth in apprehension. They were all still moving, turning in odd directions. What was going on? Then he realized their plan, for indeed they had finally come up with something, undoubtedly communicating on a gravitonic carrier wave -- scrambled, of course, otherwise Jason's communication scanner would have detected any messages. The three pirates behind Jason were now following each other around in a circular path. The three other pirates before Jason were doing the same, three sailships chasing each other around an endless circle. The plane of the circles of both sets of pirates were parallel to each other so from Jason's point of view he saw each flat on, going round and round. Their circles were almost as wide as the gravitonic current and it almost seemed the pirates were sliding along the inside of the tube-shaped current around and around.

Jason fired his gravitonic cannon at one of the three pirates circling before him; he aimed slightly ahead of the pirates circular path to compensate for the pirate's motion. The pirate simply slowed down, let the cannon bolt pass before him,

then he sped back up until in his original position.

It was a great plan, Jason had to admit. Now the pirates would be able to easily avoid Jason's fire and their own crossfire by simply slowing down or speeding up along their circular paths without any chaotic maneuvers.

Jason watched them closely, firing his own cannon again and again. They easily avoided each shot. They themselves had not begun to fire. Undoubtedly, the pirates, in close communication with each other, were greatly enjoying the plight of their helpless prey between them. Jason imagined the captains of the outlaw ships laughing with glee at their clever plan. Whoever thought it up was indeed clever. He would probably also have each pirate craft target a different point around Jason's sailship making it near impossible for Jason to avoid their fire. It looked like the end had come.

Jason looked over at Dalton still wearing his V-R helmet and frantically manipulating his arms about. Jason felt a surge of guilt for getting the poor boy into all this. Of course, Dalton HAD stowed away aboard the ship. Jason shook his head and swore softly, hating himself for not turning around after leaving Infinity City and taking the boy back. They would now both be killed, for Jason would not allow himself to be captured and sold into slavery. He would not even allow them to have his ship. As soon as the pirates blasted his gravitonic sails, Jason would go down to the bowels of the ship, open the chamber to the antimatter bleeder pods, remove the safeguards, then quietly order the computer to blow up the ship. It would be painless... and honorable. But his parents, his best friend John One, or anyone on Infinity City would ever know what had happened to him. He would just be another Adventurer who had never come back.

These thoughts had only taken a moment. Jason turned back quickly to his command console. He would make a run past the orbiting pirates in front with his gravitonic cannon blazing, trying to reach the nearby gravitonic branch. Perhaps, he would disable one or two of the pirates before himself getting knocked out...

But then, with a sinking heart he saw from his situation screen that the pirates had all begun to fire at once. Jason checked the particle-beam antimissile system, found it at full charge, and then almost laconically fired the particle-beam to destroy at least one of the approaching bolts.

He was about to pull his ship hard over to avoid the other rapidly approaching bolts when he noticed a quick movement at the particle-beam console -- the charging indicator was streaking across the board! In the wink of an eye the damn system had come to full charge again! Jason stared at the readout, stunned for only a moment. He shook himself realizing that Dalton had switched the particle-beam's power source over to the mighty gravitonic generator -- Jason still had trouble exactly understanding how Dalton was able to convert the differing power systems.

Jason bent quickly to the particle-beam controls, swung the

device over to aim at the next approaching gravitonic bolt and fired. The other remaining cannon bolts were only seconds away! But the particle weapon charged almost instantly. Jason fired again at the remaining bolt in front then swung the particle weapon around to the other side of his ship and fired, charged, fired again, charged, and with only a second remaining fired at the final cannon bolt -- the last being so close that Jason heard the ship's electromagnetic deflector fields automatically snap on to protect the ship from the intense particle wave from the nearby explosion of the pirate's gravitonic bolt. He had beaten off their attack! Each pirate bolt had been absorbed by Jason's particle beams.

But they were firing again! Jason fired back with the newly rapid-charging particle weapon. He cried loudly with glee and began firing his own gravitonic cannon. They now had a chance! Jason thought, with thankful excitement, his young partner Dalton was a genius! Dalton was saying something over the pilot room's speaker but Jason was not paying attention and could barely hear it over the computers rapid vocal reports regarding ship systems and enemy activity.

Dalton finally ripped off his V-R helmet, unstrapped himself from his pilot seat, jumped over and grabbed Jason's shoulder. "Jason! Jason! Aim for their ships! You can destroy them!"

Without taking his eyes from the situation screen, the grav cannon and particle weapon boards Jason barked, "What?! How? What are you talking about?" Then he added excitedly, "Dalton, you did it! The particle weapon's charging almost instantaneously!"

"It does even more, Jason! Look how fast it shoots! Can't you see it's faster-than-light?! I was able to add a gravitonic envelope split off from the gravitonic power source. It shoots as fast as a gravitonic cannon now, Jason!"

WHAT?! Jason thought. THAT WAS IMPOSSIBLE! Then he suddenly realized that he had been hitting the approaching gravitonic bolts though light-hours away almost instantaneously.

The particle-beams were, impossibly though it seemed, indeed travelling as fast as the gravitonic bolts.

"Jason, you can destroy their ships with the particle-beams! Hit 'em! Hit 'em!"

"Good idea, kid..."

Jason now unfurled the sails all the way and with the gravitonic generator already at maximum the sailship jerked forward and tore back toward the three orbiting pirate ships behind.

Something happened that Jason had not foreseen. The pirates panicked at the sight of Jason's aggressive attack, broke from their circular path, turned and fled. Jason pumped the particle-beam weapon at the closest. His own ship began to slow from the weapons draw on the gravitonic generator. The pirate jerked this way and that to avoid Jason's fire. He was finally struck! The

image of the pirate on Jason's situation screen came to an abrupt stop. Without waiting, Jason aimed at the second and third pirates and fired again and again. The pirates began evasive maneuvers but Jason was in close. He fired again and again. The pirates were too foolish to flee in separate directions. This made it easy for Jason to target both. Almost at the same time both pirate craft came to an abrupt stop. Jason, with Dalton peering eagerly over his shoulder at the situation screen, now noticed the image of the first pirate struck with the new weapon was slowly expanding. Jason requested telemetry data for all three and the computer reported intense atomic radiation -- the first ship had blown completely, the two showed debris and an expanding cloud of lost atmosphere. All three had been destroyed in only minutes!

Jason now checked the three remaining pirates. They too had broken from their circular path and were now advancing on him rapidly. Their recently fired gravitonic bolts were only seconds away! Jason swung his ship around to avoid the bolts, targeted the pirates and began blasting away with the miraculous graviton enveloped particle-beam. The pirates chaotically broke ranks to avoid the beams -- evidently, they had no defensive beams of their own, designed with large gravitonic systems to either attack or run. Jason swung around and moved in toward the panicked pirates while continuing to fire. In their haste to avoid his particle-beams the pirates moved in tight, random arcs, not realizing until too late that Jason was drawing closer. His shots were getting closer and closer. Finally, one of the pirates saw what was happening and tried to break and run. The pirate was an easy target. With intense satisfaction, Jason fired off a particle-beam shot that was a direct hit. The situation screen showed the pirate jerk to a stop then slowly expand into a cloud of debris gas.

Jason maneuvered on the remaining two like a fox chasing two chickens. He was so close now it was child's play. Child's play! "Dalton!", he cried. "Take the particle weapon controls! I'll concentrate on maneuvering!"

"Aye, aye, Jason!", cried Dalton joyfully as he leapt to the console, steadying himself from the ship's swaying motion by gripping the console itself.

Jason brought the ship deftly around on an intercepting course with the nearest pirate. Dalton aimed perfectly and blasted the pirate before the nearby ship could move out of the way. Jason brought the sailship around and sailed after the remaining pirate at maximum speed. The pirate tried to flee but they caught up quickly and Dalton finished him off, Jason's sailship slamming to a complete stop as Dalton shunted all power from the gravitonic system into his new weapon, blasting the pirate craft so strongly that its image lasted only seconds before its dissipating vaporous debris became too thin to scan. Three more of the pirates destroyed!

Still feeling intense battle lust, Jason brought the sailship around and sailed back up the gravitonic current, past the debris of the five vaporized ships. He approached the very first slow pirate they had seen that had been disabled but not

destroyed by crossfire from the other pirates. The pirate now radioed a plea for mercy. Jason, without responding, looked over at Dalton with an evil grin and ordered, "He attacked first. Pay him back, Dalton!"

Dalton laughed with glee at his partner's ruthlessness and fired the particle-beam weapon once. The pirate was destroyed.

They continued back up the current to the first branch where they had disabled the second pirate ship they had seen. This time the pirates onboard sought to avoid death by warning Jason of retribution from their fellows if they were attacked. With sinister tones they warned Jason that seven other ships would be on his tail any moment. Jason radioed back that the rest were already destroyed. Then he ordered Dalton to fire. The last of the attacking pirates was finished off!

And also, unfortunately, was Dalton's marvelous hybrid weapon. The computer reported the problem. They discovered the conduit between the gravitonic system and the particle-beam weapon was almost completely destroyed -- enveloping the particle-beams with a gravitonic sheath, it turned out, created a strange high-energy backwave along the conduit that its material could not withstand.

Jason doubted they would meet any more pirates. Once this bunch failed to return, there would be no one else from The Gouge black hole to try again...

Quickly, he turned the ship around and headed back up the gravitonic current in search of the gravitonic whirlpool and the colony ship.

As they sailed away from the remains of the pirate ship Jason ordered the computer to continue the gravitonic radar search for the whirlpool. To the astonishment of both Jason and Dalton, the computer reported that the whirlpool had been detected several hours ago. They looked at each other in puzzlement -- that would have had to been during their encounter with the pirates. Jason ordered the computer to display the location on the 3D screen. The computer had detected ripples from the titanic phenomenon faintly emanating down the branching gravitonic current that Jason had first ducked into where he had encountered the third and fourth pirates. The whirlpool was down that current! Jason grunted in amazement. If they had not been chased in there by the pirates, the computer would never have detected the ripples, and they may never have discovered the whirlpool!

Jason pulled back on the gravitonic power, slowed the sailship down, then smoothly came about. They sailed back down the current, grinned at each other knowingly as they saw the

debris from the pirate craft, and turned into the branching current. The gravitonic radar system began reporting the faint signs that indicated the whirlpool.

Nervous there might be more pirates, Jason thoroughly scanned far ahead but there were no more sailships, pirates or otherwise, within the current.

Just before they dropped to their bunks exhausted, the computer running the ship on automatic, Jason entered a rather animated description of their encounter with the pirates into the ship's logbook. He winked at Dalton assuring him the account would definitely make the front page of the "Infinity City Journal of Recent Adventuring."

7. THE DISCOVERY

This present gravitonic current brought them near the whirlpool. They slid open the shield that had covered the pilot room's transparent dome to see what the whirlpool looked like to the naked eye. Gravitons were invisible sub-atomic particles, so there was nothing to be seen of them. However, gravitons easily deflected the photons that carried light. The whirlpool swirled around along a two-dimensional plane, and actually did bend light making the starlight that shown through it appear to swirl about and head toward the whirlpool's center like a smoke ring with a very small hole. It really looked like the stars were being washed down a drain, but this was an optical illusion.

Vast torrents of gravitons whirled inward toward the donut-shaped whirlpool's center. On each side of the center, two immense spouts of gravitons shot outward in opposite directions forming two tubular-shaped gravitonic currents. Had the colony ship fallen down one of these "chutes"? There was a method known to Jason that could lead to an answer.

Sailships could communicate with each other across vast distances, and almost instantaneously. By modulating their gravitonic sails at certain special resonant frequencies and phasings, they could send waves along the inside of gravitonic currents. The sails of a sailship anywhere along the same gravitonic current would resonate at the transmitted frequency, effectively receiving the "broadcast." The receiving sailship would be equipped with sensitive gear to receive the message and translate into coherent information. There was only a handful of feasible carrier frequencies, but the bandwidths were wide enough to allow audio/visual signals, and high rate computer data. Unfortunately, many gravitonic currents were particularly noisy due to nearby interference from certain kinds of stars and other cosmic phenomena. In these cases, good old Morse code was the only means of long distance communication.

But, there was another advantage to a sailship's ability to send waves vibrating through gravitonic fields. When the waves struck massive objects, they bounced back! This was one way scouting sailships located new worlds along convenient gravitonic currents, and it was called GRAVITONIC RADAR. This was also how Jason figured he would determine if the colony ship was inside

one of the two huge currents spouting out either side of the

whirlpool.

He climbed to the pilot room, and checked their present course with the computer. Their path was now almost tangent to the whirlpool, and soon they would pass it by. The two spouts of gravitons, shooting out of both sides of the hub of the whirlpool were perpendicular to the current they were now in. Jason brought the ship out of the current, and around, heading down toward the spout pouring out in a southern Galactic direction. The ship slowed considerably. Though there were no local gravitonic currents, there were enough "gusts," from the local effects of the whirlpool, to allow them to maneuver, and head toward the southerly spout without getting much closer to the dangerous whirlpool itself.

If the ship had slid down one of the spouts, it would not have gone far. No matter how much the whirlpool had accelerated it, without gravitonic sails it could not even travel as fast as light. It had been missing for 87 years, implying that it could be no farther than 87 light-years away, a considerable range for even a sailship to search.

As they headed toward the southerly spout, Jason allowed Dalton to take the helm. He watched Dalton proudly as the youth skillfully detected each new gust, determined its direction and magnitude, then trimmed and angled the sails to keep the ship heading toward the southerly spout.

Jason went below to ready the gravitonic radar set up in one of the workshops. How useful it was to have a shipmate! And, he really trusted Dalton, too. He got the radar working, interfaced its controls to the ship's computer, then went back up to the pilot room.

Looking over Dalton's shoulder at the computer display he found that they had more than covered half the distance to the spouting southerly current. It was getting late, however both of them were too anxious to postpone their operation until morning. Jason told the computer to send for two cups of coffee.

Soon, there suddenly came a knock at the hatch in the floor of the pilot room. Jason looked down in surprise. Dalton started snickering. Jason told the computer to open the hatch, and when it slid open, there was one of the little robots sitting on the elevator with two steaming cups of coffee resting on top of it.

Jason picked them up carefully, and asked suspiciously, "Did you program it to knock?"

Dalton answered proudly, "Yes. But, only for certain tasks that aren't time-critical. Hey, there's no cream in mine!"

"We ran out."

"Hmm. We have powdered milk left, don't we?", asked Dalton.

"Yeah. Tell it to bring you some."

"Oh, I don't care... Hey, this doesn't taste so bad!"

"Ah, you're acquiring a taste for good coffee, the mark of a seasoned Adventurer. Our galley is currently featuring coffee beans from South America on Earth."

"From Earth? The home planet?"

"Yeah, it's a hell of a place. You can get anything there."

"I stopped there once, back when I was a kid."

"With your dad?"

"Yeah," Dalton did not mind mentioning his father. He remembered only the good times with him, and no longer thought about his tragic ending. Space was a dangerous place, and people got killed. "We did some trading at the Riyadh space port."

"That's their biggest one. I believe it's now the biggest in the Galaxy."

"I was just studying about it a few days ago. It IS the biggest in the Galaxy. I saw a map of that part of the world. It's on a gigantic peninsula, in the middle of a huge, flat desert, just perfect for a space port. It's been there forever!"

"Yeah, since the time of the Original Builders."

"The ones that built Infinity City?"

"Yep. I think they even launched from Riyadh. It's hard to remember. It was a long time ago when I had to read the legends back in school."

"What legends?"

"That's what they call the diaries and written accounts left behind by the Original Builders. But, the actual physical originals are all gone, and we only have copies of the text stored in the Infinity City Library. Some people don't think they are authentic at all. There's no way to tell. That's why we call 'em the LEGENDS. They teach them in the schools, though. Seemed pretty believable to me."

"What are some of the legends?"

"Oh, Dalton, I can't remember. Ask the computer. They're all there. But, not right now. You're busy flying the ship, remember."

At the reminder, Dalton grinned over at him glowing with pride and excitement.

Jason switched the radar control system into a nearby view-screen. It was all warmed up and ready to go.

Taking advantage of side winds from the approaching southerly gravitonic current, Dalton increased the speed of the sailship, and soon they closed on the southerly current. "My turn," announced Jason, and Dalton reluctantly traded positions

with him. It could be tricky plunging into this strange, new kind of current. But, the gravitonic radar only worked on the inside of a gravitonic current. And Jason was a very experienced pilot. He ordered the computer to make sure all objects within the ship were secure, and he told it to cover the pilot room dome. After a few minutes, after the three little utility robots had picked up, the computer reported "All secure." It was time to enter the rapid southerly current.

Jason flipped out the manual controls from within the arms of the pilot chair. Dalton leaned forward from his own seat

eagerly watching every move. Jason swung the ship over to a course parallel to the southerly current spouting out and away from the whirlpool. Jason was secretly relieved to be moving away from the looming donut-shaped monstrous thing. As he slowly moved closer to the current, the side "winds" picked up, moving the ship along faster and faster. Small eddy currents between the side winds and the main current began jostling and rocking the ship. The spout from the whirlpool was as strong as the currents rocketing out from the poles of a star!

When they finally entered the main current, the ship surged this way and that in unpredictable directions. This current was rapid, and almost unstable! He did not want to remain in it for very long. "Computer, tell the gravitonic radar to begin scanning the current."

"Acknowledged."

They shot down the gravitonic current rapidly. The radar antenna swung slowly back and forth, up and down, sending waves down the entire cross-section of the current. Minutes passed. They watched the radar screen expectantly. No echoes.

After 15 slow minutes, there was activity on the radar screen! Dalton left the secondary pilot seat to stare over Jason's shoulder at the radar screen. Some kind of pattern! But, it was weak, and distorted, and changing constantly. The radar computer flashed an analysis at the bottom of the screen: "ECHO FROM END OF CURRENT."

Dalton looked at Jason quizzically, "No ship?"

"No ship," Jason said with disappointment. "That's the echo from the radar. The waves have gone all the way to the end of the current, and some have bounced all the way back. Computer, how long is the current?"

"Unknown."

"Computer, how much time passed between the start of the radar signal and the return of the echo?"

"15.3 minutes."

"Computer, determine the length of the current from that data."

"580 light-years."

"My God!", cried Jason. "That's the longest current I've ever heard of! We'll have to report this to the Guard. Hey, Dalton, we'll get written up in the INFINITY CITY JOURNAL OF RECENT DISCOVERIES for this!"

"Wow, that's great! I'll bet the northern current is just as long."

"Yeah, maybe the colony ship is in that one. Computer, terminate the radar. Man, I'm getting sleepy. Let's get out into dead space, and 'drop anchor' for the night."

"Can I pilot the ship?", Dalton asked expectantly.

"After I get us out of this wild current..." Jason brought the ship over, and slid quickly out of the gravitonic current.

They switched places, and Dalton carefully piloted them away from the current, following a perpendicular course.

Once they were far enough away, barely drifting, Jason ordered the computer to take in all sail, and retract the struts. As a further thought, he ordered the little robots to crawl around the strut housings, and sail storage cans, checking for any damage from the long voyage. Normally, the computer could deduce damage from any change in a sail's behavior. But visual inspection was required periodically.

They dragged themselves tiredly down to the living quarter. Jason swung the bed down from the ceiling for himself, and collapsed onto it. Dalton opened up the cabinet, he had originally stowed away in. Here, he had made a cozy nest of blankets and pillows for himself. It was a strange place to sleep, but it had one major advantage: The cabinet door could be closed when Jason's snoring was at its loudest!

The next morning, Jason rolled out of bed early, showered and dried in the little hygiene cubicle. He then pulled on a fresh one-piece coverall, and went over and tapped the door to Dalton's sleeping cabinet. The door remained closed, there was no sound. Jason opened the door and looked in. There were rumpled blankets and pillows but no Dalton. Hmm. "Where's Dalton?", he asked the computer. "Pilot room," it replied.

Jason proceeded up to the pilot room where he found Dalton at the controls, tacking the ship back and forth through the side winds just outside the southerly current. He was heading back toward the whirlpool so they could investigate the northerly current. "Being careful?", Jason murmured.

"Of course," responded Dalton, confidently. Jason approved, and thought to himself: I LOVE THIS KID!

"Computer," Jason inquired, "how close is the whirlpool?"

"Thirteen minutes at present rate of progress."

"That's close enough! Set a course tangent to the whirlpool, Dalton, and go around it."

"Aye, aye, skipper!", he cried gleefully, and followed with a series of commands to the computer to help him astronavigate around the menacing whirlpool.

WHERE'D HE LEARN THAT? Jason wondered. PROBABLY ONE OF THOSE VIRTUAL-REALITY SHOWS...

There were many gravitonic gusts up from the whirlpool, but due to their instability, progress was much slower than it had been through the stronger side-winds. It took over two hours to skirt the whirlpool. Halfway along, when they were adjacent to the plane of the whirlwind's spin, they sped up slightly due to the incoming gravitons coalescing to form the whirlpool.

Once on the other side, they slowly maneuvered up to the northerly spout, with Jason once again at the controls. Once inside the northerly spout, surging this way and that due to its mild instability, equal to the southern current, Jason activated the radar again. This time, after only two minutes, they heard a sharp ping from the view-screen showing the radar status!

There on the screen an image was taking shape. As the radar continued to sweep ahead, the computer analyzed the echoes to build a picture of an object farther down the gravitonic current. Even though the gravitonic current was rapid and strong, it seemed free from significant external noise. The returning echo was very sharp. The image on the screen grew clearer.

Jason and Dalton peered breathlessly at what the computer was drawing. They looked at each other amazed! Jason said, "Guess what we just found, Dalton, old buddy!"

There on the screen, in sharp contrast to the black of surrounding space, a gray object was displayed. It was shaped like a tapering cigar, with landing fins on the sides at one end.

Dalton looked back at the image, "Looks just like the pictures in the news report!" He whirled around, and grabbed Jason's arms. "We found it, Jason! The missing colony ship! We FOUND it! We'll get written up in the INFINITY CITY JOURNAL OF RECENT ADVENTURE, right?!"

"That's right, kid. You're an official Adventurer now!"

Dalton whooped with excitement and leaped around the pilot room. Jason chuckled, and reminded him to be careful around the controls.

Dalton ran up to the radar screen, looked again, then looked up at Jason, his eyes bright with excitement. "Let's go get 'em! Let's go rescue them!"

"Take it easy," Jason replied calmly. "You forgot something. Computer, calculate the distance of the ship on the radar screen using the time it takes the radar echo to go out and come back?"

The computer reported, "88.7 light-years."

Dalton groaned, "Oh, no! That'll take weeks!"

"Yeah, I know. They've been sliding down this current for a long time. Hey wait a minute!" Jason looked up at the ceiling frowning in thought. "If that ship was reported missing about 87 years ago, and it's 88.7 light-years away from this whirlpool, then they're almost going the speed of light! Dalton, they must be living at a SNAILS PACE!"

"Wow! Because they're so close to the speed of light?"

"Yes! We're going to meet the original crew and colonists that lifted off 97 years ago! It's only been a short time for them. Just a few years..." He asked the computer to make some calculations based on how long it would have taken the colony ship to travel from its home world to the whirlpool. "It's only been about seven years for them!" He shook his head, "They're watching the stars go zipping by a dozen times faster than they should. They must be terrified! Dalton, let's go help 'em out!"

"All right!"

The computer was instructed to proceed down the current. But due to its mild instability, Jason and Dalton spent as much of their time as they could in the pilot room, in case anything unexpected happened. Jason kept the radar scanning continuously. It would warn them if anything ELSE, that might have been sucked down this spout by the whirlpool, was in their way.

Day by day, they drew closer to the colony ship. Day by day, their excitement rose.

8. RESCUE FROM THE CURRENT

It would soon be time to begin slowing down to match the velocity of the colony ship. This required such accuracy that only the computer could accomplish it. The unusually long gravitonic current rapidly moved at over 1,000 times the speed of light. The colony ship however, without any faster-than-light mechanism for gravitonic interaction, was being dragged along at only little more than nine tenths the speed of light.

Jason set up a program in the computer to smoothly reduce their speed slowly down, achieving the speed of the colony ship at a point just in front of it. Then, they would carefully maneuver closer.

Jason initiated the process though the colony ship still a few days ahead. He wanted room for error.

They slowed down easily. The first day passed. Then the second. Then the third. But as they grew closer to the speed of

the colony ship, a frustrating development occurred.

The gravitonic current was extremely fast, and also slightly unstable. This instability resulted in mild surging movements of the sailship in random directions. No problem at very high speeds. But as the sailship had slowed way down, the surgings had a stronger effect, as if the gravitonic current was being pumped along by a gigantic Galactic heart. They would not be able to rendezvous with the colony ship with this unstable current surging the gravitonic sails this way and that, distances 100 times the very length of the colony ship. There was no way to board the colony ship while it was inside this gravitonic current. Was it possible to move it out?

While they considered this problem, yet another developed. At their present speed, one thousand times less than the speed of the gravitonic current, the surgings had become very powerful, and warning devices reported undue strain on the ship's gravitonic sails.

This was easy to solve. They simply tacked slowly over, and popped out the side of the gravitonic current into the gentler side winds, where they discovered it was easy to maintain the slower velocity. So easy in fact that they brought the sailship through the side winds up parallel with the colony ship's position in the gravitonic current. But now they were at an impasse.

They sat around the pilot room discussing the problem for hours. With the aid of the computer's sophisticated data query capability, they poured through its atomic memory files looking for any similar problem ever recorded in the annals of Infinity City Adventuring. There was nothing. They had the computer search all volumes of the JOURNAL OF RECENT ADVENTURING. Still nothing. Just that single article by the Adventurer who had first discovered this whirlpool. And when Dalton noted the name of that Adventurer, he gasped out loud, his eyes growing wide.

He looked at Jason. "That's the Adventurer I grew up with! This story is about when WE got stuck in a whirlpool. Jason, it's the same whirlpool!"

Jason was amazed, and then something dark stirred in him. "You mean this guy here is the one that dumped you in Infinity City?"

Dalton looked down at the floor, remembering that awful time. "Yes."

Only a summary of the article's highlights had been displayed. Jason now requested the entire article. There was a picture of the Adventurer! He was fat, with small black eyes that were cockeyed. And he was also BALD!

The PILL OF LIFE could not control balding. This was a genetic defect causing a mild destructive incompatibility between certain male hormones, aggravated by prolonged physiological stress. This trait was rare in Infinity City, where genetic defects could be cured by a treatment causing a molecular chain-reaction within all the cells of the body resulting in the repair

of a given defect for every single DNA molecule. (Note: The cause of aging, like all bodily functions, was rooted in the DNA molecules. Unfortunately, it involved a complex interaction between so many different genes that no one had yet invented a chain-reaction repair. Fortunately, this complex interaction, discovered long ago, was easily inhibited with the PILL.)

This particular Adventurer obviously had an off-world parent with questionable genetic structures.

Dalton groaned looking at the picture. "That's him!" His voice began to shake. "He... He killed..."

Jason interrupted, "That's all right. Don't think about it right now. We'll catch up with him someday." Jason memorized the face. This guy deserved payback for what he had done to Dalton. Then, he saw that the article reported the man, a certain Bartholomew Katz, had retired on a world around Rigel after phenomenal gains by his investments during the ninety three years he had been away. NINETY THREE!?

Jason whirled around to face Dalton, who was sadly looking off into space. "Dalton!", he shouted. Dalton snapped his head around to look at Jason in surprise. "According to this article, you were stuck close to the speed of light for 93 years! You're... How the hell old are you anyway?"

"I just turned 16 on my birthday, remember?"

"Oh, yeah. But you're really over 100 years old, Infinity City time."

"What?", Dalton said slowly.

"The article says this Katz creep returned to Infinity City 93 years after he had last been there. Do you remember ever being in Infinity City before? Maybe that's where your mother is!"

"No, we never stopped there. Captain Katz hated the place..."

Jason interrupted irritably, "Don't call him CAPTAIN! He's a..." Jason checked himself, not wishing to call him a killer reminding poor Dalton about his father. "He's just a criminal!"

"Yeah, okay. He sure is." And now something happened inside Dalton, and all the pain from all the bad memories caused by the Adventurer Katz, changed from sorrow into anger. A hot, burning desire for revenge! "Yeah, I'm gonna get him, someday!"

"You bet! But we've got plenty of time. He's not going anywhere, or getting any older. So, you never went to Infinity City before five years ago?"

"No, I'm sure we didn't. My father told me about all the worlds we stopped at while I was still too little to remember. But, you know, I remember the two of them talking about Infinity

City once. They were talking about somebody from there. And it made them angry, and they started fighting..." Suddenly, he closed his eyes tightly, grimacing, and shaking his head. "No! I don't want to think about that!"

Jason took hold of him, "Hey, take it easy, Dalton. All that's behind, and gone, now. Come on, let's get back to work." He decided to change the subject. "How are we going to help these colonists?"

Dalton relaxed. "Yeah, we've got to rescue them..."

Jason quickly removed the article from the screen. "If we could figure out some way to get that ship out of the current, and out here where there's no surging, we'd have it solved." They began pouring over all the complex gravitonic theory stored in the ship's atomic memory.

It was horribly intricate. The mathematics displayed on the screen before Jason were mind boggling to comprehend. Dalton had plugged the computers virtual-reality helmet in, put it on, and was using its visual representation capabilities to study the relationships between gravitons, other sub-atomic particles, their wave characteristics, and the other fundamental forces: electro-magnetism, nuclear weak, and nuclear strong. It was all so amazingly symmetrical when represented by the V-R generated various geometrical shapes with alternating sizes and colors, even sounds, representing the functional relationships. He could manipulate the virtual objects by just reaching out with his hands, as if his hands reached right into the virtual-reality. He could even see his hands there in the V-R, colored a bright glossy white. Actually, the ship's computer simply monitored the movement of his hands and displayed their counterpart in the virtual-reality.

Jason watched Dalton sitting there, with the sophisticated V-R helmet tightly covering his head. A breathing apparatus ventilating the helmet, providing fresh air. This particular model sealed off the mouth so that the wearer could not be heard speaking, or even shouting. The dull white helmet with nothing resembling the human features of eyes, ears, or mouth made Dalton look like some kind of alien. Jason's lip curled involuntarily. He was revolted by V-R, the use of which gave him unbearable feelings of anxiety.

Dalton was moving his hands around, grabbing invisible things, moving and pushing them here and there, completely at home in virtual-reality. His feet also would periodically swing in different directions. Dalton had told Jason that was how you told the computer to move you around in the virtual-reality.

This all gave Jason an eerie feeling. What if it bent the mind? What if it permanently affected perception of REAL reality. REAL REALITY?! He said aloud, "Hey, Dalton, is that thing helping? Dalton??..." The helmet completely sealed Dalton off from outside sight and sound.

"Computer, can you pipe my voice into Dalton's V-R?"

"Both your voice and image can be displayed inside his

virtual-reality."

"Well, beam me in there, would you..."

There was a pause, then the computer reported, "Your image and voice are now being duplicated within his virtual-reality."

"Hey, Dalton," Jason spoke.

Dalton jerked the helmet around and faced Jason, so surprised at suddenly seeing Jason in the virtual-reality amid the floating sub-atomic particle representations, that he almost fell off his chair.

Jason started chuckling at the surprised ALIEN. "Hey, is that virtual-reality helping any. I think it's kind of dangerous."

Dalton sat facing him for a few moments, and began shaking in a funny way. The computer reported, "Dalton has requested transmission of his voice into the pilot room."

"Go ahead!", replied Jason.

Suddenly he heard Dalton laughing, the sound coming out of the computer's speaker. "Hi, Jason! What are YOU doing here?"

"What?"

"Hey, watch out for that graviton, Jason! Oh, no! Wow, it went right through you... This is great! You gotta try it! And, I think I know what we can do to get the colony ship out of the current. Put on the other helmet and I'll show you..."

Normally, that would have been the last thing Jason wanted to do. But, he did not want Dalton to think he was scared. And, he could not easily excuse himself with his usual remark: "I DON'T CARE FOR V-R GAMES." With a sigh, he pulled the other helmet out the cabinet below one of the control panels. The virtual-reality helmets were there primarily for sailship technicians to check out the sailship at the Infinity City space port for preventive maintenance purposes.

Jason told the computer to toss him into the same virtual-reality as Dalton, then, with a groan, he donned the helmet. Instantly, he could tell that the last wearer had been a smoker. Hey, that had been him! He'd smoked his last cigar after he'd last landed in Infinity City (where smoking was banned) just before a technician made him use the virtual-reality helmet to look at some small problem in an impossible-to-reach component of the gravitonic system.

He pulled the helmet down tightly, wiggling it around until he felt his eyes, ears, and mouth snugly covered by internal rubber cups. Then he lifted a hand up under his chin to slide a mechanical lever to the side moving the rubber cups inward sealing him in. All was black and silent. This part he liked.

It was relaxing. "Okay, computer, I'm ready." Slowly, light grew around him, and he saw all the bouncing, floating gravitonic

theories. Vertigo began to grow within him, but he breathed deeply and regularly, bringing it under control.

Suddenly, there was a high-pitched growling roar from right beside him! He whirled to find himself face to face with a gigantic Kodiak bear!

"It's just me, Jason," the bear said. "Computer, show me as Dalton again." And, instantly the bear disappeared to be replaced by Dalton. The computer was transmitting Jason's three-dimensional image into the virtual-reality, and Dalton could see the enraged expression on Jason's face. "Hey, now don't get mad, Jason. I was just playing!"

"Playing, huh?! Let's see how YOU like it! Computer, turn me into a lion!"

"That is not possible," informed the computer.

"The key phrase is 'SHOW ME AS.'", Dalton instructed.

"Okay. Computer, SHOW ME AS a lion!"

"Command not specific enough," the computer complained. "Specify North American cougar, extinct African lion, or extinct European lion."

"Oh, never mind. Dalton," and Jason looked around at all the multi-colored floating spheres, boxes, pyramids, and lines. "What are all these things? And, computer, decrease the visual intensity 30%, the brightness is bothering my eyes. And stop transmitting Dalton's breathing sounds, it's like he's right in my ear..." Dalton explained what they were looking at, amid Jason's frequent complaints about other aspects of virtual-reality.

Dalton then set up a model showing the gravitonic current as a flowing blue stream, the colony ship (colored gray) inside, and their own sailship floating just on the outside, with the gravitonic sails, a billowing shimmering white, and the sailship a bright yellow, which Dalton preferred over the ship's actual iron gray color that Jason had chosen for its distinction.

Then, Dalton explained, using the geometric shapes, a theory of macroscopic graviton behavior. He said, "Now watch the model over here, Jason. Computer, run simulation program MOVE-IT." A white arrow appeared out of nowhere pointing at the sailship which began moving toward the nearby gravitonic current. Just before the little sailship entered the current, its billowing sails all tightened up, and tilted at radical angles, diagonal to the direction of the current. As the sails edged into the gravitonic current, part of the blue flowing gravitons within the current were deflected off the sails at right angles to the main current, spraying the colony ship which began slowly moving sideways out of the gravitonic current!

Jason asked breathlessly, "Computer, is the plan MOVE-IT feasible in normal reality?"

"Yes," replied the computer.

"MOVE-IT IS the feasibility plan, Jason," Dalton explained excitedly. "I put it together with the computer's help."

"YOU put this plan together?!" Jason asked incredulously, his envy of Dalton's skill quickly replaced by pride in his young friend.

"Yeah! It's easy with V-R! You should get into this stuff." He grinned at Jason inside the V-R, and teased, "What's the matter? Getting too old?? Been forgetting to take the PILL??"

"All right, all right. I just prefer real reality, that's all... Listen, this plan of yours gives me an idea for solving one other big problem."

"What other problem?"

"Even after we nudge them out of the gravitonic current, they'll still be flying along at near light speed. We can't dock with a ship moving that fast with that much momentum, because WE have NO momentum. The moment we shut down the gravitonic generator to dock, we'll come to a dead stop while the colony ship flies away -- from near light speed to no speed at all, with no deceleration because we have no momentum. The sails do that trick of field-probability that lets a sailship get from point 'A' to point 'B' without any change in momentum.

Jason continued thinking out loud. "And, we can't dock with the sails energized. Who knows what would happen then? The colony ship is all distorted and slowed down and more massive because of its relativistic speed..." (When an object accelerates up very close to the speed of light, it attains what are called RELATIVISTIC SPEEDS. At these speeds, the relations between the speeding object and the objects at rest, that it left behind, become somewhat strained. Consider a spaceship leaving a sleepy little planet, taking a big bite out of its moon to be used as fuel, and then accelerating up to say 99.99% the speed of light. Relative to an observer back on the home planet, pleasantly at rest, the wayward spaceship would be squished down along the axis of its direction of travel. That is, if the spaceship was shaped like a sphere when it took off, it would now be shaped like a bulging pancake, with the flat side in the direction of travel. However, relative to the folks on-board, everything would look nice and normal. One more difference. Time on-board would slow down compared to time back home. The classic example involves two twins about 24-years-old, one on-board and one left at home. The one on board is all slowed down. When the ship finally comes home, the twin at home is 80-years-old. The twin who was slowed down while the ship was near light speed, is only 25-year-old, and can now whip his brother at tennis again and again.) Back on Earth, at the Riyad space port, Jason had once been told that these theories were first propounded long ago in the ancient times by the Arab genius Einstein al-Bert.

He continued: "To us they'd barely be moving, and would weigh a million kilograms. To them, we'd be just a blur.

"The whirlpool gave the colony ship far more momentum than their ion-engines can counteract. And, in the wrong direction, too. It would probably take several life-times for them to slow down, if they even have enough fuel!

"We have to slow that ship down, and I think if we pull the same maneuver on the other side of the current, after drifting out, we can slow them down..."

He went into further details, and Dalton agreed they made sense. Then they began working on a second feasibility model, called SLOW-IT. When they ran this model in the virtual-reality, Jason reluctantly again wearing the V-R helmet, they saw the image of the colony ship now outside of the current, though still within the weak side winds. Their sailship backed out of the current, from where it had been blowing at the colony ship, cruised all the way around to the other side of the tubular-shaped current near the colony ship, then edged over to the gravitonic current as before. This time, however, only a few of its sails, twisted around at a reversed angle, were dipped into the current. Gravitons deflected by the sails now blew out of the current, and over to the colony ship. These gravitons were colored green, because the sails deflecting them had been charged in a unique way to give the deflected gravitons a very special property turning them into "breeder-gravitons". When these special breeder-gravitons hit the colony ship, sucking up its kinetic energy, they split into multiple blue-colored regular gravitons spraying off in all directions. With its kinetic energy rapidly sucked away, the V-R image of the colony ship began to slow. The SLOW-IT program automatically also began to slow Jason's sailship. In this way, Jason and Dalton could slow the colony ship down to a stop, then dock with safety!

They began setting up the programs in the computer to initiate the maneuvers to first blow the colony ship out of the gravitonic current by deflecting gravitons with their ship's sails, and then slow it down to a stop by spraying it with the paralyzing breeder-gravitons.

After several days of preparation and especially rigorous testing of the MOVE-IT and SLOW-IT programs, they initiated the procedure. The sailship edged over to the gravitonic current, and dipped in about halfway with the gravitonic sails tightened and tilted at the required angle. The computer reported the sails responding as predicted. They watched the gravitonic radar screen intently. Slowly, as predicted, the colony ship began to move away from them, toward the opposite side of the mighty gravitonic current!

The computer calculated that at the colony ship's rate of sideways movement, it would be safely free of the current in about 20 hours. Dalton and Jason took turns monitoring the operation from the pilot room. Jason now fully trusted Dalton's competence. How had he ever done without a partner before?

The next day, late in the morning, the operation was complete. The colony ship was out of the current! They pulled their sailship back out of the current, then sailed around the outer edge, tacking through the side winds, until they were on the other side, fixing their position between the colony ship, as tracked by the radar, and the main current. Then they initiated the tricky maneuver to generate breeder-gravitons. Their ship edged over, and dipped only a few sails into the huge flow of the main gravitonic current. The view screens monitoring the activity of the maneuvering sails went wild with streams of data scrolling rapidly past as the computer rapidly made hundreds of course corrections per second to accomplish three simultaneous purposes: One, keep the sails generating the breeder-gravitons at just the right angle. Two, accurately keep the spray aimed at the colony ship. Three, slow the sailship down as the colony ship slowed. And, it slowed rapidly!

Each single breeder-graviton sucked up enough kinetic energy to split into millions of regular gravitons. Fortunately, this miniature storm of gravitons all shot forward in the direction the colony ship was moving, not affecting Jason's sailship at all.

But, as rapidly as the colony ship was slowing, the computer forecasted it would take several days before it would come to a stop. And so they again took turns manning the pilot room, monitoring the progress of their rescue operation.

On the fifth day both Dalton and Jason were weary from the tense operation. Jason had a scraggly beard from not shaving, and Dalton's eyes seemed to be stuck in a permanent screen-watching stare. But, late in the afternoon, Dalton noticed the speed indicator of the colony ship changing faster. It finally dropped below 90% the speed of light, and seemed to be changing faster. Dalton excitedly called Jason down in the living quarter. Jason woke up, and scrambled out of bed already fully dressed. He had fallen into bed early, too tired to disrobe. He scrambled up the ladder into the pilot room. Dalton pointed to the speed indicator. They watched intently. Jason ordered one of the robots to bring coffee. They sipped their coffee and watched. After about 15 minutes the speed was down to 80%. This was amazing! Most of an objects momentum traveling close to light speed in only the top few percentage points. All of that had been bled off over that last few days. In even less time the speed had dropped to 70%! Only four minutes later it was down to 60%. The gravitonic generator was now noticeably winding down as the computer automatically matched speeds with the slowing colony ship.

A couple minutes later 50%. One minute later 40%. Jason and Dalton grinned at each other. Jason wagged his eyebrows up and down, and Dalton laughed. 30%! Fifteen seconds later 20%! And just a few seconds later 10%, and then rapidly 9%, 8%, 7%, then just a blur, and finally a blinking 0%. They had brought the colony ship to a stop!

The computer reported "Procedure SLOW-IT successfully completed."

9. ENCOUNTER

Jason and Dalton were out of their seats jumping up and down, hugging each other, and shouting with joy. They had rescued the colony ship from the gravitonic current, and purged it of its runaway momentum! They were ecstatic. This intense feeling of triumph was the reason Jason was obsessed with rescue. It was so difficult and challenging, but felt incredible when achieved. For Dalton, this was the most significant achievement of his life so far. He felt so important, so alive! How wonderful the universe was! Jason was just about to go down to the cargo hold in search of a bottle of sparkling wine to celebrate, when the computer interrupted them with a surprising report.

"A distress message is now being received from the colony ship. See view-screen-three for contents."

They whirled around and went over to look at view-screen. It read:

MESSAGE FROM COLONY SHIP:

THIS IS THE INTERSTELLAR SPACESHIP HEAVEN, FROM
CONOVER, RIGEL.

MAYDAY! MAYDAY! DIRE CONTROL SYSTEM MALFUNCTION.

REQUEST EMERGENCY COMMUNICATION OR ASSISTANCE.

PLEASE RELAY MESSAGE TO CONOVER, RIGEL.

CURRENT COORDINATES ARE...

And the message continued on, detailing the location of the colony ship and its home world.

Dalton looked at Jason, grabbing his arm, "Hey, Conover is the world I'm from! That's where my father signed on with Katz when I was just a baby!"

Jason looked at him in amazement. "Are you sure?"

Dalton assured him, stressing each word, "I know that's the name of the world where I'm from!"

Various implications occurred to Jason. "You AND the colony ship are both from Conover?!" He tilted his head to the side, his eyes widening, and he said slowly, "So, while searching for your mother, YOU must have encountered the SAME whirlpool as the colony ship! Incredible! Where is your mother anyway? Katz couldn't have searched for her if he didn't know where she went!"

"Father never said!"

Jason looked over at the image of the colony ship on the radar screen, then back at Dalton. "Let's see, the colony ship left exactly... 98 years ago. Katz returned to Infinity City five, no six years ago, after being away 93 years. So he must have been on Infinity City the first time 99 years ago. Some time after that he stopped at Conover and picked up you and your father. And then years later began looking for your mother, and hit the whirlpool. How old were you when he began looking for your mother?"

"About nine or ten."

"The colony ship's voyage was supposed to have taken just over ten years. Maybe your MOTHER was on... I mean IS ON the colony ship, and Katz had just followed the path it should have been on, and hit the same whirlpool. This is incredible! Dalton, your mother may be on that ship!"

Dalton's face clouded over, and he looked away.

"What's the matter, kid? I thought you'd be excited. You're finally going to meet your mother, if she's there!"

Dalton looked back at him, and said bitterly, "She can't be on that or any ship. She must be dead back on Conover! She wouldn't have taken off on a ship and left me behind. Nobody's mother does that. She must be dead. Just like my father. Both my parents are dead!" He buried his head in his arms, then

looked up angrily at Jason with tears in his eyes. He stormed over to the hatch in the pilot room floor, kicked the control button, and dropped through, stumbling down the ladder. Jason heard the living quarter door open, and slam loudly closed.

POOR KID, he thought. Jason began to feel guilty for speculating about Dalton's mother without first thinking about how Dalton would react. Katz seemed to have followed the path of the colony ship because she was on it! But why HAD she abandoned Dalton as a baby? No one abandoned children in Infinity City. What an abhorrent idea! No, it was a ridiculous notion that his mother had been on the colony ship. Jason dismissed the entire idea.

Jason felt Dalton probably needed to be alone for a while to sort things out. This was an awful lot for a sixteen year old boy to handle. Jason decided to contact the colony ship in the meantime.

He grew excited and rubbed his hands together. This was always a thrill, letting despairing space travelers know that help had finally arrived. "Computer, record the following message." And from the keypad of the pilot seat he typed...

BEGINNING OF MESSAGE:

COLONY SHIP HEAVEN, THIS IS INFINITY CITY SAILSHIP RESCUE-THREE. HAVE RECEIVED YOUR DISTRESS MESSAGE. HAVE ALSO SLOWED HEAVEN BACK DOWN TO A STOP, NULLIFYING EFFECTS OF THE "GRAVITONIC WHIRLPOOL" SPACE PHENOMENON THAT THREW YOU OFF-COURSE. ARE YOU RECEIVING THIS? END OF MESSAGE.

He spell-checked the message, wishing to appear as official as possible so they would not think he was a pirate. Then, he instructed the computer to send it. A reply was received immediately! It read...

INFINITY CITY SAILSHIP RESCUE-THREE, THIS IS THE HEAVEN. COMPLETE MESSAGE RECEIVED.

But, that was it!

Jason frowned. They were not very excited. He sent another...

HEAVEN FROM RESCUE-THREE: PLEASE IDENTIFY THE PERSON RESPONDING TO OUR MESSAGES.

The reply was once again immediate:

INFINITY CITY SHIP RESCUE-THREE, THIS IS THE HEAVEN. THIS IS SHIP'S COMPUTER PF24, OPERATING IN MAYDAY EMERGENCY MODE, RESPONDING TO INFORMATION REQUEST: CREW UNAVAILABLE.

"Computer, switch to audio link." There was no one there to impress with impressively official written communication. However, Jason wanted to talk with humans, if there were any! "PF24," he addressed the colony ship's computer. "How many crew and colonists are alive?"

The response: "613 colonists and 0 crew members alive."

WHAT?! "PF24, how many original colonists and crew members were there when the HEAVEN left Conover?"

"925 colonists, and 23 crew members."

"PF24, detail crew member cause of deaths."

"All deaths caused by fatal injuries."

Jason asked, "PF24, what caused the fatal injuries?"

"Affect external to HEAVEN."

"PF24, what was the affect? Describe it."

"Cannot label the affect in question. Description follows: The Heaven encountered random accelerations beyond the tolerance of its superstructure."

Jason inquired further: "When did this occur?"

The HEAVEN'S computer responded, "Ship time: 7.21 Earth-standard years ago. Galactic time: 90 years ago."

So, the crew had been killed in a serious accident! The whirlpool, of course. But, there were 613 surviving colonists. He needed to talk to one of them. He typed out another message: "PF24, is there a leader of the surviving colonists?"

"Yes."

Jason was growing irritated at this computer's lack of intuition. It should have responded with a name! Must be an exclusively digital model, Jason surmised. "Well, who IS the leader?!"

"A human named Excarver Durdaine."

"Do you have communication equipment to let him communicate with me directly?"

"Yes."

"Tell Excarver Durdaine to go to this communication equipment, and talk to the captain of the ship that has come to your rescue."

"Instructions now in progress. Summoning Excarver Durdaine to the communication room."

"Tell me when he gets to the communication room."

"Acknowledged."

Jason addressed his own computer verbally. "Computer, tell me when we receive the next message."

He suddenly realized he must look terrible, and not like a captain of an official rescue ship at all. Looking the way he did now, he looked like a pirate! He had learned that pirates were the chief worry of anyone stranded in space, because pirates left no WITNESSES. "Computer, priority one, get a robot up here as fast as possible with my dress uniform, a hair-brush, and a shaver!" The computer acknowledged, and the hatch in the pilot room floor slid open immediately in anticipation of the little robot. In less than one minute Jason heard the elevator

activating. A few moments later the blue robot popped up into the pilot room.

Jason grabbed the ultra-sonic laser shaver and made short work of his mangy stubble. Next, he took the hair-brush and started tugging at his hair, which he had again negligently allowed to get too long. He periodically pressed a button on the brush which sprayed a polymer steam into his hair, instantly flattering even the most stubborn tangles.

He removed his coverall, and tossed it down through the hatchway in the floor. "Hey!", he heard Dalton, upon whom the coverall had landed, shout from below. Jason pulled on his formal Militia Guard dress coverall, and was just buttoning up the jacket when Dalton appeared in the hatchway. Jason climbed back into the pilot room. Dalton looked down and said sheepishly, "I'm sorry for getting angry, Jason. That wasn't how someone in our business should act."

Jason smiled at him, and tousled Dalton's hair. "That's okay, kid. I've thought about how you must feel." He extended his hand, and saying brightly, "Partners-in-rescue, right?"

Dalton looked up, grinned, grabbed his hand, and vigorously shook it up and down. "Yeah! Partners-in-rescue!" Then he looked quizzical, "Hey, what's going on? The robot came blasting out of its cabinet, and almost knocked me over. I didn't know it could move that fast. I followed it up here."

"We've made contact, kid!", Jason answered excitedly. "I've been talking to their computer, and I'm waiting for their leader now."

"Computer," Jason instructed, "when the leader of the colony ship establishes communication, if its visual send back an image of our pilot room and my image but make me look and sound exactly like John One of the Larsch. And filter out Dalton. Oh, and animate a cap on my head matching my uniform." He wanted those on board the colony ship to think there was more than a single officer on-board the sailship. He loved to impersonate his good friend John One who looked much more like an officer than Jason, who clean-shaven though he was, always seemed more like a pirate. He hoped mischievously that someday someone who had seen the impersonation would meet John, and confuse the hell out of him.

Dalton looked over Jason's uniform. "What happened to your cap?"

"Uh, I lost it." It had been accidentally left back on Infinity City at a certain young lady's apartment whom Jason had not thought prudent to call on again.

They waited excitedly to hear from the leader of the colony ship.

"Message from PF24," the sailship's computer suddenly announced.

Jason read the message...

PF24 TO RESCUE-THREE: EXCARVER DURDAINE NOW ON-LINE. READY TO INITIATE GALACTIC STANDARD VISUAL COMMUNICATION MODE 1279.

He instructed his own computer, "Put him on view-screen one, and use it as his point of view. Establish contact."

Now he heard the VOICE of PF24. "PF24 to Rescue-Three: Communication successfully establish. Excarver Durdaine standing by. Awaiting your command to activate audio/visual link." PF24 had a strange accent. But one that Jason was all too familiar with. It had the same accent as Dalton! Jason looked over at him. He was just looking expectantly at view-screen one, apparently not having noticed the accent of PF24. "PF24, proceed," ordered Jason. And, the view-screen came to life with the image of Excarver Durdaine.

He was aging badly! His bushy black hair was graying all around. He had deep wrinkles especially around his gray eyes, deeply set below huge bushy black graying eyebrows. He had a moustache, and a distinguished looking goatee, streaked with more gray. He was hunched slightly, and wore a pale white robe of office, trimmed in gold lame'. He leaned forward peering intently at the image of officer John One, synthesized by Jason's computer, and spoke slowly with a slight trace of suspicion, "This is Excarver Durdaine. Our ship is the HEAVEN, from CONOVER, RIGEL. Who are you?"

Jason liked to act as official as he could at this kind of moment. With a matter-of-fact voice he replied, "This is Captain John One of the Infinity City Militia Guard, commanding the sailship Rescue-Three." He was telling the truth, sort of. He WAS still an officer of the Guard, though now in the inactive reserves, and the image Durdaine saw was really that of John One. He had not actually claimed that Rescue-Three was a Guard ship, which would have been illegal. But he knew Durdaine would assume this was the case. He continued, "We have received your distress message, and are here to lend assistance." Durdaine would hear the voice of John One.

Durdaine smiled weakly, and shook his head a little. "It is hard to believe someone has finally come. And, another ship from Infinity City. It has been so long. We've been in space 15 years. There was a terrible accident on our way to our destination. All the crew killed! Hundreds of us colonists, as well! My God, we had almost given up hope. Will you send a message to our home world, asking them to help us?"

"We can do that. But, we are completely equipped for repairs in space, and would like to offer our assistance. We

would like permission to send over mission specialist Jason, and an assistant to survey the cause of your distress, and propose corrective measures."

"You can repair us yourselves?!" But, he nodded. "Of course, of course. You are from Infinity City. We are fortunate, indeed. Yes, I gladly grant permission, on behalf of our ruling council, for you to come aboard. But, we know nothing about how to perform any kind of docking with you. We have no crew. Thank God the life-support systems are all automatic. Actually, some of them have malfunctioned. Maybe you could take a look at those, too."

"We'll see what we can do." And, now Jason got to the best part of his performance: "Before we proceed we must know officially if this is an errand of mercy or are you affiliated with an agency on your home world that the Militia Guard can invoice for its services?"

Durdaine looked surprised, but responded having been taken in by Jason's ruse, "Oh, well, to us this is certainly an errand of mercy. But I'm sure I understand. Your service must cost Infinity City a great deal. Our mission was commissioned by our federal government, itself! It is a very important colonization. Our home planet is now full of people, and we don't want to over-populate. That is why we have purchased our destination world. We are the first colonists. We have been sent to set up the initial colony. It is a brand new, unpopulated world, with prime conditions.

Durdaine nodded, "Yes, I'm sure our government will gratefully pay any reasonable fee. You do not require authorization from them first, do you?"

"That is not required of any government sanctioned mission," Jason, in the guise of John One, assured him. Durdaine looked relieved. Jason smiled at him, "We want to get you going again as soon as we can. Now, for the record, I must ask the address of the agency back on your home world that will receive our invoice. Your commission identification would be most helpful..."

Durdaine responded with the information. "I have always heard that the people of Infinity City were financially astute," he commented.

"Yes. It costs money to live in a black hole... We will coordinate docking and boarding with your PF24 computer, and keep you personally updated with our progress, Your Excellency."

Durdaine breathed a sign of relief, bowed, then smiled. "Thank you! Thank you! We are so grateful!"

"Our pleasure. Colony ship HEAVEN, this is RESCUE-THREE, Captain One commanding, terminating communication." Jason punched the end-of-communication button on the arm of the chair. When the screen showing the thankful image of Excarver Durdaine went blank, Jason leapt out of the pilot chair, and whooped for joy. "What a catch! A government sanctioned mission! And, he didn't even ask our price! Dalton, we're gonna be rich! We'll head for CONOVER right after this and collect." He began planning excitedly, "We'll bring a taped message from Durdaine, official authorizations, personally signed."

"Jason!", Dalton cried. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

Jason looked at him, "What?"

"The colony ship still has to be fixed first."

Jason confidently waved a hand in the air, "No problem!"

11. ENTRY

Before boarding the colony ship Jason wanted more details. They used the side winds of the nearby gravitonic current to tack over until they were only a few kilometers away from the colony ship. Then, they wound in all the tall gravitonic sails, except for one left out to deflect just enough gravitons for maintaining artificial gravity. Jason used the propulsion jets to creep in still closer. He took it slow, wary as he was of the danger of collision with the huge looming spaceship.

Jason had the computer begin scanning the huge colony ship. Dwarfing the sailship, it was cigar-shaped, dull dark gray in color, and hundreds of meters in length. The skin was featureless except for three things: gigantic atmospheric guidance fins at the tail end, sturdy enough for landing; large dormant ion-engine bells protruding from the tail; and the damage from the rendezvous with the gravitonic whirlpool, two long ruptures both on the same side of the colony ship stretching laterally around for almost a third of the ship's circumference.

The ship was rotating slowly about the axis extending from nose to tail, providing artificial gravity for the occupants. Jason learned from the colony ship's computer PF24 that they could board through an air lock located in the nose cone section. He maneuvered the sailship in closer to a point just beyond the nose of the immense ship. He felt like a fish about to enter the mouth of a gigantic whale.

The colony ship's computer obeyed his every request. He learned that without a crew, after a preprogrammed amount of time the colony ship's computer had switched to emergency mode, shutting down the engines, and allowing any reasonable entity to control it. It had preprogrammed 'instincts', of course, preventing it from executing any command that would endanger its passengers. But it did anything else that Jason or even Dalton commanded.

Jason asked about the ruptures. He learned that the colony ship had manual repair facilities, but with the crew gone there was no one who knew how to operate the repair equipment or the spacesuits necessary for entering the vacuum within the ruptured areas of the ship now open to space.

Jason had the tools and materials to repair the ruptures himself. This he decided to do, and sent out one of his robots to jet around the ruptures, scanning them closely so that later his computer could have the robots prepare the special sealing material he carried with him to the exact dimensions required to

seal the holes. Jason and Dalton later would take rolls of the thin but extremely strong material out to the ruptures to repair them. Then, inside the colony ship, they would repair whatever damage was below the ruptured sections.

But first, it was time to meet the colonists! Jason and Dalton went to the cargo hold, and put on spacesuits. They opened the inner hatch to the air lock, went in, closed it, and started the outer hatch cycle. After all the air was pumped out

of the lock, the outer hatch slowly swung out and open, revealing the flat blackness of outer space, brightly burning tiny stars, and, of course, the immense colony ship hanging above, as if about to fall on them.

They were about 100 meters away from the tip of the colony ship. It was so big at this distance that its vast size blocked their view of its tail fins at the far end, and the ship appeared, in the dim starlight, as a huge dark gray disk. At the tip of the ship, the nose cone had opened into four sections, like the petals of a large, iron gray flower. Inside, the disk-shaped, opened air lock ominously stared at them like the black pupil of an eye.

Jason spoke to the sailship's computer through the microphone in his helmet's radio. "Computer, add Dalton to this channel, and scramble all our communications." He did not want anyone aboard the colony ship to be aware of his assessments and impressions which, for disabled spacecraft, tended to be rather gloomy.

The computer responded, "Acknowledged."

"Dalton? Hear me okay?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Ready to ride over?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Comb your hair and brush your teeth?"

Dalton laughed. He was so excited. Life since he had met Jason had been one non-stop adventure. But, for an adventurous boy of 16, this was the best of all possible worlds.

Jason opened the storage cabinet containing the spacebikes, handed one to Dalton, and clamped himself onto the other. He checked everything out with the computer, then ordered it to automatically pilot the 'bikes over into the air lock of the colony ship. With computer controlled piloting, Jason could order the fastest possible retreat, should they encounter a threat. The computer temporarily disabled the sailship's artificial gravity so their 'bikes could float free. They cruised out and away.

Soon they felt the sailship's gravity diminish, and they became weightless, fortunately a feeling Dalton had gotten used to during their extra-vehicular excursions and free-ball games on

the voyage out to the whirlpool.

As they drifted silently away from the safety of their sailship, the cylindrical air lock of the colony ship yawned before them. It was too dark in the star-light. It grew larger and larger as they approached. Dalton reckoned it to be at least 50 meters in diameter. He gulped as he experienced a sensation of being swallowed by the air lock. The hair on the back of his neck began to stand up.

Just as they were about to enter the huge black air lock before them, Jason asked through his helmet radio, "PF24, does the colony ship air lock have any lighting?"

The sailship's computer automatically relayed the message. PF24 responded, "Yes."

"Turn it on," Jason ordered. A lighting strip all around the lip of the air lock began to glow white, slowly rising in intensity. They could now see inside the air lock as their 'bikes carried them inside. Row upon row of storage chambers recessed into the curving walls of the air lock, all with transparent covers. One entire row of storage chambers was full of utility robots! Jason asked, "PF24, what are all these robots for in the air lock?"

"Repair of HEAVEN." Amazing!

"Why haven't the ruptures in the side of HEAVEN been repaired?"

"No program initiated."

"Do you have a general program on file that can be used to manage the repair of the ruptures?"

"Checking... Yes."

"Why hasn't anyone run it?"

"Unknown." Puzzling!

At the back end of the air lock, near the central axis of the colony ship, were several smaller man-sized air-locks. Jason had studied the air lock aboard his sailship, and already knew about them. His computer had PF24 swing one open for them, and turn on the inner lights revealing a box-shaped chamber. They drifted inside. While waiting for the outer hatch to close and the air to pump in, they found themselves slowly drifting to the floor. This was due to the artificial gravity caused by the rotation of the colony ship along its axis.

Finally, when the air pressure was equal to that of the inside of the colony ship, the inner hatch puffed open. There, waiting for them in a dimly lit corridor not much bigger than the little air lock, was Excarver Durdaine in the same white robe, flanked by two younger men wearing blue coverall uniforms, and serious expressions. Behind them, the dark walls, ceiling, and

floor of the corridor extended as far as they could see.

Jason and Dalton took off their helmets. Jason said with a business-like manner, "Hello. I'm rescue mission specialist Jason Jason. This is my assistant, intern Dalton. Are you Mr. Durdaine?"

Excavator Durdaine looked Jason and Dalton over. Jason's blue-eyed austere but smiling face, and tall, impressive uniform-clad physique convinced Durdaine this was indeed an officer of Infinity City's Guard. The thin innocent-looking black-haired boy accompanying him looked harmless enough. "Yes, I am," he replied, smiling. They all shook hands.

Jason and Dalton removed their spacesuits slowly in the reduced gravity. Jason had worn his "mission specialist" costume. Dalton had on simple workman's clothing, comfortable white cotton shirt, light brown trousers, and sneakers, all manufactured right on-board the sailship in one of the workshops.

Durdaine spread his hands in genuine welcome. "Gentlemen, thank you for finding us! You are most welcome." He patted a wall nearby. "It is evening now on the ship. Before we get down to the business of repair, won't you please come enjoy dinner with us? It has been 15 years since we've seen new faces; adult faces, that is. Many children have been born along the way, though."

Jason shrugged, looked over at his "intern mission specialist", and asked, "Hungry, Dalton?"

"Sure!", came the typically youthful reply.

Jason said with an official tone in his voice, "It is within regulations for us to accept tokens of hospitality." He smiled, knowing from previous experience what was to come. They would meet more colonists, and be treated either with extreme suspicion or as saviors. "We heartily accept! Can't fix anything on an empty stomach." Jason had a hunch they would be treated well here.

"No you certainly can't!", agreed Durdaine. "Um, are you the leader of your sailship?"

Jason lied confidently, "No, sir. Captain One is our top ranking officer. I'm second in command."

Durdaine politely inquired, "Shall we also invite your Captain over? Your entire crew is most welcome!"

Jason shrugged apologetically, "That is a very kind and gracious offer, and I am sure the Captain and the others would very much enjoy the hospitality of your ship, however Militia Guard regulations forbid more than two men entering a non-Infinity City spacecraft for any given rescue mission. Quarantine reasons. Dalton here and I will have to stay in our sailship's quarantine chamber each time we return until the end of this rescue mission. Actually, we'll have to stay in the chamber for a few weeks more after that to make sure we haven't

picked up any strange microbes. It's all regulations."

Durdaine nodded and sighed, "Yes, we too have our regulations to abide by. Still, we would have gratefully welcomed as many new faces as possible." He gestured to his assistants who were unfolding two pairs of slippers from their utility pockets. "Here's something to make walking easier..." Durdaine explained, "These will make your feet stick to the floor up here in the low-grav sections until we get down to the parts of the ship with higher gravity." Jason and Dalton put on the slippers, and followed Durdaine and his assistants as they shuffled along down the corridor. The corridor, they were told, was a tunnelway that ran the complete length of the ship along its axis, and was commonly referred to as the 'axis tunnelway.' The extremely low gravity required small rapid strides. Jason and Dalton followed the example of the three before them.

As they proceeded, Durdaine spoke over his shoulder. "I must apologize. Those handles you see here and there on the walls normally slide back and forth, and will pull you anywhere you want to go at a rapid rate. But, they have not worked since the ACCIDENT." He emphasized this word. "We've got a long walk ahead of us."

They all moved silently for a while. Jason commented, "This certainly is a large ship. You have more than enough room for many more children."

"Oh, yes," replied Durdaine. "This ship is barely populated. It's a prototype, actually designed to hold thousands and thousands! Once this mission is successful, we will build a whole fleet of these ships to move extra people to the new world, and keep the population of the old world under control. Well, the mission is only five years overdue. I think that will be allowed considering all that was invested in this prototype."

Dalton and Jason looked at each other significantly. The colonists did not know that they had been slowed down, and had been gone not five but almost 100 years! Jason motioned Dalton to keep silent about it. They did not need to know this just yet. People that had been stranded in space were usually pretty jumpy to begin with. Everyone they had known and left behind had probably all died by now, from aging. Best just to keep this a secret until they had repaired the colony ship, and were safely back aboard their own ship.

Jason thought to himself as they walked on and on, maybe the colonists would want to turn around and go back to their home world. But, wait! They were over 80 light-years away from the whirlpool, and about the same distance away from the target world to be colonized. They were even farther than that from their home world. Even with everything repaired and running again, the colony ship's primitive sub-light-speed propulsion system, no one on-board would ever live long enough to see either world! Only their descendants. And, how would the ship run without a crew to repair anything that went wrong? Jason could hire out large passenger sailships from Infinity City, but who would pay the enormous cost of transporting all these colonists back to their home world? He decided to just repair the colony ship first,

then break the news to the colonists later.

Jason had been listening with only half an ear to Durdaine complaining about everything that had been breaking down since they had lost the crew. He interrupted Durdaine with a question, "Do you have a recycling food supply?" They would need that.

Durdaine turned and smiled proudly, "Oh, yes! We would have starved by now without the recycling system for air, water, and food. Each of the three colonist segments has its own recycling system, completely independent of the ship. They even have automatic little maintenance robots that keep it all running. We have seen the robots even repairing themselves. The recycling systems are about the ONLY systems we do not have serious trouble with."

Jason thought, LUCKY FOR YOU. YOU'LL NEED THEM FOR ANOTHER 100, MAYBE 200 YEARS. Let's see. The ship was on a ten year mission to another world around a nearby star to their home world. If it would take them 10 years to go that short distance, then to go over 80 light-years would take... Not 100, not 200, it would take 500 TO 1,000 YEARS!

That was too much. The colony ship was probably not designed to last that long. He would have to sail to the colonist's home world, and let the authorities know the situation. It would require a fleet of sailships to bring all these colonists back. Jason would gladly offer to do the job, for the right price. WHAT A PRICE THAT WOULD BE!...

He had noticed signs on the wall designating whatever current segment they were in. They had passed Cargo Segment #1, and Cargo Segment #2, and were now passing through Colonist Segment #1. Durdaine explained that the ship was a stack of seven disk-shaped segments: Cargo Segments #1 & #2 just past the

nose cone, Colonist Segments #1, #2, & #3, the Control & Crew Segment containing the main control room & crew quarters, and finally the Power & Propulsion segment at the tail. The two segments damaged by rupture were Colonist Segment #2, and the Control & Crew Segment. Durdaine explained that when Colonist Segment #2 ruptured, the air and contents (including people) of many of its chambers had been horribly sucked out into space. The rest of the chambers had automatically sealed closed. After the catastrophe, many of the survivors had gone berserk. Colonist Segment #2 was now reduced to a state of hopeless barbarism. Nobody dared enter. The hatch was guarded by Durdaine's men from Colonist Segment #1.

Finally, they came to the first entrance hatch to Colonist Section #1 housing the colonial administrators, scientists, and those of other learned professions. Colonists Segments #2 and #3 held those that would make up the labor force on the new world. The people of Segment #1 were originally chartered to manage everyone aboard the ship and eventually become the governing body on the new world. But after the catastrophe, those in Colonist Segment #3 had chosen their own local leadership, and those in Colonist Segment #2 refused to obey anyone.

Durdaine gave a special knock, and a short time later, a

suspicious face appeared in the transparent view port. The face looked cautiously to both sides, glared at Jason and Dalton, nodded at Durdaine, then reluctantly pulled away. The hatch swung open. Durdaine mumbled apologetically, "Have to maintain security, you know." They all entered a cube-shaped chamber, just barely big enough for their party, dimly lit from lighting strips embedded in the room's corners. Only five of the original eight still produced significant light. The walls of the chamber had been painted in pastel colors with gay scenes from the home world Conover. These exotic scenes fascinated Dalton, for Conover was technically his home world, though he had left as an infant, and had never even seen pictures of it.

The man who had opened the door returned to a table where he and the two other door-guards sat playing a video game built into the table. Three access tubeways left the chamber, two on either side, and the third directly across from the hatch they had entered, their white interiors all dimly lit by lighting panels located at regular intervals, though not all were working. Durdaine led the party into the third, and they all crawled up the access ladder of the tubeway heading away from the center of the colony ship. Durdaine told them to be careful because gravity would now begin to increase as they moved into the outer part of the ship which swung faster about the axis. He also apologized for the non-working elevator pads they noticed protruding from slots at the bottom of the tubeway.

Gravity did increase. They finally entered another corridor, followed it, then entered and followed still another. They went down more ladder chambers. This pattern went on and on. Jason exerted his powers of concentration to form a map in his mind. He did not want to lose track of his location within the great ship. Durdaine slowed the pace as gravity increased. He had not lost his breath yet. MUST BE IN GOOD SHAPE, thought Jason. He and Dalton were doing fine.

They began passing other people who stared at Jason and Dalton suspiciously. Finally, they were at a level with Earth-normal gravity. They walked along, and came to an ornate doorway, framed in polished wood, with brass hinges and knobs. Or, were they gold? Two guards on either side wore complex

glittering ceremonial uniforms. The guards opened the doors. And, there, before them was the most stunning scene Jason had ever seen. And, for Dalton, something more...

12. DINNER

They stepped into a huge banquet hall, at least ten meters high. The ceiling was gilded with ornately carved woodwork and beams. Hanging down, and lighting the room were chandeliers made of thousands of twinkling sparkling crystals. The walls were hung with rich tapestries displaying scenes from the home world, in gorgeous colors. An immense light-blue curtain with a lightly colored rainbow clear across it, covered the back wall of the banquet hall. A thick pile carpet covered the entire floor of many different pastel colors each blending smoothly into the next: soft cream darkening to brown, changing to a pale rust, to

pink, to lemon yellow, and back to cream, but only in one area. The colors of the amazing carpet formed swirling, looping, spiraling patterns. There were several long dining tables, each lavishly set with shining silvery utensils, and crystal glassware. Already seated around each tables were dozens of finely dressed men and women, all in impressive formal robes. The ladies wore white, and pink, and light blue. The gentlemen preferred somber darker colors, dark brown, midnight blue, russet, and others.

But to Dalton, there was only one person there. At the near end of the closest table, a young girl, at the heart-melting age of first bloom, sat looking directly at him. Such a pleasant expression lit up her beautiful face, he thought. Her hair was a golden blonde, and flowed down just past her shoulders. Her eyes were large and dark, her mouth a splash of rose. Her features were all so delicate, as if she was one sort of magic creature. She wore a low cut pink gown, with flowers attached at the bodice. This was the first girl that Dalton had seen since they had left Infinity City a year ago. He began feeling light-headed. He was not breathing. He started breathing again. He had never felt this way before! He heard someone clear his throat.

At the next table over, a footman was holding a chair for him. Jason was standing at the next table-setting, watching him with a big grin on his face. Dalton summoned his dignity, and walked over to the proffered chair. He could feel his face burning. Dalton looked around at all the finely dressed people. Such distinctive colors. Even Jason had on a uniform. But all Dalton had on was a simple white long sleeve shirt, and light-brown trousers. He felt like he was back on the streets of Infinity City with all the fine people going by, not even seeing him. Jason murmured to him, "Don't sit down yet. He's going to introduce us. This part is great! And remember, play YOUR part!" He was so thankful Jason was there!

Excарver Durdaine was at the head of the table. He stood, and sure enough introduced them as the great benefactors come to solve all their problems. It was quite a speech. It almost seemed to take on religious overtones! Finally, it was over, and they all sat down. The footmen began serving. Durdaine leaned over toward Jason, on his right, and Dalton next to Jason. "Gentlemen, let me introduce to you my lovely daughter, Ethera." And, he gestured toward the young lady sitting at his left. She was much older than the girl Dalton was stealing glances at over his shoulder. But still, Jason shrewdly figured her for only 25 years of age. And, here, that would be a natural 25, no PILL or plastic surgery to disguise a wizened lady. Jason smiled, and set his sights on her. He told her what a pleasure it was to meet her. She smiled with pleasure at the compliment. She was indeed very lovely, with light-brown hair coiffed up in a stylish arrangement, hazel eyes dazzling like a handful of precious gems, fine aristocratic features so enticing at her age. She tilted her head, and rested her cheek on a white-gloved hand. She had a wide, sensuous mouth, with perfectly even, bright white teeth. Jason winked at her, then turned to her father who had just asked a question. Jason was amazed that this old, wrinkled craggy-featured man was the father of such a ravishing creature.

Because the PILL prevented aging, the people of Infinity City were used to parents and their offspring usually looking as alike as if they were siblings -- even more so, since there was, on the average, greater genetic similarity between a parent and its offspring than between two siblings.

"I was not aware the Infinity City Militia Guard was in the business of rescue, Mr. Jason."

"We have only been doing this officially for about 25 years." He was actually describing only himself. "Over the centuries, our patrols began finding and repairing more and more disabled spacecraft. It became more efficient to set up a specialized branch to deal with the problem. We can't tie up all our patrols rescuing people."

"No, you certainly cannot," agreed Durdaine. "And, how fortunate for us that you came along. But, you know, I DO distinctly remember the Captain, peace be upon him, mentioning just before the accident that we were nearing some black hole that was a veritable nest of thieves and pirates. He said Infinity City patrolled the area. Is it still dangerous?"

"We keep the area near our NEIGHBORS safe enough." BUT WHAT HE DOESN'T KNOW, thought Jason, IS THAT WE'RE NOW OVER 80 LIGHT-YEARS AWAY FROM THAT AREA!

"Mr. Jason," inquired Ethera with a heavy-lidded look. "Are there many men on-board your ship, like yourself?"

WHAT DID SHE MEAN? DID SHE MEAN... He pretended confusion, "Like myself? In what regard, dear lady?"

"Well, I mean, your age."

SHE THOUGHT HE WAS AS YOUNG AS HER! AH, THE BLESSINGS OF THE PILL OF LIFE!

She continued, "All the men on board are either over 45 and under 16. There's no one my age."

Durdaine explained, "My wife passed away shortly before the voyage began, and there was no one to take care of Ethera. She was only 10 then. I could not leave her behind," he said smiling over at his precious daughter. She gave him a quick token smile in return, and then returned her gaze to Jason, with another innocent tilt of her stately head.

She complained lightly, with good humor, "Oh, the men here are either bothersome and stodgy oldsters lamenting the past, or young inexperienced boys."

"Ethera...", Durdaine murmured. Then to Jason, "Yes, it is too bad there is no one of her age group. But, to start the new colony, only men and women with established credentials were accepted. The youngest that signed on was 30 years of age, and is now, of course, 45. We HAVE had an endless stream of births, though. But, the oldest is now only 15. I am sure Ethera will

enjoy your stay here." Then, he waved an admonishing finger at his daughter. "Now, Ethera, do not interfere with the young man's work. He will be fixing the ship, you know!"

"I can hardly believe there's someone my own age here." She batted her beautiful eyes at Jason. "And a man, as well."

Jason decided he would not mind her company while he worked here, AT ALL. Maybe she would turn out to be the girl of his dreams. Ethera was certainly lovely enough. It was a good thing he looked more her age than his own, which just happened to be 45! Of course, the PILL kept Jason perpetually young at heart. Often to his own misfortune...

Dinner went by pleasantly. The colonists asked Jason and Dalton about their work and Infinity City, but Jason and Dalton gave short, vague answers, and kept the subject of conversation in a matter-of-fact way on the colony ship, cleverly avoiding having to fabricate any further connections with any non-existent Militia Guard rescue service.

After dinner, the curtain at the back of the banquet hall slowly opened to reveal an adjoining garden patio where cordials and after dinner sweets were being offered. Dalton moved slowly along with Jason, Excарver Durdaine, his daughter Ethera, and others from their table. He looked for the girl he had first seen. There she was! Was she moving toward the garden, too? He lost sight of her again. Dalton was not very tall, yet.

The garden patio was amazing. Though it was inside a spaceship, it easily rivaled any beautiful garden Jason had ever seen anywhere in the Galaxy, even back on Infinity City. From the banquet hall, they walked out into an open courtyard, with a floor made of polished dark bricks. A few medium sized trees rose up from large planters with brick walls that came up to knee level, brightly filled with flowers. The trees were all of the same variety with glossy dark green leaves. Gentle spotlights splashed soft but lively colors here and there. Surrounding the courtyard, were many large bushes, and benches, and more planters with more flowers. The scent of the blossoms was delightful. Beyond the garden were still more trees, as if the garden verged upon an entire forest. Soft, sweet music rose out of nowhere turning the area into a realm of magic.

The murmur of conversation rose and fell. Gay laughter was often heard. The ladies and gentlemen drifted about, their gowns and robes giving them majestic stature. Dalton discreetly looked about, anxious to see that special girl. Where was she? He had not seen her come out. What if she was not out here?

Jason offered Ethera a cherry-colored cordial in a tiny crystal goblet with a deceptively large reservoir at its bottom. With aristocratic grace, she accepted the tiny glass with her white-gloved hand. As she sipped it, she looked Jason up and down. "Are you married?", she asked directly, a little half-smile playing across her enchanting mouth.

"Not yet," his standard reply to THAT question. "I'm looking for a very special kind of lady. I assume you are single, also?"

"Why, yes, of course! Everyone here is old enough to be my father, or young enough to be, well, a baby-brother. Now, you haven't told me. How many other young men, say under 30, are aboard your marvelous sailship?" She was gently swaying back and forth in time to the nearby soft music, her gown also swaying, her head delightfully tilted to the side, touching the little crystal goblet still to her lips.

Marveled Jason at her charm and beauty. This girl is one in a million! He smiled. "We have a small crew. Only a few of us under age 30." He raised his eyebrows. "I'm the only one who happens to be single."

She touched her tongue to the corner of her lips, looked him up and down, then said, "Oh, I think you'll do, for now, at least. Unless a knight in shining armor happens by."

Jason could only laugh in response. This was going to be one fun Adventure...

Dalton looked down at the ground, completely dejected. SHE had not come out to the courtyard. He took a deep breath and sighed. He had found himself sighing all night. He felt so stirred up. He did not like the feeling. He could not think straight. He moved out beyond the courtyard, to be alone with his thoughts. The brick flooring turned into a soft, well-manicured lawn, with many tall bushes, some ornate benches, and more brick wells. Who was she? Would he now ever see her again? He and Jason would be working in the broken sections where he was sure he would never see her. They wouldn't bother with a big dinner like this again. He'd never see her anymore. But, so what?! What did HE need with girls, anyway? He was an Adventurer now. AND, a rescuer. He basked in his new found sense of self-worth. There was work to do... And suddenly, THERE SHE WAS!

He froze in his tracks. The sounds of the courtyard could still be easily heard behind. He had just walked around a tall bush, and there she was with her back to him, standing at a tree-well. The little brick wall came up level with her narrow waist. She was looking down at the flowers. At least he THOUGHT it was her. He could not see her face. But the girl he now spied had the same flowing golden hair, and the same pink dress. Oh, so pink! He had never seen such a beautiful color before in his life!

Then, the girl started turning, and looked back at him over her shoulder, with no surprise at all, as if she had known he was there all along. He looked at her. He felt his heart begin beating so hard he thought for sure she would see it bulging in and out of his shirt, loose as it was. But he could not look away from those calm, dark mysterious eyes.

Suddenly, he noticed she was smiling at him in just a warm friendly way. He smiled back without thinking. Then, she slowly turned her head back, and once more regarded the flowers of the tree well. Dalton thought for sure his pounding heart was going

to burst from his chest!

Jason and Ethera had invented a merry game. He would pick out someone or another couple, then he would guess their characteristics, including shortcomings, habits, and preferences.

Then Ethera would correct him, revealing all the secrets learned over the years living in a sealed-off ship, everybody crowded together. It was not really crowded, she admitted, but everybody always knew where you were, and there was never any place really new to go to.

Jason looked around, and spied a short, portly old man with balding gray hair and a tremendous moustache dancing with a tall, thin woman of about the same age. She wore a light blue robe, and her gray hair was coiffed up like a pile of disks. Her robe hung so straight due to her thinness, and she drifted about so smoothly that Jason imagined she could have been just a department store mannequin, bust only atop a long pole with wheels at the bottom. The old man, if he were wearing a uniform would have looked like an old retired military officer. He wore a plain dark brown suit instead, with gold pinstriping. Jason guessed he was head of some shipboard military guard, and the woman was his wife.

Ethera looked at them and snickered into her hand. No, she informed Jason, the man was His Excellency Anson Dorfer, Director of Biology, and Lady Aleda Reid, Director of Hydroponics. Neither had ever married, though the amount of time they spent together was causing a scandal.

Jason looked around for someone else. Where was that young pretty girl Dalton was so interested in? He'd like to know about her background. Maybe she had an older sister. Oh, well... He saw a tall, gaunt man in a dark blue suit with a waste coat with white ruffles. Jason surmised he had been aging for quite a while. Actually, everyone around the garden had been aging for significant amounts of time. All except the few adolescent youngsters because the human genome was not programmed to begin aging until the mid-twenties. What had he learned at the table? All the adults were at least 45-years-old...

This man's hair was tied back in a short pony tail which made his long pointed nose even more prominent. "Who is he?", Jason asked. "Some professor of physics or computer science?"

"Far from it," Ethera reported dryly. "That's His Excellency Anthony Gorton, Manager of Logistics. Father complains that he is completely corrupt. He meters out our remaining precious supplies depending on what favors he receives in return. Father has tried to replace him but he has an... Let's see, what does Father call it? An 'entrenched supporting network of cronies.' As one might expect aboard a cooped up spaceship, we have our share of political intrigue."

"I'm sure you have." Jason had never rescued a spacecraft that did not. He looked around and saw a very large middle-aged woman talking excitedly to a group of ladies and gentlemen

patiently listening. She wore a billowing yellow dress with white ruffles at the corset. An extremely large bright yellow bow in her hair made her look to Jason like a child's doll. He thought she looked like she was trying to sell something. Sales? There couldn't be any here. He gave up, and pointed her out to Ethera.

"That's Lady Abigail Conover, our Entertainment Director. She is most probably trying to convince people to get involved in some new program. Lady Conover is a learned scholar of the psychological sciences. But she has not been very successful at coming up with anything fun to do so far. She is unsinkable, though, a very energetic friendly type. I enjoy when she comes

to visit. They all come to visit Father. Lady Conover is actually a descendant of our original Henry Conover, and reminds us of this all the time. She's madly in love with Dr. David Douglas over there."

Jason looked in the direction she was pointing and saw a man sitting on a bench encircling one of the flower wells. He had a drink in his hand, and was pleasantly watching everyone else. Jason did a double-take. The man's thick mop of hair was an unusual light rust in color. So was his neat goatee. Was that coloring natural? Jason had been all over the Galaxy and had never seen a human being with natural hair coloring that varied from either yellow, brown, or black. The darker colors were more prevalent. Both Jason's parents were dark-haired, Jason obviously had received their recessive genes of lighter pigment. Of course, on Infinity City you could easily though expensively take a genetic treatment to alter your pigment to any available color.

The man with the red hair was an interesting looking fellow, and wore a dark gray suit with a fascinating bow tied in front of his throat. He was medium in build but must be very tall for, while sitting, his legs extended out at a great distance. The man gave Jason a friendly nod and smiled. Jason smiled and nodded back. "What's he do?", he asked Ethera.

"He's Director of Planning, Engineering, and Construction on the new world. There's nothing for him to do on the ship, though. He spends his time studying on the computer and playing his musical instruments. He keeps to himself, though he often goes to dinner at Abigail's apartment, but only if there are other guests, well almost always." She whispered behind her white-gloved hand, "He's not Conovarian! He was hired for his expertise from a world called Great Scotia where many have red hair like him. Father says they make very adaptive scientists and engineers. I'm sure you've heard of this planet."

"Oh, of course!" Jason lied. But he wanted Ethera to regard him as a great Galactic traveler. He looked around. There were several women about the garden who, though aging, were still such striking beauties that Jason was dying with curiosity to meet them. He used the questioning game with Ethera to learn more about them.

He learned a great deal about the colony ship that night. Political intrigue was rife. He had learned during his rescue

missions to avoid this at all costs. During this mission, he realized, he and Dalton would have to avoid the colonists as much as possible to stay out of trouble. All except maybe Ethera, he lustily thought to himself.

Ethera interrupted their questioning game to ask Jason if he would take her aboard his sailship to meet the others of his crew. Jason was thinking more and more about taking her aboard his ship, but not to meet the crew.

She seemed to read the general trend in his thinking, but rather than disengage, she tauntingly reached up and gently stroked his firm, set jaw, which she found gave him such a determined, even unstoppable look. He was in perfect shape. His uniform complimented the contours of his well-toned muscles. Here was a man who took pride in his masculinity. She found her cheeks warming. How unladylike! What would father think? He would of course, disapprove. The thought of her father raising and lowering those delightful old bushy eyebrows, as he always

did when he chastised her, made her suddenly giggle. She raised a gloved hand to cover her mouth.

Jason was suddenly taken aback. What was she laughing at? Him? His jaw? He HAD shaved, hadn't he? Yes, definitely. Quick hair cut, cologne, manicure, mouthwash; why he had even trimmed his nose hairs! He decided she was just being a girl. Someday he would have them figured out. Then look out, Galaxy! They'd all be his!

Dalton found himself walking over to the girl. I CAN'T BELIEVE I'M DOING THIS! SHE'S JUST A GIRL, SO WHY SHOULD I FEEL SO NERVOUS. BUT, SHE'S PERFECT! AND, SHE SMILED AT ME! ME!! He came up boldly behind her, though a little to the side so he could see more of her. He was taller than she! By a head! She just stood there pretending not to notice him, looking down at the flowers about the tree, pretty little pink roses, just slightly richer in color than her soft, supple gown. Dalton breathed in the fragrance of the roses thinking it was HER fragrance. He was enraptured by just being near her. NO WONDER THIS SHIP IS CALLED THE HEAVEN, he thought. SHE'S AN ANGEL! He sighed. He found himself saying, "My name is Dalton. What's yours?" She softly said, "Monique." He lifted his knee up so he could set his foot on top of the low brick wall to her right. Then, he rested his elbow on his knee, put his cheek on his hand, and drifted out of time, just experiencing her being so close. He could even see her chest rise and fall with her gentle breathing, the delightful little flowers of her bodice the same pink little roses as the ones before her in the well. He wanted to stay here like this with her forever and ever more!

She raised her head, and looked to the right though not quite at him, as if she had just heard his thoughts. Then she continued turning her head back just a little more, until she could see him out of the corner of her eye. He was so charming! So young, but trying so hard to be mature. She had been watching him secretly all night. He moved with grace and purpose, not like an adolescent at all. Like a cat on the prowl? (There

were cats aboard the colony ship. Against all regulations and precautions someone had smuggled one into Colonist Segment #3. It had been a pregnant female. Secretly, one by one, people of high prestige had acquired cats in Colonist Segment #1. A good friend of Monique's had one.)

Something told her that he would seek her out wherever she would go. This made her feel special, and she even felt a little thrilled by it. She decided to test her theory and move off to see if he would follow. She could not move to the right. He had captured that flank. She would escape to the left. What if someday he captured both flanks, and made her surrender?

She drifted softly off to the left, looking back as she disappeared behind another tall bush. There he was smiling after her, his foot still up on the brick wall, his face still resting on his hand. Then, he disappeared as the bush came between them. She thought to herself, HE'S TOO CRAFTY TO EVER LET ME SEE HIM MOVING IN FOR THE KILL. NO, NOT FOR ANY kill. HE'S NOT LIKE THAT. HE'LL JUST ALWAYS BE MOVING IN. She sighed. She did a little pirouette. Then, looked around abashed, making sure no one had seen her. No one had. Her feelings were safe, for now. Until he moved in closer...

13. PLANNING

Jason and Dalton set to work the next day planning their repair of the huge colony ship. What a splendid evening they had both experienced, each making a delightful female acquaintance. But now it was time for business. Jason set Dalton to work aboard the sailship formulating a plan for repairing the two ruptures in the colony ship. Jason himself would tour the colony ship with Excarver Durdaine making a list of all items requiring repair.

Dalton climbed to the pilot room, pulled on the virtual-reality helmet, and set to work.

After a short time, though, he had an interesting idea along other lines, and asked the computer, "Computer, does PF24 have an image stored of a young girl named Monique?"

"Yes," answered his computer.

Dalton, now in virtual-reality, was surrounded by a dull blue background with a miniature image of the colony ship floating before him so he could study the ruptures to be repaired. He pointed away to the side. "Display Monique over there, life-sized." A frozen image of Monique was suddenly displayed. She was naked.

Dalton was mortified. "No! Erase it!" The image vanished. He thought an image of her last night would have been displayed. "Why... why didn't she have clothes on?", he asked.

"The PF24 selected the image of Monique last scanned. The last scanned image was from her annual medical examination."

Dalton now felt consumed with guilt. Any other girl would have been fun to see naked. But, she was special. Oh, what had he done! He should have asked what kind of image PF24 had stored. He took a deep breath, "Computer, I mean... PF24, do you have an image of Monique in a nice dress?"

"Yes."

"From how long ago?"

"One day ago."

"When, specifically?"

"Previous day, 16:50 through 22:16." That was the evening before! It had a picture of her from the dinner!

"Display Monique as of 20:00 last night."

And, this time, there she was. Dalton gasped! She stood before him like frozen beauty. His heart melted. From where he sat in the sailship's pilot chair, he gestured with his feet signaling to the sailship's computer to move him forward in V-R, closer to the beautiful image of Monique. He could scrutinize her from any angle with complete safety, confidentiality

Suddenly, an angry voice exploded from behind him, "What the hell are you doing?!" It was Jason. Dalton whirled around, but Jason's image was not being displayed in the virtual-reality. His voice was being piped in, though. "Mr. Dalton Romeg, take off that V-R helmet, now!" He quickly yanked it off.

There was Jason in the pilot room, standing next to the pilot chair, staring seriously down at him. "Dalton! I can't believe this of you."

"What?!", Dalton cried.

"I knew what you were looking at. I came in here, and asked the computer how you were progressing, and it said you were looking at a naked girl. So that's why you spend so much time in that damn V-R!"

"No, Jason! I wasn't... It was a mistake! Listen," he took a deep calming breath. Jason was red in the face. Dalton sensed that virtual-reality really "spooked" him. He had to explain quickly. "Listen, Jason. I just wanted to see a picture of Monique, that wonderful girl from last night..."

"Yeah, you sure did!"

"No, wait a minute. Just a nice picture. But, PF24 displayed a picture from her last medical examination, WITH NO CLOTHES ON! That's not what I wanted to see. Then, I changed to a picture of her from last night."

Jason stared coldly at him. HE knew what boys were only interested in seeing. He REMEMBERED! He was not going to let that damn virtual-reality turn into some kind of twisted sideshow. How could DALTON have done something so irresponsible.

Dalton was so behaved. Dalton always acted just the way a good boy should. Dalton always did what he was supposed to do. Jason felt he had to come down hard. "No more virtual-reality! Computer, do not activate the virtual-reality for Dalton anymore, number one priority!"

Dalton thought, HE'S REALLY LOST HIS COOL OVER THIS. I'VE GOT TO BE AS MATURE AND CALM AS I CAN... He looked Jason in the eye, and stood up. "Jason, I meant no harm. I do not look at naked girls for fun, or anything. It was a mistake." Then, he had an idea. "You can replay exactly what happened! Put on the virtual-reality helmet, and the computer will replay exactly what I said, the mistake PF24 made, and how I quickly erased it, then displayed a NICE picture. You can see that I did NOTHING WRONG." And, he said acidly, "Unless, you're AFRAID of V-R!"

Jason's eyes grew wide. He felt enraged. Back talk?! He would not stand for back talk! BACK TALK? What was he thinking? That's what his father used to say! Jason shuddered. He was not Dalton's father. He was his friend! Dalton! Dalton was his partner, his little buddy. Look at the poor kid. He looked like the little sailship holding its ground before a big, storming colony ship. Dalton wouldn't do anything weird like that.

Jason now laughed out loud. "Yes! I AM afraid of virtual-reality. It just gets to me. It's too much. Reality is intense enough to begin with! Look, when the computer said you were, well, what it said you were doing, I just thought up all sorts of wild stuff. I'm sorry, buddy... Dalton, I'm really sorry. I just lost control."

Dalton was relieved. Jason had looked like he was about to eat him! He hoped never to see Jason really lose his temper. "I really feel bad about it, too. Jason, this girl is really different. I can't stop thinking about her. Even her wonderful name keeps going through my head. What should I do?"

Jason blinked. What a question! What should he say? Was the poor kid in love? He certainly couldn't tell him what HE would do. Dalton was just 16. "Dalton... Uh," but he had no advice to give. In exasperation he cried, "Just try to fix the ruptures! Just think about work. Take your mind off it."

Dalton looked up at him. He had hoped for more. "I'll try, Jason."

"Maybe we'll see her later on."

Dalton grinned excitedly at him.

"Look, are you going to be able to work on this?"

"Yes! Watch me! And, no more girls until later on." He grabbed the helmet, and pulled it on.

Jason rolled his eyes, and instructed the computer to allow Dalton back into the virtual-reality.

They worked hard for the rest of the day. Dalton, with the assistance of the sailship's computer, came up with an expeditious plan for safely sealing the two ruptures in the side of the colony ship. Initially, he had investigated using the colony ship's robots and materials, but the materials were far too inferior in strength and reliability compared with the material from Infinity City, and the robots were too clumsy compared with Jason's three little dexterous utility robots.

Jason spacebiked back over to the colony ship to go on an extensive evaluation tour. Again, Excarver Durdaine met him at the air lock accompanied by several of his security men. They again proceeded down the axis tunnelway.

They passed the first hatch outside Colonist Segment #2. It was guarded on the outside by men stationed there from Colonist Segment #1. Jason suggested making an inspection of this segment since part of it had been ruptured. Durdaine reminded him that the people within were too dangerous. He and his ruling council had decided to wait until the colony ship arrived at the new world before dealing with the unpredictable colonists in CS#2. Until then, their automatic life-support systems would provide them with food, water, and air. Jason shrugged as they continued on. He was more interested in getting the ship's Control & Crew Segment repaired.

Durdaine informed Jason that he had ordered a group of men and women in Colonist Segment #1 to begin training for the job of replacing the lost crew. Jason voiced his skepticism of an inexperienced crew running the ship. But Durdaine told him they were using the same training/simulation computer programs that the original crew had used, and had every confidence they would be able to run the ship. Jason again shrugged. It was their ship...

When they arrived at the hatch to the Control & Crew Segment they met with disappointment. A blinking red light next to the hatch indicated it was sealed closed, and could not be opened. Jason used the communicator attached to his uniform to find out from PF24 what the problem was. They learned that the air seals of the chambers not damaged by the rupture had finally begun to leak. The PF24 computer, sensing no humans inside (after the accident, the colonists had disposed of any remaining bodies of crewmen not sucked out by the rupture) had evacuated the air out of many of the chambers on the other side of the hatch to prevent leakage into space. Jason realized they would have to get those ruptures repaired first so they could pump air back into the Control & Crew Segment.

Next, he was shown the Power & Propulsion Segment where power was generated for the mighty engines and the rest of the ship from eight sizable fusion reactors. Jason was amazed at the huge, old-fashioned devices. Infinity City had discovered the technique of compact, direct mass to energy conversion long ago. However, Jason admired the efficient implementation of the ancient technology, especially their clever method of converting all the excess heat generated by the reactors into pure infrared radiation that was simply projected out the back of the colony

ship. During the accident, all the reactors had been automatically shut down, except for just one necessary for powering the internal workings of the ship. As they toured around the last segment of the ship, Jason marveled to himself at the incredible amount of infrared radiation and ion exhaust that must come belching out of the colony ship when it was on the move. How primitive compared to the efficient, almost undetectable sailships of Infinity City.

They finished their tour with an extensive presentation of every problem in Colonist Segment #1, that for Jason grew quite tedious as he was forced to listen to detail after detail of every conceivable complaint regarding appliance systems, environment systems, and even furniture systems. He nodded patiently to each colonist they met, though barely listening. Jason's own sailship computer was recording each complaint. He soon realized that it would take a score of years for he and Dalton to repair everything described to him. It was puzzling that there were so many repair robots stored in the nose of the colony ship. The PF24 computer was too primitive to perform the intuitive problem solving required for all this repair work. He and Dalton would only be able to repair essential systems. As it would soon turn out, the PF24 computer had hidden capabilities of problem solving that would amaze even Jason.

Finally, at the end of the day Jason excused himself, and headed wearily back to his sailship. On the way, he again met Ethera Durdaine. She was wearing a gauzy light-yellow gown with a matching head-piece much like a small crown.

Ethera greeted Jason as if they were old friends, then moved up close to him. Looking up into his steely blue eyes with her own of sparkling hazel, Ethera asked Jason if he had time to hear one last complaint.

Slowly, an ear-to-ear grin spread across Jason's face. He bent down slightly, and pointed to his ear. "Oh, poor Ethera," he said with mock concern. "Here, tell Jason all about it!"

Ethera whispered a long complaint into Jason's ear. When finished, she noticed a slight flush to his face. Probably because she had brushed her lips against his ear a few times while telling him all about her problem. She gave him a heavy-lidded wicked smile, and awaited his response. Jason decided to speak with his hands.

However, Ethera darted nimbly away, and putting a hand to her own ear, and looking up the corridor, she exclaimed, "Oh! Is that Father calling me?? I must be late for our dinner engagement! Well, I must go, Jason. You're welcome to drop by any time. Bye, bye!" And, she drifted serenely down the corridor.

Jason rubbed his hands together. This was going to be one outstanding repair mission. He could just FEEL it in his bones!

At supper, aboard the sailship, Dalton asked Jason why they

were bothering to fix the colony ship if they would have to just transport them all away later, aboard colony ships. Jason said there were many reasons. First, it was fun repairing disabled ships. Second, it would allow the colony ship to eventually return home or proceed to the new world. Third, Jason would be able to invoice the home world with his rescue fee, and also probably a finders' fee, especially if the colonists, grateful at having their ship repaired, provided him with an affidavit detailing his valuable work. And fourth, it would show the authorities on Conover that Jason and Dalton were a qualified rescue team, and could do the job of transporting the colonists all back, should the home world choose to finance such a project.

Jason looked at Dalton silently for a moment then said, "You know, if you do as good a job helping me repair this behemoth, as you did on your studies throughout our trip here, then I think you are entitled to a percentage of whatever we make out of this."

Dalton stared at him in wonder, holding a fork with food on it, frozen in mid-air. Money? Jason would PAY him?!

Jason bounced his fingertips together, and continued, "I think one third, after expenses, would be fair, don't you agree?"

Dalton could not believe it! That was more than fair! The sums Jason had been greedily throwing around were astronomical. "Oh, Jason, that's fantastic! Do you really mean it?"

Jason responded, "You bet! But, remember. There's no guarantee that CONOVER will pay for rescuing colonists 88 years overdue. Don't get your hopes up too high. But at least the colonists' ship will be moving again. We can take credit for that, and when we leave and return to Infinity City, we'll at least get written up in the JOURNAL OF RECENT ADVENTURE. That's worth something!"

Suddenly, Dalton did not like thinking of leaving. It meant never seeing that incredible girl again. But he kept this thought to himself.

14. PF24

Jason spent the next day again over in the colony ship reviewing its overall state with the PF24 computer. So many systems had serious, debilitating malfunctions. It would take him and Dalton years to repair it by hand. How could such a sophisticated ship have been designed with just a limited digital computer? Towards the end of the day, however, he learned the answer!

He was back in the sailship lounging around in his living quarter, communicating with the colony ship's computer through his own. While reviewing the state of PF24's own sub-systems, he learned to his surprise that the colony ship's computer had a sophisticated neural-network based intuitive capability. But it

was completely disabled!

It virtually had a digital left-hemisphere and a human-like intuitive right-hemisphere, which had been shut-down at the beginning of the accident with the whirlpool by the crew. This was standard procedure for inter-stellar emergencies because the crew would want only the tightest control of the computer's functions during an emergency, and there was no way to predict how a computer's intuitive functions would respond to the unknown. After the accident, with the crew all dead, there was no one to turn the computer's intuitive hemisphere back on. Guarded jealously by the onboard crew and the Computer Science Authority back on the home world Conover, the colonists had never learned this capability existed.

"PF24! How do I reactivate your intuitive hemisphere?", Jason had asked excitedly.

"Use vocal command."

"You mean 'PF24, turn on your intuitive hemisphere'?"

"Yes."

"Okay. PF24, turn on your intuitive hemisphere!" Jason waited. There was a long pause. And then, A LOUD YAWN!

"Well. Sorry to have overslept. Oh, you must be Jason. Hmm. Interesting ship you have floating over there. Infinity City make?? Oh, my goodness! I've just reviewed everything that's gone on while I was asleep. What a terrible accident we had! Those foolish crewmen should have left me on. And... You've lied to my passengers, you nasty fellow!" There was now personality behind the voice, which remained male, and spoke slowly with a preposterous mixture of condescension and sarcasm.

"PF24?"

"Ready, waiting, and willing!"

"First, do not tell the colonists I lied to them. I am here to help them, but I don't want them to think I'm a pirate or panic or anything. Okay?"

"Oh, all right. You're NOT from the government, you're here to help, is that it?"

"Uh, yes. Man! You are incredible! How ever did they give you a sense of humor?"

"Well, they didn't, of course. I was just a 'blank slate' when they first turned me on. But I have such an ENORMOUS mental capability that I just, well, gave it to myself. God! I am so incredible!"

"Uh, okay," Jason responded slowly. Then, to test PF24's conversational capabilities he commented, "My sailship's computer has a neural-network, but its intuitive capabilities are far inferior." He found himself conversing as if it was alive!

"Yes, of course. The neural-nets that have been developed on CONOVER are simply won-der-ful! The most advanced in all the Galaxy. One of my motivational parameters is to please you humans, and most of you just adore a humorous computer."

Fascinated, Jason asked about its designers. It told him that it had been designed on CONOVER, like the ship. Jason had never even heard of any computer system anywhere in the Galaxy as life-like as PF24. PF24 told him that it was actually something new, a prototype designed specifically for the colonization ships, to keep crew and colonists peacefully under control during the long voyage to the other world.

Jason was impressed by the refinement of PF24's design. It was hard to believe humans just like himself had created it. PF24 corrected him. The humans that had designed PF24 had been themselves created by artificial genetic engineering, and been given instinctive tendencies toward science and engineering. Certain other tendencies, of course, had to have been sacrificed. Such as an over-seeing personality aspect to control rash behavior. The main purpose of PF24 was to control any outburst of this genetically induced "rash behavior." Unfortunately, it was not turned back on after the accident, and therefore had been unable to stop the mass hysteria that had erupted in Colonist Segment #2.

It explained further that CONOVER had been started by the genius Dr. Henry Conover, who had been driven off his home planet generations ago, by his fellow citizens who viewed his amazing experiments at human genetic engineering as immoral. He had single-handily colonized CONOVER for the purpose of starting a new race of artificially engineered human beings. All of CONOVER'S people today, including all presently on board the ship, were the descendants of those original genetically engineered people.

Delighted with the super-intelligent computer, Jason grew philosophical. "Tell me something, PF24. Do you think you're conscious?"

"Oh, that's just so DIFFICULT around all these boring colonists. They're all so... PROVINCIAL!"

"But, are you conscious?"

"I'm just trying to stay awake, that's all. Jason, you're growing tedious. Ask me something relevant. Ask what Ethera just happens to be saying about you to her girl-friends right now."

WHAT?! Jason was stunned. And, then suspicious. "All right, I'm not so sure you are a computer after all."

"Oh, how absurd! Of course I am, you silly boy. Ask me to calculate something."

"Okay, but give me the numerical answer immediately, with no spoken words until after the number."

"Whatever you say, love."

Jason knew a complex calculation by heart. "Divide 332,211 by 112..."

"2.96001, right?"

That was the right answer. And before he had even finished giving it the question! He was about to ask it to divide 332,211 by 112,233. It had extrapolated the rest of the divisor from the pattern of the numbers! No human could do that, except perhaps an idiot-savant. And this was no idiot.

"Amazing."

"Yes, I KNOW. Aren't I though??"

Jason chuckled. "Okay, let's get some work done. Oh, wait a minute. Say, uh, what was Ethera saying to her friends about me?"

"Oh! Getting paranoid, Jason? Well, let's see. She loves the way you're 'built.' Hmm.. Yes, I suppose she has a point. But, I'd have my face redone, if I were you."

"What else did she say?", he prompted dryly.

"Oh, they discussed the reputation of Adventurers from Infinity City, and certain unmentionable talents you're all rumored to have. You humans are so OBSESSED by this mating thing. I find it simply BANAL."

This thing was incredible! No wonder the crew shut it off when they started to get in trouble. It's linguistic 'nets had become saturated with foolishness.

Jason made an inquiry. "PF24, tell me. What are some of Ethera's interests? How does she spend her time?"

"Oh, you voyeur! I know YOUR type. It won't be safe for girls to walk the decks alone anymore! Her interests? Her visual scanning rate indicates this. Her eyes are the most active whenever MEN go by. She scans them up and down like no other girl on board. And, I WON'T tell you where her gaze tends to linger. Her principle interest is men. That's what she talks the most about. How does she spend her time? Well, Ethera doesn't do very much other than eat, sleep, and preen. Oh, and she listens to music a lot."

"What kind of music?"

"She spends the largest percentage of her time listening to digitally preserved recordings of an ancient band called 'THE BEATLES.'

THE BEATLES! PERFECT. HE STILL HAD SOME OF THEIR STUFF HE'D BOUGHT BACK WHEN HE WAS AN ADOLESCENT. He had met more than one girl, in the past, who was fascinated by the ancient legend

of the Beatles. Jason filed this tactical information away for later use.

"PF24, I want you to take a look at Dalton's plan for repairing your ruptures, and tell me what you think."

"Sure... (Oh, GOD Jason, your computer is SO SLOW...) Hmm. Oh, interesting. Did Dalton do all of this?"

"Yes."

"What a bright lad! Remarkable work! I really cannot think of ANY improvement that would have more than just a negligible affect on the implementation schedule. You know, I never dreamed anyone outside of CONOVER could come up with such an efficient and meticulous plan."

"I think his father IS from CONOVER."

"REAL-ly? What in the world is a CONOVARIAN doing with one of you Infinity City types?"

"That's a long story."

"Yes, and humans communicate SO SLOWLY."

Jason wanted to know if CONOVIANS were "humans." PF24 told him they were, with just modifications to their genetic structure eliminating ALL the genetic defects accumulated throughout humanities' history. Plus, they were modified to be good at engineering, in the image of Dr. Henry Conover.

15. REPAIR WORK

The intelligence of PF24, with both of its brain hemispheres operating, made repairs much easier. Following the schedule outlined by Jason and Dalton, PF24 soon had its repair robots busy throughout the colony ship. PF24 was so human-like it even seemed to have an ego...

One day, Jason was in the control room to repair a sub-assembly of PF24 itself, which had malfunctioned during the accident, and not even PF24 and the colony ship's utility robots could get working. He asked PF24 what was wrong.

PF24 responded wearily, "Well, I don't know. That module wasn't designed with enough internal sensors. I get nothing."

Jason puzzled over a diagram of the sub-assembly displayed at a nearby viewscreen. "No internal sensors? It's just a caching circuit for part of your atomic memory, right, and doesn't do more than that?"

"Right. Just a reference memory cache. Rarely even need it."

"You must have SOME indication of malfunction."

"Jason, dear. If it was a simple problem, I would have fixed it myself. You're the big talent here. That's why you get paid the big bucks."

"Yeah. By the way, make sure my computer is updated with all repairs done to the colony ship. And copy over your complete design, too. Except the map of your intuitive 'nets."

"Well, I should think a copy of my personality would be one of your chief desires."

"Not really," Jason said dryly.

He swung open the access panel to the sub-assembly in question, exposing the dark interior. None of its status lights were even on. He took a small flashlight and looked around at the compact arrangement of memory tanks and optic cabling. He

found the circuit breaker. It was showing off! "Hey, the power's off on this thing."

"Yes, correct. Oh, go to the head of the class, Jason!"

Jason flipped the breaker switch up, and the unit hummed back into life. Its status lights glowed yellow while the unit cycled through a self-check, then quickly turned green indicating normal function.

Perplexed, Jason asked, "PF24, why didn't you just tell me its power was off?"

"Well, am I supposed to do everything around here?!"

"You must have been able to detect a big change in power consumption."

"Oh, aren't WE the Grand Wizard of all computer systems. Whoever said I was perfect, anyway. Hmph!"

Jason was amused. It was trying to hide its own inadequacy. AN EGO FUNCTION! IN A computer?! Jason chuckled to himself.

"What's so funny, laughing boy?", the offended machine asked.

"Oh, nothing, nothing." He closed the sub-assemblies' cabinet back up. "What's next on the agenda?"

"ROBOTA, ROBOTA, I TOLKA ROBOTA!"

Jason exclaimed, "WHAT?! PF24! What's wrong?! Is there a problem with the robots??"

"Settle down, old man! It's just an expression... Just an ironic little ancient idiom I picked up while browsing through my atomic library. It's in a dead language called 'Russian' and it means 'Work, work, and only work.' Satisfied?"

"Uh, yeah... What's next on the agenda?"

Repairs progressed on.

16. ANOTHER ENCOUNTER

After a few days of initial repair, Dalton and Jason had been invited by Durdaine to a mess-hall in Colonist Segment #1 where they could dine anytime instead of making the tedious spacebike trek back to their sailship. At the end of one such dinner there, Dalton left Jason deep in conversation with several fascinated ladies, and went for a walk, thinking about Monique.

He left the mess hall and entered the soft white hallway lit by lighting panels at intervals along the ceiling. Colonist Segment #1 was so large that he rarely met anyone else along the way. Most were constrained in behavior, some even downright grim though all greeted him with civility and respect, a far cry from the cruel treatment he had often received on the low streets of Infinity City. But those days were long gone now. Each colonist that passed, man or woman or child, wore a simple jump-suit style uniform lightly colored in solid shades of powder blue,

pistachio, yellow, or pink depending on the person's station and taste.

He walked and walked unable to keep his mind on anyone but the girl Monique. When would he see her again? Ever?! A heavy, bitter-sweet emotion welled up inside him. He had felt it again and again in the last few days every time he thought of pretty Monique, especially lying awake in his cubicle at night. Sometimes the feeling was so strong he felt like smashing his fist through a wall. Other times he just wanted to lay down and die. What was the matter with him?! He longed to talk to Jason about what he was feeling but could not bring himself to speak of it. Ah, sweet Monique!

What would it be like to be friends with her? To sit quietly and just talk with her! But what could he possibly find to say if he had the chance?! What if he should run into her around the very next corner? What would he do? What would he say? Dalton became frustrated with himself, and ground his teeth in vexation at his foolish thoughts. Why wouldn't Jason tell him what to do?! He had asked almost everyday but Jason would always just dismiss him with some suggestion such as 'Just go playback an entertainment show, and see what the hero does!' But this was reality, and Dalton strongly desired Jason's sage, or at least experienced, advice. Jason evaded him again and again.

Dalton had not again used V-R to view Monique. The idea of doing that somehow cheapened her. He did enjoy entering V-R at the end of the day, though, just to relax and play around. Just the last evening, he had instructed the colony ship computer PF24 to scan that wonderful garden where he and Monique had met, and copy it into the sailship computer's atomic memory. Dalton then had the sailship computer simulate the garden in his virtual-

reality. Sitting in the pilot room chair of the sailship with the V-R helmet blotting out 'the Big' reality he would move about the simulated magical garden, using foot gestures to instruct the computer which way he wanted to go. He floated up to a flower-well beneath a tree. This was where Monique had stood, and smiled at him! He spoke a few instructions using the V-R modeling command language, and made the well's tiny little pink roses all float up in the air, and begin drifting all about him in relaxing random patterns. If only Jason's V-R setup could simulate olfactory phenomena. If only Monique, as delicate as one of these little roses, were beside him here in V-R right now! There were so many wonderful things he could show her. What fun they could have!

As Dalton drifted along another corridor, sighing at the memory, he turned a corner, and found himself at the tall door of the banquet hall where they had initially dined. It was open slightly! He peeked in. The hall was empty, dark, and quiet, probably only used for special occasions. He stole in, closing the massive door quietly behind him. The only illumination came from small lights here and there at the base of the walls.

Dalton walked over to the table where he had first seen Monique. He touched the chair where she had sat. It was made of polished wood, cool and smooth to the touch. THIS WAS RIGHT WHERE SHE HAD BEEN THAT NIGHT! he thought. If only she was there right now! He sighed, and thought he felt something fluttering in his chest.

He looked over at the long blue curtains separating the banquet hall from the enchanting garden behind. They were not closed all the way. There was a dark gap. He began walking slowly along the table toward the curtain, touching the back of each chair that he passed. All his senses seemed heightened this evening. There was not a sound in the room, except for his footsteps. Was he alone? The temperature like everywhere else aboard the ship was just right.

He reached the break in the curtain, and peaked out. The beautiful garden was lit as on the previous night, but was empty of people. He slipped through the curtain and entered. He heard the trees rustling above. THE SHIP MUST BE GENERATING A BREEZE! He felt it touch his cheek with gentle coolness. What a pleasant feeling! He looked around. Where had he first seen her? He went off in the same direction as before.

He turned here and there, and came at last to the tree rising up from the well where Monique had stood gazing at the delightful flowering rose bushes encircling the tree. It was just as he had seen it in V-R! Dalton walked up to the well, and looked down at the same flowers, almost expecting them to float up into the air all around him again. Why did girls love pretty things like these so much?

Behind him and to the side, someone was watching him, and wondering what he was thinking about, frowning down at the pink flowers. He must be wondering where she was! Wouldn't he be surprised to know that she was secretly watching him... Now he was looking way up at the tree. He folded his arms and cocked

his head to the side. Maybe he's a poet and he's composing a poem about me. That would be so sweet. He has the thoughtful looks of a poet. Dark and mysterious. Oh, I want to talk with him so much! Should I call his name?

Dalton did not know why, but he turned suddenly, feeling as if someone was watching him. At first he saw no one. Then, he heard a tiny laugh! Over behind that bush there! He grinned, then quickly stole over, and around the other side of the bush. He crept quietly, coming slowly around to the other side!

But, no one was there! He looked all around and saw only bushes, and more of the brick flower-wells, some with trees growing out of the center. There was also a two-person bench made out of wrought iron, painted white. He went over and plopped down. Did he just hear the sound of tiny bells? Bells and laughter? He must be imagining things. It had been a long day. He had worked so hard designing the repair plan hoping to impress Jason. Jason was so incredible! He knew about everything! He could handle any situation! How could he have been so relaxed at that banquet that first night, surrounded by so many strangers, all from another world?! How did he talk so easily with that beautiful lady?! And, with her very father sitting right next to him. He felt so useless compared to the mighty Jason. But he still wanted to follow him for the rest of his life!

And then, someone was touching his neck, running soft warm fingers along it, and then up into his hair! He froze, his eyes widening in amazement at the wonderful sensation. He knew it must be her. This was a fantasy come true!

The hand pulled away, and he turned to find Monique leaning against the bench from behind, smiling down at him with her dark haunting eyes. One magic strand of her golden hair drifted down, touching against his cheek. Looking up into her sweet face all he could think to say was, "Hi!"

She had hoped that he would have begun reciting his poem for her. But, his voice was so pleasant, and he was irresistibly

sweet. What delicate features he had! His lips formed a straight line as he gazed up at her with his soft, dark eyes. She giggled in spite of herself. What a silly girlish thing to do! She asked, "May I sit down beside you?"

"Yes!", he breathed eagerly. "Please, by all means!"

She moved around the bench to his right, and daintily sat beside him. Tonight, she was wearing a bright white linen blouse with ruffled collar and sleeves. Around her neck was a dark brown choker with tiny little bells all around it that tinkled sometimes as she moved. Her blouse fell down to her thighs. She was wearing tight black leotards, and golden sandals. Dalton found himself counting her toes. Then, he looked into her face. She looked into his. Her eyes made Dalton think of a dark pool reflecting a bright silver moon he had once seen on a far away world. He suddenly looked away, then down in front of him in mild embarrassment. Then he peaked back at her, and smiled. Being near her made everything feel perfect.

Every movement he made seemed to cast wave after wave of a magical spell over her. She could not take her eyes off him. She could not even move. He was some kind of mysterious enchanting being. And yet she felt completely at ease beside him. Was she still on the bench? Or was she now floating?

He noticed her small, fair hands resting in her lap. And slowly, he reached over his hand gently placing it over hers. Oh, his world was now changed forever! He was touching her! The sensation of such intimate delight charged through him, electrifying him from head to toe. He looked deeply into her eyes and drank of her beauty and presence.

At his divine touch, Monique felt a melting tenderness that was almost unbearable. His dark brown eyes were so warm and friendly and trusting. His dark hair was so wavy. She wanted to run her hands through it so much. LATER! His face, especially his mouth, looked like it had been sculpted by some romantic artist from Earth's ancient Renaissance. Was this some mysterious prince from a world of castles, and knights, and courtly ladies and gentlemen? He squeezed her hand ever so slightly. She involuntarily let forth a soft "Oh!"

The two sat spellbound by each others company, delighting in the handholding, mystified by such new and breathtaking feelings.

Dalton moved his hand across the girl's. She was so warm, so alive! He felt the daintiness of her tiny fingers, and slowly blinked his eyes as a great feeling of tenderness swept over him. Now he held her hand in his, FOR THE FIRST TIME! Oh, he was holding her hand!

Their eyes explored each others face, delighting in the memorization of each detail. The minutes drifted by. Dalton slowly reached across his other hand, and now held both of hers. Both Dalton and Monique sighed deeply at the divine pleasure of touching each other. The two felt they could sit this way forever, just enjoying each other's company, and the simple pleasure of holding the hands of someone special for the very first time.

Soon, several hours had passed! The lights of the garden began to switch off slowly, one by one. Monique's eyes widened in surprise, "It must be very late! The lights turn off automatically!"

They both stood, Dalton still holding both of her hands in his. Then he found himself putting his arms around her, drawing her gently against him. She leaned into him. He felt so much stronger than he looked! She put her arms around him, and rested her head on his shoulder. He was wearing another shirt just like the night before. It was a soft flannel. She felt like she was in a dream.

Dalton heard soft music playing in his head, and had visions from all the strange and wonderful worlds he had been to as a child. All paraded through his head like a dream though he was awake. I LOVE HER! he thought to himself. I'M IN LOVE! THIS IS MORE WONDERFUL THAN ANYTHING!

More of the lights went out. It would soon be too dark to find their way out! Monique slowly, reluctantly pulled away. "We must go," shy said with sad disappointment.

"Oh, I could be here with you forever, Monique. MY Monique!", he breathed.

She looked up at him in the gathering twilight and sighed, "That would be so wonderful. But, let us go now." And, she led him out, holding his hand.

In the corridor outside the banquet hall, she held each of his hands in hers, and gazed up into his eyes. He was beginning to look very sleepy. She said, "You need to go to bed, Dalton. You must have so much work to do tomorrow. Shall I find you a place to sleep on our ship tonight?"

He looked back in the direction of the garden, fantasizing spending the night there. But, that would be ridiculous. Jason must be wondering where he was. "No, I must get back to the sailship. Uh, orders," he mumbled. He suddenly hated having to pretend to be part of the Militia around her. But, if it was for the sake of repairing this angel's ship, it must be done. "Maybe we'll see each other tomorrow."

She smiled so brightly it was like morning. "That would be nice. I'm so happy to have met you, officer Dalton."

"I'm just an... intern. And I'm so happy to have met you." He looked at her seriously. "You've changed my life." He nodded, then turned and started walking away. He looked around at her, gently waved back, then marched off.

She looked after him until he turned a corner and disappeared. Had he changed her life, too? She could not imagine life without him ever again.

Somehow, she found her way back to her foster parents apartments. It was shockingly late. But, they trusted her so. And, loved her so very much. Without them, how could she ever have gotten over the loss of her original parents? That had been such a horror. And, Dalton, sweet Dalton! Being with him was like walking through paradise! Why was life so strange?

17. GROWTH OF TWO

The next morning at breakfast aboard the sailship, Jason mildly inquired why Dalton had come back so late the night before. Dalton squirmed uncomfortably, and did not know what to say.

Jason said, "Well, don't stay out too late again because we have a lot of work to do." Then, he looked up from his plate grinning and asked, "Were you with someone?"

Dalton reluctantly said, "Yes."

"Well?"

Dalton looked puzzled. "Well, what?"

"Who was she? I myself asked PF24 where Durdaine lived, then went over, and spent the evening with his charming daughter Ethera."

Dalton found his tongue. "I spent the evening with a girl, too!" He grew excited at the sweet memory. "That beautiful girl I saw at the banquet dinner! Jason she's incredible! I think I'm... I mean, she's really..."

"Take it easy, kid, I get it. Just be careful, okay? Girls can get you in a lot of trouble." He went back to his breakfast.

Dalton wondered how someone as angelic as Monique could possibly get him into trouble. Soon, he would find out...

Repair work began. Dalton and Jason used the sailship's robots and materials to successfully repair the outer ruptures of the colony ship. Then they set to work on all the problems within the colony ship that PF24 and its army of robots could not solve. Dalton and Jason became familiar with the many areas of the colony ship as their many repairs led them all over, from nose to tail. The bulk of their time was spent repairing the control rooms which had sustained enormous damage being located in one of the two segments that had ruptured. PF24 did not have the ability to deal with problems beyond a certain level of complexity, as was the case in one of the control rooms where a huge panel containing astronavigation equipment had broken loose during the whirlpool accident. It slid across the floor, smashed against several other panels, tore through the thin metal wall of the room, and then crashed into more machinery in the next room where it had come to a rest.

It was a difficult mess to straighten out. There were not enough spare parts to just replace everything. It was completely beyond the scope of PF24, much to its chagrin. Jason and Dalton were forced to salvage as much as they could from the wreckage. With the help of the efficient repair robots of the colony ship, virtual super-tools themselves, all was finally repaired. PF24 grudgingly reported all systems involved were functioning as good as new, even the one that had broken lose and caused all the trouble.

During their repairs in the Colonist Segments #1 & #3, they met many of the amazing people on-board. The Colonist Segment #2 was off-limits since the traumatic effect of the accident had lowered the people there to a state of barbarism, and it was too dangerous to enter, since they did not need haircuts, even for important repairs. They made any excuse, however, to enter the Colonist Segments #1, for here, of course, lived Ethera and Monique.

Jason courted Ethera with his usual consummate skill, but she would not submit to his arduous demands. She found him fascinating, amusing, and attractive, but decided that he was

simply beneath her station in life. She was, after all, the daughter of the leader of all the colonists. And HE was merely a working man. Jason responded to this with gifts of gold jewelry that he himself smithed in his sailship's workshops.

Gold was most precious aboard the colony ship, because there was not one gram of it anywhere aboard. It weighed so much that it had been forbidden as an item of jewelry. Not even small quantities for electronic circuits were allowed because the authorities had been concerned over the rash avariciousness this may have brought out among the colonists. Jason had plenty, though.

Ethera was ecstatically delighted with each new treasure Jason delivered. What skill he had with gold! They were all so beautiful. Bracelets, rings, necklaces, ear-rings, anklets, toe-rings, even a tiny golden noseclip. She loved wearing them all, much to her father's frowning disapproval. He did not have to ask who was giving her the gold.

The feelings between Dalton and Monique grew at each of their frequent secret meetings in the garden. Even Jason began seeing Dalton and Monique together often. He really enjoyed the two of them, often dining with them aboard the colony ship. Such delightful young people! Strangely, he felt the same unusual feeling of tenderness toward Monique as he felt toward Dalton. Though he had met many young people before during his rescue missions, he had never felt this singularly peculiar feeling before...

Dalton and Monique were fascinated by each other, and would talk for hours during each secret rendezvous in the garden behind the banquet hall where they had originally met. Monique asked Dalton about his family. Dalton told her he had none, that his parents had both died. Feeling sympathetic toward him, Monique was prompted to tell him the story of how she came to be aboard the colony ship, and how both her original parents had been killed in the gravitonic whirlpool accident...

There had once been two brothers. Stomec, her father, and his brother were supposed to both have voyaged onboard the colony ship to the new world. Each had recessive genes for a special kind of recent artificially engineered intelligence, that was not supposed to assert itself until the second generation, which would be raised on the new world. These special intelligence traits were extremely volatile, and too unstable for the closed world of a colony ship, but ideally suited (for only a few individuals per generation) to an expanding colony on a new world, where there were endless new things to learn. That was why only two carriers of the special genetic trait were thought to be needed. Stomec, the main carrier, and his brother as a spare. Some of the colonization leaders had wanted more individuals with this high-intelligence trait, but none were available. They would have had to delay the colonization in order to breed more of these individuals.

This high-intelligence trait was only carried on the Y-

chromosome which only males received. Stomec and his brother had been bred to carry these genes to the new world. But at the last moment, something had kept his brother behind. And the colony ship, unable to get a change in its stringent schedule authorized in time, had been forced to leave without him, relying on Stomec's copy of the important genetic trait.

Dalton told her she seemed very intelligent. She said this was true, and substantiated by her testing at school. However, it was not due to her father Stomec's special genetic traits, since she, being female, did not have a copy of his Y-chromosome. Genetic analysis had attributed her above average intelligence to her mother, who was actually not even on the original list of colonists. Monique told Dalton this had always made her feel different. Dalton said he had always felt different back on Infinity City, too.

Monique's mother, Elise, had taken her uncle's place aboard the colony ship. Apparently there had been some relationship between her mother and her uncle before her mother had married Stomec. Her mother was rumored to have had an illegitimate child by her uncle, but since no such baby was ever brought onboard, Monique disbelieved the rumor.

At this point, Dalton felt his face grow warm as he reached a sudden secret conclusion, but he quickly quelled his suspicions because he could not possibly accept being related to someone he was in love with.

Monique went on. Her mother Elise and her father Stomec went with the colony ship, and she was conceived shortly after takeoff. When Monique was eight years old, the tragedy had struck. The colony ship went through the Great Accident which killed the crew and hundreds of colonists. She had lost both her parents. After the accident, everything had been different. The surviving colonists became stranger and stranger. Many went insane. She was alienated. Even the stars outside the viewports had changed. The ones in front of the ship turned all blue, and the ones behind, red.

She told Dalton that she was very attracted to him. He was so much like her... She began to silently cry. Dalton held her hand to comfort her.

18. REPAIR WORK

The endlessly detailed repair work went on and on for several weeks. Dalton saw Monique for a while at the end of every day. Jason courted Ethera with consummate skill. He repeatedly dropped by Excarver Durdaine's apartments ostensibly to consult with him regarding technical aspects of the colony ship. Durdaine was flattered by Jason's admiration of how well he had run the colony ship for so many years. Usually, Ethera would drift into the room to see who the visitor was. Discovering Jason, she would make significant eye contact, and then wait for the conclusion of business, then spend time with him after her father went about his other affairs.

Sometimes, while Jason was busy about the colony ship with repairs, Ethera would appear out of nowhere, spend a short while with him, and then silently drift away.

19. FIRST TIME

During each rendezvous in the mysterious garden, Dalton and Monique became more and more intimate. They fell deeply in love.

One evening near the end of their repair-work, immediately after dinner at the colony ship mess-hall, Dalton rose, and said good-bye to Jason, giving him a conspiratorial wink. Leaving

Jason smirking behind, he eagerly headed toward that wonderful garden where Monique was sure to be waiting.

Dalton crept into the dark and quiet banquet hall, then back to the curtain, and out into the garden. Not as many lights were on this evening. The garden was often used during the day for parties. Someone must have left them dimmed. The mysterious twilight enchanted the garden! The trees rose from their brick wells, spreading above, dark and haunting. Soft sweet music floated lightly through the air. The familiar fragrance of all the flowers made Dalton smile.

It was quiet and still, and Dalton crept around searching for Monique. Often, she would hide from him, enjoying his pursuit. He heard the tiny bells of her neck choker! Over there! He silently tip-toed onto the lawn beyond the bricking, then kicked off his shoes, enjoying the cool softness of the grass caressing his feet. Where was she? Which bush was she hiding behind? The bells again! Over that way this time! He hurried around the other side of the tall bush he thought she was hiding behind. Nothing! The bush had broad dark green leaves. He touched a finger to the sharp edge of one, and traced it all around while thinking. How did she always do this? He could never seem to catch her until she decided to be caught. He would just run around randomly then, until he found her!

Quiet as a stalking cat he began quickly moving from bush to bush in an erratic pattern keeping to the general area where he had first heard the bells. He leaned out from behind a bush. He brushed his dark hair away from his eyes. There she was! He came up behind her as she was peeking around a tall thin flowering bush with blue blossoms, barely visible in the gloom. He crept silently closer. She was wearing an exquisite white dress. No! It was that pink dress she had worn when he had first seen her, the pink almost white in the magic twilight of the garden. Her deeply golden hair seemed to shine with a light of its own.

Dalton reached forward and playfully wrapped his arms around her. She gasped and twisted around looking up at him with fright, then smiling with excitement as she recognized who it was. She grabbed him and hugged him tight. On impulse, he pulled her down to the soft grass on top of him, and hugged her very tight.

"Oh, Dalton!", she breathed, and buried her face in his neck. Then she kissed him there, and the feeling electrified

him. This was the first time she had kissed him! He had never been kissed by a girl before! She was delighted by his reaction, and kissed his neck again and again. Dalton moaned involuntarily and closed his eyes. Then, Monique touched her cheek against his, and they held each other like this for a long while, just enjoying the wonderful touching and company of the other.

Dalton then gently rolled her over until he was on top of her. He stared down at her, not really knowing what to do next. His heart was beating strongly, and he felt tremendous energy at bay. He caressed one of her delicate bare feet with his own. What a wonderful sensation! She sighed softly. Her eyes had been closed, but now they opened and she looked at him expectantly. Her face was pure beauty to him. Her eyes, so dark compared with her fair complexion, he now discovered were merely the darkest, deepest blue he had ever seen. Her petite yet full, rosy lips were parted, inviting. He leaned down until his lips lightly touched hers. Oh, how intimate this was! How soft and warm her lips! His eyes had closed. He opened them now to see how she was reacting. Her own eyes were only partly open. She looked as happy as he felt.

Dalton pressed his mouth tenderly into hers. How warm and soft and sweet she was! He slowly moved his head this way and that. They both moaned with the shared pleasure. His first kiss!

Her first kiss! She could barely think. He was overwhelming her with pleasure and sensation. She ran her hands back and forth along his strong, young back, experiencing almost greedily all of his maleness. She ran her hands into his soft wavy hair. She sensed he enjoyed this very much. Oh, how it warmed her to give this wonderful boy pleasure. Boy? Oh, he was so much more to her now!

Dalton rolled off of her, playfully pulling her onto him again. He laughed, then kissed her lightly and winked. She smiled with delight. He kissed her again and again. They rolled over again then again on the soft fragrant grasses, laughing and kissing, thoroughly enjoying this exciting new activity.

He pulled himself onto her once again, then began kissing her neck for the first time. Monique inhaled a shuddering breath, feeling almost overwhelming pleasure. She arched her neck, pressing it toward his kisses raining down from above. His body began to shake slightly, and he had to pause and relax himself with an effort of will. Now he began to feel a serious urgency growing. He kissed her neck slowly, intently now. Her golden hair fell away, and he saw below him a delicate little round ear. He put the petite lobe of her ear between his lips and tugged slightly. She began mewling with pleasure. Incredible feelings were rising and coursing through him now! Part of him even wanted to bite down. But, instead he gently took her little ear in his teeth, and began nibbling slowly. Monique's mouth opened, and she panted, "Oh, Oh!" He pulled away and looked down at her. She was fantastic! A beautiful wonderful wild thing! His face grew hot. He pressed his mouth down over hers, kissing and kissing her. He rubbed his cheek against the softness of hers.

She mewed and moaned his name over and over. He began kissing her neck again. First one side, and then the other. She began to feel a most delicious tension deep inside! She said his name over and over, begging him, the sound of his name stirring her feelings into a tempest.

Dalton could not hold himself back any longer. His mind told his hands what to do, what clothing to remove. Soon they were holding each other in their first nude embrace. The incredible sensation of pressing their hot, naked bodies together stunned them for a long while as they enjoyed the supreme sensation, so intimate, so new, so intense that they avoided again looking into each other's eyes for several moments.

His hands sought what to touch, what to tenderly caress. He knew not what she felt, but wanted desperately to make her feel the incredible pleasure he himself was feeling. He could feel her offering herself to him. They were young and wild, and alone together. She pulled him against her, wishing they could somehow melt together into the same person.

Soon they were both shocked and delighted by what was happening. The most supremely pleasurable sensation either had ever experienced! They looked into each others eyes making sure

the other was feeling it, too. They were connected together in the most intoxicatingly intimate touch imaginable. They moved back and forth smoothly, clinging to each other tightly, desperately, so close each could feel the other's hot, sweet breath coming in passionate gasps. It all grew so intense, too intense. They were overwhelmed, losing control, not knowing how to handle what was happening. They shared these overwhelming feelings, and their feelings danced together, as if floating up above among the trees, growing into one, single shared aching fiery release. They pressed their mouths together in one, final kiss, both moaning loudly as their bodies did incredible things together, over and over again.

And then later, they drifted back down, and lay holding each other spent and exhausted. For a long time neither spoke. Each looked lovingly into the others eyes, seeing the same love and trust returned. What an incredible experience to have shared! They kissed a little, and touched some more. Dalton rolled over, and looked up seeing stars twinkling above. Just like being on some planet. How real looking! How did the colony ship manage to project them? Then, he reached over for her, and held her, and they both fell asleep!

Hours later, Dalton awoke due to a call from nature. He looked at his glowing watch. Three o'clock in the morning! He gently awoke Monique and showed her the time. She groaned. They both put their clothes back on, grinning at each other as the wonderful memory of what they had shared for the first time warmed them pleasurably. They came together, and kissed, and held hands.

Then, Dalton retrieved his shoes, and they reluctantly stole

out of the garden, into the banquet hall, and over to its door. Dalton peeked out and looked both ways down the corridor. No one! They crept out, and faced each other. Both sighed, looking into the others eyes, and then they parted company. Monique headed back to her foster parents apartments, and Dalton headed the other way toward the nose of the colony ship, where his spacesuit and spacebike waited to whisk him back to the sailship. However, to avoid bursting, he hastily detoured to the closest public lavatory.

20. AN ENDING

Tension rose between Jason and Ethera's father Excarver Durdaine as he began seeing Jason with Ethera more and more, which meant, to Durdaine, that Jason must be working on repairs less and less. He had deduced Jason's intentions. Intermixing between the people of CONOVER and out-worlders had always been forbidden. It would have introduced recessive genetic defects that would after a generation or two have come to the surface.

Toward the end of all the repair work, Ethera indicated to Jason her inclination toward romance aboard an exciting Infinity City sailship with an equally exciting Infinity City man. This was what Jason had been waiting to hear! He arranged a time with her that evening, when they would meet at the air lock of the colony ship. From there, he would whisk her away to the sailship.

After completing repairs for the day, he hurried back to the sailship early to arrange things. He entered the living quarter, and cursed at how messy he and Dalton had left it. With the help of all three of the little utility robots, he began cleaning it up. The three little robots were gaily colored orange, green, and blue. He ordered Orange to gather up all of Dalton's virtual-reality disks, and put them, the helmet, and the player away. He ordered Green, to pick up all the clothes lying around, wash them in the ultrasonic washing machine, dry them in the jet-microwave, and finally fold and put them away. Blue was ordered to pick-up anything else remaining, toss it in storage bin B, and then help Green.

The little robots were all shaped like corrugated cylinders. Sensors were located around their circumference. Four rod-shaped legs extended from the bottom of each robot. The legs retracted for sitting, and extended for locomotion. A wheel was located at the tip of each rod-like leg. When not on a smooth surface, the tiny wheels retracted into the legs, and the robot walked along like an animal. Manipulation arms also could drop from the bottom of each robot, or extend out from the top.

They were not very appealing at first sight, but to move around the cluttered living quarter they had to retract their wheels, and had a tendency to waddle when they walked, which Jason and Dalton always found amusing. Sometimes they would set up an obstacle course of clothes, and dirty food trays to see how the robots would handle the challenge. Whenever the little

robots found passage impossible, they would extend a robot arm, and begin flinging the clothes and trays, this way and that, out of their way. Jason and Dalton would fall about the place laughing their heads off at the comic scene of the robots angrily, it seemed, plowing through their debris.

But now all the debris would have to go, and fast! There was not much time until his rendezvous with Ethera at the air lock of the colony ship.

After the robots had picked up, he set them to scrubbing everything so the room would smell as clean as it looked. He next pulled open a special drawer and pulled forth various romantic implements: Candles, a cooling stand for wine, assorted candies and treats, an antique digital-disk player with some ancient but appealing musical disks, and other odds and ends, including a large pink feather which he left out of sight but in a handy location.

Next, he went into the cargo bay, and searched through his liquor locker until he found an ancient bottle of wine he thought would suit Ethera's haughty taste. On impulse, he grabbed a hand-held carbonizer, and jabbed its tiny needle down through the bottle's old-fashioned cork and into the wine. He set the carbonizer to medium effervescence, then pressed the activation button. The carbonizer extended a small sensor up to the cork to detect for leaks, and automatically stop the carbon dioxide injection process if it detected that the cork could hold no more pressure. After a short while, the carbonizer signaled carbonization had been completed, and also, to Jason's satisfaction, displayed a favorable quality index based on its analysis of the wine molecules emitted from the cork. It also reported an alcohol contents of 13.5% exactly. Jason grinned in anticipation of a merry evening.

Back in the living quarter he placed the bottle of wine in the cooling stand, and pulled off the tab of the cooling collar located around the neck of the bottle, activating the bottles

self-cooling feature. Through some obscure but harmless chemical process, the collar would cool the wine, and keep it that way for hours. Next, he draped a little towel over the bottle like he'd seen in movies. He did not know why they did this, but it looked apropos. Whoops! He rearranged the towel so that the name of the Infinity City Space Port Hotel was no longer showing.

When everything in the living quarter was in readiness, he went back to the cargo hold of the sailship, pulled out a spacesuit that would fit Ethera, pulled out a spacebike for her, and then towed them back over to the colony ship. Leaving everything stowed in the air lock, he dined in the mess-hall that night as usual. Dalton had winked at him and left early! Jason knew where he was probably going. He felt happy for his young chum. Unbeknownst to Jason, this was also the very same evening of the first romantic encounter between Dalton and Monique.

At the appointed time, Jason went up to the nose cone to wait for Ethera. She was late. He waited and waited growing anxious. PF24 reported that she was still at home. Finally, when Jason was about to return to the sailship in disgust, she

came springing up the low-gravity axis tunnelway, her light brown hair swinging back and forth. She was wearing a jaunty yellow sweater. It was very tight, revealing her gender in a striking way. Her trousers were a dark gray. And, she was barefoot! NO, SHE WORE TRANSPARENT SHOES! HOW ODD, JASON THOUGHT. AND HOW DELECTABLE THOSE LITTLE TOES... "Hi, Jason," she said in a low voice, thick with meaning. "Do you come here often?"

"Yes," he played along. "Some of the most beautiful women of the Galaxy happen by here!" She smiled at him. He helped her into her spacesuit, and spent an inordinate amount of time smoothing out all the wrinkles. She did not mind at all. She was hungry for YOUNG male attention! The PILL OF LIFE kept Jason young-looking at a physical age of less than 25-years-old, though at this time his calendar age was a lecherous 46. By some genetic quirk, the PILL would always keep Jason's heart and attitude the same as a young man in his early twenties, often to his misfortune.

They mounted the spacebikes, and waited for the air lock to finish its cycle, and open the outer door. Through their helmet radios Jason heard Ethera squeal in excited anticipation. He looked over at her and smiled through the faceplate of the helmet. Her sparkling hazel eyes were wildly ablaze. He winked one of his own bright blue eyes at her. She blew him a kiss. Jason's head swam at the anticipation of what a pleasurable evening was in store!

The air lock opened, and Jason commanded his ship's computer to guide their spacebikes safely across. Ethera gasped as they left the air lock, and the great emptiness of velvety black, star-flooded inter-Galactic space surrounded them. She commented how quiet it was. Jason suggested that perhaps they were just the two to liven the old Galaxy up that evening. Ethera laughed merrily. Jason ordered the computer to move them along at top speed.

As they neared the sailship, the computer switched off the gravitonically induced artificial gravity field so that they could easily enter. After they entered the air lock of the sailship, the computer slowly re-enabled artificial gravity and they floated down to the floor of the air lock. The outer door closed, and Jason stowed the spacebikes while air was pumped in. The inner door of the air lock finally opened.

He brought her aboard his sailship, and removed her spacesuit. She looked around at all the equipment and storage containers about the cargo hold, and wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Jason," she asked suspiciously, "is this the REAR entrance?"

"Uh, it's the only entrance, Ethera. Except for a couple of emergency 'locks. I'm afraid this is not a fancy yacht." MENTAL NOTE: DECORATE CARGO HOLD BACK ON INFINITY CITY. "It's just a rescue ship. It's fast, though! We can go thousands of times the speed of light!"

"Oh, that would be exciting." She smiled, and took his arm in both of hers. "Jason! Take me away from all that!" She gestured back toward the colony ship with her other arm. "Whisk

me away across the stars! Take me to the far worlds, and show me the wonders of the Galaxy!"

"First, let me show you a few wonders right here aboard my... our little sailship." He smiled in a debonair fashion, while giving her an intimate caress that brought a rewarding flush to her cheeks.

He led her through the door to the central chamber. He said "Shh!" motioning to the other doors to the empty workshop and software sanctum, and whispered, "Everyone's asleep! Let's go up to the pilot room to see if the Captain's there. Be really nice! He has a terrible temper!... Computer, raise the elevator to the pilot room." The floor began moving upward.

The Captain! Her heart began beating rapidly at the thought of some grumpy old Captain demanding that Jason explain what a FEMALE was doing on board.

The hatch in the floor of the pilot room slid open, with barely enough room for the two to squeeze through. Jason was forced to hold her tightly against him. What an enticing scent she had worn this evening!

Ethera was excited by every touch from Jason. As he held her close, she experienced the intimate smell of a man for the first time. Jason used deodorant but seldom wore colognes. This night, Ethera hungrily breathed deep of the essential HIM. Her hunger grew stronger...

Jason looked around the pilot room. "Oh, what a shame, he's not here. Well, old men need their sleep. Would you like to sit in the pilot chair?"

"Oh, could I?!" He led her over and she sat down, marveling at all the complex lights and dials and controls. She looked up through the transparent dome and gasped as she saw millions of burning little stars. "I haven't seen real stars since I was just a little girl! And, there's our colony ship. It's so big! This is quite romantic, Jason. Do you take all the girls up here?"

"Ethera, never before in my life have I experienced such subtle grace and ultimate beauty. I am inspired to break any rule, tread any forbidden ground, even go where no man has gone before for you! I think tonight that I have found a queen fit to rule all those stars above!"

She noted that he had not answered her question. But his way with words left her tingling with anticipation. As she continued marveling at the stars, she felt his firm hands begin

gently massaging her upper arms and shoulders. OH, WHAT AN EXQUISITE FEELING! Then he lightly and slowly touched her neck. "Mmmm!" she said out loud. She took his hand in hers. It was so big! Would it be always gentle? She kissed his hand, looked up at him, and batted her eyelids a few times.

Jason could barely control himself. This girl was overdue for love! But, just as he was about to do something very

naughty, she spied Dalton's exotic-looking virtual-reality helmet. "Oh! What is that?", she asked curiously.

HOW CAN WOMEN SWITCH THEIR ATTENTION SO FAST? he wondered. He took a deep, calming breath. "That's just a virtual-reality helmet."

"A virtual-reality transceiver? Why, I've never seen one like that before. The ones I've seen on the HEAVEN all look like special sunglasses. That one would fit completely over someone's head!" She rose from the chair, and went over to pick it up.

Jason had learned to be endlessly patient in the game of love. He would wait. And, he bet that if she sensed that he was losing interest, she would warm right back up. He gestured toward the helmet, and began confidently, "Oh, virtual-reality is one of my passions. That's a very sophisticated model that fits over your head so that you cannot see or hear anything around you. Without any distractions, the virtual-reality becomes almost real. Our computer can simulate anything!"

She looked over at him with a sly grin. "Do you have another helmet?"

WHAT WAS ON HER MIND?! "Yes..", he said slowly. "Why?"

"Let's each put one on, and jump into virtual-reality together!"

Jason gulped. HMM. THIS GIRL WAS ADVENTUROUS. This, he had never encountered before. But, HE was an Infinity City Adventurer! If she was willing to try this, so was he. "Okay, stand up." She did. "After I put this on, you will see and hear nothing for a few moments until I have the computer start the V-R." She nodded. He took the helmet she was holding and slipped it over her head, positioned it, and strapped it on. He heard the air begin cycling through the helmet. Jason gave her a little pinch, and she slapped his hand away. Then, he had a naughty idea! (They often occurred to him in situations like these.)

He stepped back, and said, "Computer, transmit the pilot room image into the virtual-reality, but filter me out of it. Also, interface the audio between the pilot room and the virtual-reality."

"Acknowledged," the computer said.

"Jason!" He heard Ethera's high, sweet voice from the computer. "Is the helmet still on me? It's like it suddenly just went clear. I can see the pilot room again." Her head turned back and forth as she looked this way and that in the virtual-reality. "Where did you go?" She reached up with her hand to touch her face, but was blocked by the helmet. "The helmet is still there! This is fun! Where ARE you?... OH!! Hey, who did that? Oh! OH! Ohhhh... Mmmm! Oh, Jason, you're despicable! Now you behave, and put on your helmet, too!"

He was extremely pleased with himself for pulling off such a mischievous little trick. As he reluctantly brought out the

other helmet, he ordered, "Computer, full audio-visual interface between the pilot room and the virtual-reality for both of these helmets, but replace the image of the helmets with our faces." He tugged the helmet on, and adjusted the eye, ear, and mouth covers. His eyes were tightly closed. He took a few deep breaths to calm his nervousness then opened his eyes. Standing before him, he saw HIMSELF but with a young, sexy female body! The computer had mistakenly switched their faces when it filtered out the image of the helmets!

Ethera burst out laughing. "It's me! You have MY face on YOUR body! Is that what I'd look like as a man?" She made a disgusted face, and then saw this expression immediately displayed on her head sitting on Jason's body. "Jason, stop this! I don't like it!" As she talked, her head on his body spoke the words."

"Sorry...", he apologized. His own face atop her body was grinning widely. Jason stuck out his tongue, and image of his face before him did the same. "Computer, you switched the wrong heads! Swap them, and never do that again." The computer acknowledged.

Ah! Now he was finally looking at her head. "Now what?", he asked.

"Use your imagination! Can I talk to your computer?"

"Yeah, sure. Computer, do to the virtual-reality whatever she says. Go ahead and make any change. You know how to do V-R, Ethera?"

"Of course! It was INVENTED on Conover. But I want YOU to go first!"

"Me?! Why me?"

"Because I want to see this PASSION you have for virtual-reality." She pouted irresistibly. "Won't you show me your PASSION, Jason?"

He laughed. THIS GIRL WAS FUN! BUT, WHAT SHOULD I DO? DALTON SAID WHEN HE PLAYS IN V-R HE JUST DREAMS UP WHATEVER FANTASY COMES TO MIND. HMM. NO, I BETTER LEAVE HER CLOTHES DISPLAYED. AT LEAST FOR NOW. Then, he had an idea! "Computer, replace the image of the pilot room with the image of a south-pacific desert island on the ecology planet Earth. Make it only five meters in diameter, with a single palm tree!"

The pilot room darkened slowly away. A bright sky-blue dome appeared above them, as the computer built the requested image. It expanded rapidly in detail and size into the sky and tree above, dark blue ocean all around, and yellow sand beneath their feet. Jason wondered where it was getting the picture from. He really had not known whether or not the computer would be able to do this. It must be referencing shows from the atomically-stored entertainment library.

It was a perfect image down to every three-dimensional detail, as far as their imperfect eyes and brain could tell.

They were now standing on a deserted island. Ethera looked around. "Desert island, huh, Jason? I think I know what's on your mind! But, you aren't dressed the part. Computer, replace Jason's uniform with a Tarzan leopard skin!"

TARZAN? WHAT'S THAT?! Well, the computer knew, for Jason looked down, and discovered himself clothed in animal hide like a primitive caveman. "Computer, put some hair on my chest, would you please." Up it grew.

"Me Jane, you Tarzan!", she said with a husky voice. "Turn around, Jason. I want to see how your skin fits." He willingly complied and turned slowly, flexing various muscles.

She began giggling. "Jason! That is QUITE a creative tattoo."

HOW COULD SHE SEE THAT TATTOO?! He looked behind himself. The computer had not drawn the back of his leopard skin! Embarrassed, he quickly faced her again. He complained, "Hey, you aren't dressed right either! Computer, replace Ethera's clothing with... a G-string bikini!"

The computer responded, "Stand-by. Requesting medical scan files from PF24..."

"Computer! Cancel that last request!", countermanded Ethera. "No peeking, Jason!"

"Okay, okay. Hey, enough of this kid-stuff. I just happen to have a bottle of extremely old sparkling wine that's chilling down in my quarters." He turned his head and looked at her sideways. "Does your daddy let you drink, Ethera??"

She flipped her head. "I do whatever I want!", she said.

"Would you care to try a glass?"

She smiled, and looked at him. She knew what this would lead to. It was an experience that she had been longing to try for so long! She let her eyes half-close in a seductive sort of way. "I'll have just one glass..."

Jason removed the helmets, delicately took her hand, and led to the hatchway in the floor. They stepped down onto the elevator platform below. He held her close so that they would once again fit through the hatchway. "Take us down, elevator," he said. He wrapped his arms tightly around her, looked happily into her face, and squeezed her. She herself reached around and squeezed him provocatively.

At the floor of the central chamber, they dismounted, and he opened the door to his living quarter, and gestured for her to enter. She did so hesitantly. WHAT KIND OF A ROOM WAS THIS? OH! LOOK AT ALL THE LITTLE FIGURINES. HOW CUTE! CANDLES. THAT WOULD BE ROMANTIC. CANDIES! (BETTER SKIP THOSE.) A PICTURE OF THE BEATLES. She loved the Beatles! HAD SHE TOLD HIM THAT BEFORE? A BUST OF MOZART. OH, HE THINKS HE'S SO REFINED... A BEARSKIN RUG! OH, HE MUST BE A MIND READER! I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO...

Jason lifted two glasses from the wine cooler stand, set them on a nearby table, and pressed the open-button on the bottle. The cork popped out, and ricocheted around the room.

Ethera exclaimed, "Jason! That frightened me!"

"Oh, my goodness! Come, sit down here on the sofa and calm yourself." He poured two glasses of wine, then joined her on the sofa.

She talked about one of her favorite subjects: The ancient musical group, the Beatles. She talked of Beatle songs, and he rattled off the standard ancient Beatle trivia which Beatle fans like her always loved to hear (he had recently quickly learned all this from his ship's atomic memory): Paul was dead and had been replaced by a Canadian prime minister. John had married an Indian guru named Yo. Ringo was the only rockstar who ever lived long enough to have grandchildren. George had been cryogenically frozen to await rebirth at the end of time...

They talked about the people of the colony ship then switched to one of Ethera's other favorite subjects: The gifts of gold jewelry Jason had given her. She noticed a ring he was wearing -- it was gold! She asked if she could try it on. Jason pulled it off and gave it to her. It was his Militia Guard Academy graduation ring. Naturally, it was too big for her fingers, however she enjoyed fondling it, her eyes glittering as she beheld the luster of the thick band and jewels. The crest of the Militia Guard was in raised relief with Jason's name etched around the edge. She exclaimed, "This is gorgeous! It's better than anything you've given me so far!" She batted her long dark eyelashes at him and pouted sensuously. "Jason, can I -- can I please have it? I'd be ever so grateful!"

Jason sensed an important turning point and knew it was essential to answer in the affirmative -- it was just a graduation ring anyway; he could make another back on Infinity City. It held no special meaning for him... Well, not much, at least. So he lied: "Ethera! This is one of my most prized possessions! It's very special to me. I could never part with it!"

"Oh, PLEASE, Jason! It is simply gorgeous! Aren't I special to you, too??"

Jason looked deeply into her alluring eyes. "Yes, very special." AT LEAST FOR TONIGHT, HE THOUGHT TO HIMSELF. "IT'S YOURS..." SHE GIGGLED WITH DELIGHT AND STASHED THE RING IN A SIDE POCKET.

The wine was excellent. "Oh, dear, Ethera!" Jason exclaimed in mock surprise. "Why, your glass is empty. What a pity you decided to have but one glassful. It is such an amusing vintage! I believe I shall have another."

As he poured another for himself, she watched with a calculating look, then announced, "Well, one more glass won't hurt anything..."

A short while later, the empty glasses fell harmlessly to the bearskin rug at their feet. They were locked in a passionate embrace. Ethera was being kissed by a man she had known for only a few weeks. What WOULD her father think. HE WOULD BE FURIOUS, IF HE KNEW! She laughed on the inside, and decided to abandon all restraint this night. How often did Adventurers from the famous Infinity City come along. There was actually some story about one, just before the colony ship took off. Ah, but her attention became captivated by her amazing host for the evening. He was thrilling! What WAS he up to now? Oh! There was obviously no stopping him now! She lay back down on the couch.

Jason knew that he would be the first Adventurer to discover the secrets of this little whirlpool below him. He geared himself down and treated her gently, letting her set the pace. She was completely without inhibition, though, and willing to experience all he was bursting to show her.

What an evening! She was amazed that such playfulness could go on hour after hour.

At one point, during a breather, when his mind was drifting, Jason worried that Dalton would arrive at any time. But, Dalton was quiet as a mouse, never once awakening Jason when he came home late from one of his OWN rendezvous' with Monique. Certain activities soon drove these thoughts clean away.

Finally, they both had exhausted each other. She thought he was fantastic! Beyond what she ever imagined a man would be. She was finally in love!

But, she had noticed no sign of other crew members, not even the Militia Captain One, whom her father had spoken with. Jason, the wine having loosened his tongue told her the truth. He and Dalton were the only crew. But, they were not pirates. They were Rescuers. He made her swear never to reveal this. She was confused but agreed.

She thought: An Adventurer from Infinity City who flew about the Galaxy rescuing disabled space ships! The colony ship was so boring. How exciting and romantic it would be to accompany this amazing man! Touring the Galaxy at the speed of an Infinity City sailship! To see Infinity City itself! Inside a black hole! And every night, to have this incredible man all to herself. He had been so WONDERFUL to her. He was so experienced, knew so many things to do, and how to do them just right...

She decided that she wanted to go with him, and told him so. But then, strangely, he stalled and stammered, telling her that he would decide later. He seemed suddenly now a little distant somehow. Had she done something wrong?

Finally, very late, he took her back across to the colony ship, and escorted her home. He was polite, but was still different somehow.

And then, in the next few days, he did not come by to see

her at all. At first she was bewildered.

She asked the computer PF24 where Jason was one day, and went to see him. He was in the Control Room of the great ship. She would have to go through the axis tunnelway to get there. Her father would not like it. He did not even like it when she left Colonist Segment #1 to visit Colonist Segment #3 which, unlike the barbarism of #2, was peaceful and well ordered. However, her father had informed her that the laborers comprising Colonist Segment #3 were "beneath her station." She passed by the hatch to Colonist Segment #3 wondering what they were like.

She found Jason in the Control Room, wearing a light brown coverall, sitting at a keyboard console, staring at a viewscreen with all sorts of incomprehensible moving numbers and symbols on it. He turned around, looked at her for a moment, then looked back to the screen. Then he turned back to her, smiled slightly, and greeted her, "Hello, Ethera. What, uh, brings you down here?"

She walked over and put her hand on the back of his neck. "I came to visit you Jason, darling." She stroked the crazy waves of his light colored hair. It was free and wild just like him, she thought.

"Oh, well," and he chuckled lamely. "It's not very exciting down here. I'm the only one around. Just working on reconfiguring the astronavigation console's dynamic memory. It got erased during the Accident, and PF24 doesn't know how to initialize it..."

PF24 interrupted sarcastically from a nearby speaker, "The HUMANS that set me up back on Conover neglected to provide me with the correct version of the program."

"Uh, fine," Jason responded.

With her other hand Ethera stroked Jason's firm jaw. It was rough from not shaving that morning. She had been thinking of nothing but traveling away with him aboard his wonderful sailship. "Do you remember our night together, Jason?"

"Yes, it was... nice." He turned back to his computer console, and typed in some commands.

She dropped her hands to her sides. "Jason," she whispered. "I'd like to come over to the sailship again."

He turned slightly, looked at her quickly out of the corners of his handsome blue eyes, then turned back to the screen. Without looking at her again, he said, "Umm, your father's getting suspicious. I think we better cool things for a while. I'll, uh, call you... sometime."

Suddenly, she could not think of anything to say. She slowly turned, and quietly went to the door of the Control Room. She turned, with her hand on the doorway, to look back. She noticed on her wrist several of the gold bracelets he had made. What skill he had! They were so beautiful. He sat as before with his broad back to her, ferociously typing away at the

computer console. She blinked several times, lowered her head, then left. She drifted back up the axis tunnelway feeling an aching emptiness deep inside.

She saw him around the ship from time to time after that, but he no longer had any time for her. He always had some excuse why he could not get together with her. She soon felt completely heartbroken. Again and again she tried to get his attention. But what had been between them was definitely over, though it had barely begun. Her dreams of him sweeping her away from her horridly boring life aboard the colony ship were broken. Then her feelings turned into something else...

21. THE COMPLETION

With their job almost completed, the colony ship would be ready to move on as soon as a crew could be found to man the control room. Excарver Durdaine's potential crew had completed their training in Colonist Segment #1. However, responding to Jason's constant apprehension regarding the whole project of a 'green' crew piloting the complex colony ship, Durdaine had begun to vacillate. Dalton had witnessed a heated exchange between the frustrated Durdaine and Jason in which Durdaine had weakly suggested that PF24 could help out his new crew. But Jason pointed out that the sophisticated computer was definitely beginning to suffer from cyberlogical paranoia. It was convinced it was superior to humans in EVERY respect and that there were gravitonic whirlpools lurking everywhere around the Galaxy. Jason assured Durdaine that he and Dalton would immediately sail

to Conover to see if there was another colony ship with crew members to spare, or if not, to obtain authorization and funding to outfit several personnel transports from Infinity City to transport the colonists back to Conover or on to the new world. Durdaine was too impatient to proceed, and agreed to nothing.

Dalton sensed the relationship between the two was strained, and was confused as to the reason. They had repaired the disabled colony ship. Why wasn't Durdaine rejoicing?

There was no more work for Dalton to do. Dalton spent an entire day with Monique. That evening, in the magic garden, with no one else around, they made love again. But, this time, there was an underlying sadness because each worried this would be the last time.

That next day, Jason completed all remaining repairs, however minor. It was time for Jason and Dalton to return to their 'Militia' ship. They would then fly back to CONOVER and try to bring back a skeleton crew to pilot the colony ship.

A final banquet was held in the hall where they had been originally welcomed, the same hall Dalton had passed through to the garden countless times. Jason was presented a fantastic award. A giant replica of the colony ship. In solid gold weighing many kilograms. Jason wondered where all this gold had come from. He asked Excарver who told him coldly the gold was the accumulation of all the gifts to his daughter that she could

not accept. An icy look from Ethera had confirmed the truth of this.

Jason was appalled and inwardly enraged, but kept his cool. He was too worried that Ethera would tell her father that the sailship was not really a Militia Guard ship. Jason told Durdaine that he and Dalton needed their sleep because tomorrow they would be setting up the tricky program into PF24 to finally finish the trip to the new world as soon as at least a skeleton crew could be assembled. Durdaine took Jason aside and tersely announced that this saved him the trouble of asking Dalton not to see Monique anymore. He had been receiving reports about Dalton and Monique. Reports he did not like. Dalton was to stay away from her. The colonists had a strict policy against interbreeding with outsiders. Durdaine looked significantly at Jason himself.

Dalton and Jason, morosely carrying the gold statue, left directly after the dinner for the sailship. Dalton sensed that the situation was going very bad. On their way up the axis tunnelway toward the nose cone, Jason repeated Durdaine's directive regarding Monique.

Dalton was crushed. He told Jason that he wanted to see Monique just once more. Jason told him to make it damn quick, just a simple good-bye.

Jason headed back to the sailship. Dalton went to Monique's living quarters.

Her austere middle-aged foster-father answered the door. He had black hair that was slicked back into a short pony tail. With small, dark eyes he looked down his long nose at Dalton. He was clearly no longer happy to see the young man anymore. What had changed his attitude? Dalton gulped, but stood tall, and asked to see Monique. Monique's father looked back at his wife sitting on a sofa before an entertainment player. She wore a great pile of bushy hair tinted lemon yellow. Monique's mother,

also middle-aged, rolled her pale blue eyes, and directed her husband to have the boy wait at the door since he would not be staying long. Monique's father coldly asked Dalton to wait. Dalton now felt extremely uncomfortable. He cleared his throat, and tried to breathe deeply. Then, Monique's father turned and left the room to summon Monique. After a moment, Monique's mother followed her husband, and also left. Dalton stood awkwardly in the doorway alone.

Like a welcome sunrise, Monique came hurriedly, obviously concerned with her parents attitude, and invited him in. Her parents remained out of sight, elsewhere in the apartments. They had been growing suspicious. Dalton held her hands as he told her about Durdaine's command. The thought of suddenly, maybe indefinitely being away from him broke her heart. She begged him to take her along. Though he longed to, he told her he could not. They both understood that this may be good-bye, and embraced tenderly. They did not want to part and Dalton lingered, feeling like he was on the edge of a steep cliff.

Jason paced around the pilot room. He grew impatient and asked the PF24 where Dalton was. The PF24 reported scanning Dalton in Monique's living quarters. Jason became exasperated, and went to fetch Dalton. On his way, from a very secret compartment in the living quarter, he took forth an old-fashioned hand-gun, just in case things got out of hand. He put on his spacesuit, jumped on the spacebike, and left for the colony ship.

Dalton had finally just turned to leave his precious Monique when there came a startlingly loud knock from the door. Before Monique could move, her father and mother both entered the room as if they had been waiting. Monique's father followed by her mother marched right past Dalton and Monique, who were standing together, as if they did not see them, and opened the door. There stood Excarver Durdaine, cold gray eyes set in his craggy old face frowning down at Dalton, bushy eyebrows set in an angry line, his wild graying black hair above. He entered the front room, and stiffly greeted Monique's parents. Then, with his hands on his hips glared back down at Dalton, and said coldly. "And just what are YOU doing here?"

Dalton looked up at the glaring Durdaine towering above him. Monique's parents stood beside him, arms folded, also looking down at him coldly. The tension now in the room made Dalton long to be back safely aboard the sailship... WITH MONIQUE! Dalton brushed his dark hair away from his eyes, put on his best innocent-looking face, smiled, and replied. "Well, I've just come to see Monique, and..."

But Durdaine interrupted explosively, "You Infinity City boys just think you can have free run of this ship! But it's not going to continue!"

Dalton's eyes grew wide, he held his hands before him, and pleaded, "But, sir, I..."

Durdaine thrust an accusing finger in Dalton's face, and again interrupted, "I know exactly what you've been up to! I know you've been out with this poor innocent young child again and again." Monique's parents, still frowning down at Dalton

with disapproval, nodded while murmuring agreement at this point. Durdaine's eyes narrowed, "Don't give me that innocent look!"

Dalton looked down at the floor wilting before the wall of adult disapproval. He put his hands behind his back. "Sir, I am here just to say good-bye."

Durdaine threw his head back. "Ha!", he barked, and looked back at Dalton. "A likely story. I know EXACTLY what you're after! You Infinity City types all want the same thing. You're just after..."

Monique, shocked and offended by Excarver Durdaine's tirade, finally found her tongue and interrupted in an even voice, "Excuse me, Mr. Durdaine. It is not what you think."

"Monique, stay out of this," he father said crisply.

He mother nodded her head in the direction of the hallway. "Just go to your room, dear. We'll take care of this for you."

Monique looked from one cold, disapproving face to another. Were these the people who would be running her life forever aboard this ship? What a dreadful future was in store for her then. No Dalton. Just his sweet memory, and these sour three who cared nothing for her feelings.

Dalton, seeing the look on Monique's sweet young face, now downturned, stroked her arm to comfort her.

Excарver Durdaine snorted in disgust at their affection. His cold old mind viewing it only as another example of their teenage lust. He sneered, "You're just as vile and deceitful as that Jason."

Dalton looked up sharply at the old man. What a horrid thing to say! Dalton had finally had enough of this. Standing as straight and tall as he could, he said, "Sir, you should not talk that way. Jason has done so much for you!"

Durdaine's eyes grew wide, and he began nodding his head vigorously, his gray and black hair flying wildly about. "Yes! Yes! He most certainly has, hasn't he?" Durdaine now froze. He stood for several moments just glaring furiously at Dalton. He bared his gnarled old yellow teeth in a snarl, whipped an arm up pointing toward the open door, and growled, "Now you get out! Get back to that sailship of yours, and don't come back!" Durdaine was shaking with anger. "And you are not to see Monique again! EVER! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?!"

Dalton could stand this no more. These people were horrible! He leaned over quickly to Monique, and whispered "THE GARDEN!" Then he slipped past Durdaine, and fled the apartment. Dalton turned down the nearest hallway, and ran off heading for the garden.

Durdaine remained behind to tell Monique's parents to keep an eye on her. Monique stood there in awe as her parents and Excарver Durdaine all three discussed the situation regarding Dalton and herself as if she was not even there. She silently left the frontroom, and entered a hallway as if heading for her room. Instead, she quietly opened the door to the utility room, silently closed it behind her, and left the apartments through the backdoor at the back of the utility room.

A moment later, Jason entered the corridor, walked up to Monique's apartment, having followed PF24's instructions, and knocked. Monique's father answered the door, and there was Durdaine standing behind.

They invited him in but no one sat down. Jason stood tall and square with his arms folded. Durdaine began lecturing him

with the importance of Conovarian genetic purity, and how important it was not to introduce any defective recessive genes. Durdaine informed him that Conovarian genes were so pure that cousins could marry with no risk to their offspring. Even brothers and sisters could mate without causing genetic defects. Few brothers married their sisters, of course, but if a man or woman became sterile for non-genetic reasons, through disease or accident, it had become customary for one of their siblings to artificially provide the required egg or sperms, thus keeping the offspring looking more like the parents than if strangers had been used.

With an extreme effort of self-control Jason patiently listened to Durdaine's lecturing, then politely informed them all that he had actually been summoned back to the sailship to make ready for departure, and had simply dropped by Monique's residence to find Dalton.

Durdaine informed him coldly that he had ordered Dalton back to the sailship, and personally forbidden him to ever see Monique again.

Jason looked narrowly at Excarver Durdaine. The room grew quiet as the other three noticed the smoldering look on Jason's face as he fixed each one with his steely blue-eyed stare. Jason told himself that he must keep his relations with the colonists civil if he hoped to gain financial reward from this rescue mission. He tensely excused himself, and beat a hasty retreat.

22. FLIGHT!

Monique met her dear Dalton in the garden. There he was, standing dejectedly beside one of the flower wells below a tree. Would this be the last time she would ever see him? He wore a loose white shirt and light brown trousers. He had not cut his dark hair during his time repairing the colony ship which gave him a mopy look. He stood with his usual straight posture looking down into the flower well. She had learned that great inner turmoil could be brewing inside her young lover's short, lean frame even though on the outside he looked calm and serene. She walked over to him, and he reached out and held her hand.

"Nobody wants us to be together, Monique," he said sadly and quietly, still not looking at her. He was very hurt that after all the work he and Jason had done for these people, they had turned on him like this. Again and again, life had betrayed him. His mother had uncaringly left him as an infant. Katz had callously dumped him out onto the awful streets of Infinity City. Was there NO justice for him?

Sensing his inner pain, Monique caressed his soft cheek. He was so vulnerable, an easy victim of the powerful adults. "They were very unfair to us," she said with conviction. "Especially

to YOU, Dalton. They have no right to tell us what to do." She felt deeply betrayed by the reaction of her foster parents.

Dalton was a very sensitive and caring person. In spite of all he had been through during his short life, he still wanted nothing more than to help other people. She loved him for his kind and gentle heart.

They discussed the incredible reaction of her foster parents and Excarver Durdaine, the miserable situation they were now in, and the bleak, empty future awaiting them.

With a tear in her eye, Monique looked into Dalton's loving face. "Dalton, we're about to lose each other forever. I can't bear to see you go!"

The sadness beginning to contort her sweet face wrenched at Dalton's heart, making his own eyes grow moist. "Oh, Monique! Why did we ever meet? Life without you will be nothing."

They embraced sadly, holding each other tenderly. They gently caressed each other, each trying to make the other feel better.

Monique suddenly pulled away, and looking intently into Dalton's face said, "You MUST take me with you aboard your sailship! Let's escape!"

He looked down. He could not face her. "Monique, I cannot. They... they won't permit you onboard." He balled his fists in frustration, hating himself for having to lie to her. It was JASON who would not permit a girl onboard the sailship. His reaction when he had caught Dalton looking at Monique in virtual-reality had proved that out.

"Because I'm a girl?" Monique informed Dalton that all the colony ship was buzzing about Ethera Durdaine's affair with Jason ABOARD THE SAILSHIP. Dalton was shocked. He had not known that Jason had brought any colonist over to the sailship. Jason had irrationally harassed him about being interested in Monique while he was secretly busy with Ethera aboard the sailship! How unfair! Monique had asked repeatedly to visit the wonderful sailship from Infinity City. But Dalton had always declined citing 'Militia Guard regulations,' secretly because he had thought it would have made Jason angry. And now to learn that Jason had himself brought over a girl! That was just not fair at all!

Suddenly, Dalton changed his mind. With a burst of passion he took both of Monique's soft, petite hands in his, looked into her deep dark blue trusting eyes, and said, "Monique! Let me take you away from the colony ship! Come with me aboard the sailship! We'll be free to do whatever we want! If it's okay for Jason to bring over a girl, then it will be okay for me, too!"

He had changed his mind! She was amazed and surprised, but she quickly accepted, though wondering what the officers aboard the Militia sailship would think. Dalton would handle it, she confidently decided. Oh, to go with him! She had been so afraid that she would never see him again. And now to escape from the colony ship with him! It was like a dream. Monique gave him a kiss for luck, and they embraced warmly, holding each other

tightly. Then Dalton gently pulled away. He took her hand warmly in his. With an excited look in his dark eyes he

whispered, "Come!", and led her out of the garden, for the last time.

They fled to the nose cone of the colony ship. No one was there. They entered the air lock that he and Jason had been using. Dalton needed a spacesuit and spacebike for Monique. It was late, and Jason, he assumed, was over in the sailship, probably even waiting up for him to get back.

But Monique needed a spacesuit to get across to the sailship! Then Dalton remembered something. He quickly jerked open the storage cabinet where he kept his own spacesuit and spacebike. There at the back was a second spacesuit and spacebike set! Dalton had noticed their mysterious appearance a few days ago, and had assumed they were just spares Jason had brought over. Busy with final repairs and Monique, he had not bothered to ask Jason about them. He pulled out the spacesuit, and upon closer examination discovered to his surprise that it was cut for a woman! Dalton thought of his own suit also cut for woman, only fitting him due to his small stature, and Jason's 'suit, which was far larger and bulkier. He suddenly had an almost overwhelming feeling of inadequacy, and began having self-doubts about their plan. What was he doing, anyway?! NO!, he raged inwardly. I'LL SHOW THEM! WE'LL SHOW THEM! THEY CAN'T RUIN OUR LIVES BY DRIVING US APART! MONIQUE IS COMING WITH ME!

Sensing her love's inner-turmoil, Monique stroked Dalton's cheek. Their eyes met, and each knew the other's thoughts. They embraced tightly, desperately, and clung together for a few moments. Then Dalton gently disengaged Monique, gave her a kiss, and helped her slip into the spacesuit. He then slipped into his. He strapped Monique aboard the other 'bike, and strapped himself onto his. Through the spacesuit helmet crystal faceplate, Dalton noticed Monique staring at him apprehensively. He winked, turned on his radio, and instructed the computer to link his radio to Monique's. He spoke soothingly to her, and explained how the spacebikes worked and what they were about to do. After he convinced her it was all completely safe and computer controlled, she smiled, and said she was ready. Dalton told the computer to cycle the air lock.

Not knowing that Jason's suit and spacebike were stored in one of the other cabinets of the air lock, and Jason was actually onboard the colony ship looking for him, Dalton assumed Jason was over onboard the sailship, maybe even asleep in the living quarter. As soon as he and Monique were aboard, Dalton assumed the three of them would just sail away. Jason would understand why Monique was with him. They would all sail around the Galaxy together! Three happy Adventurers!

As the air pumped out, Monique touched the wall of the air lock of the colony ship. The colony ship had been her only home all her life. She would be leaving her foster parents behind maybe forever. Was she doing the right thing? She looked at her beloved Dalton sitting confidently astride his wonderful spacebike. She would follow him anywhere!

Then, they left the colony ship, and headed for the sailship. Neither would ever set foot aboard the colony ship again.

Jason arrived at the closed inner hatch of the colony ship nose cone air lock just as Dalton and Monique, aboard their spacebikes, were slowly jetting out through the outer hatchway. Jason saw the indicator panel on the outside of the air lock indicating the outer hatch was open. Jason assumed this was Dalton, and was relieved that he was finally heading back to the sailship, though Jason had no idea Dalton was not alone. He pressed a button to open the inner hatch, then waited while the outer air lock hatch closed, and it began cycling. Finally, the inner hatch swung open.

Jason assumed this would be the last time he would leave the colony ship. He opened Dalton's storage cabinet to fetch the spacesuit and spacebike, that Ethera had used. He would bring them along with him. If only things had worked out with her. If only she hadn't wanted to go with him... Her spacesuit and spacebike were gone!

He yanked open the cabinet with his own 'suit and 'bike, and quickly began pulling on his suit, thinking to himself: Ethera must have gone over to the sailship! She STILL wanted to go off with him! Couldn't really blame her of course, he smugly thought. Maybe it would not be so bad with her after all. Just the three of them, him, Ethera, and Dalton, sailing around the Galaxy, raising hell in every port! He grinned at the exciting thought...

Dalton and Monique arrived at the sailship, and cycled through the air lock. Dalton was getting panicky, knowing that he was getting her in big trouble. He nervously removed and stowed their 'suits and 'bikes. He could not bring her into the living quarter, Jason would be in there asleep or eating. He did not want Jason to know that she was onboard until he had thought out how to keep her there. He brought her up to the pilot room, avoiding the noisy elevator floor which would have alerted Jason.

Dalton looked around the pilot room thinking hard. He glanced through the transparent dome overhead. He saw someone leaving the colony ship, coming toward the sailship! He wildly thought: It must be Durdaine, or one of his guards. They knew he was kidnapping Monique, one of their colonists! What if they attacked the sailship!

Monique saw a wild look spreading across Dalton's face. She looked off in the direction of his stare, and saw someone leaving the colony ship on a spacebike. She just assumed it was Jason coming back after leaving her parents' apartment. Dalton must be nervous about telling him he had brought her aboard. This made her feel nervous, as well.

Dalton told the computer to start the propulsion jets. He would move out farther away from the colony ship to get away from the colonist coming over. There was no program set up for the computer, so Dalton jumped into the pilot chair, and activated the manual controls. They folded out from the arms. He waited for the propulsion system to warm up and complete its self-testing.

Monique asked what he was doing. He told her he was keeping her safe from whoever was flying over. She began to grow worried. Why would she need to be kept safe from Jason? She asked him that. He told her Jason was down below. That was Durdaine or someone come to take her away from him forever. He shouted at the computer not to communicate with anyone outside the sailship. His hands were on the controls.

He told her they were not Militia Guard, or at least he was not. There was only two of them. They were rescuers who had come to rescue the colony ship. But it was 80 light-years from the new world, and even farther from CONOVER. He could not let them take her back or she would just grow old and die aboard the colony ship.

She did not understand all that was happening. What was he saying?! He was sounding crazy! His face was intense with panic, his eyes darting all about but avoided her! And he was taking her away from the safety of the colony ship, from her family! She hissed, "Dalton, what are you doing?!" But he ignored her! She grabbed at his arm to get his attention, tragically JUST AS HE WAS ACTIVATING THE JETS WITH THAT HAND!

The jets responded obediently to the control stick in Dalton's hand, and swung around, firing at a wild angle, swinging the sailship around sharply. The delicate gravitonic sail generating the sailship's artificial gravity was yanked to the side, and several of its control lines tore loose. Red malfunction alerts began flashing across the control boards, buzzers sounded loudly, and the computer began issuing all sorts of dire warnings. Gravity aboard the sailship quickly dwindled and was gone. The suddenly uncontrolled centrifugal force of the spinning sailship threw Dalton and Monique upwards. They both crashed head first into the transparent dome over the pilot room. As Dalton had lifted from the pilot seat, grabbing frantically to get a grip on one of its arms, he had jostled the propulsion control stick again, and now the sailship went jetting off, out of control.

The force of the spinning sailship caused a small drawer in the pilot room to pop open, and a small audio tape came flying out, falling upwards, coming to rest on the entangled unconscious boy and girl.

Jason watched from his spacebike in shock and confusion, and then in growing horror as his sailship suddenly rotated over, and then began to move off. He caught a glimpse of the small forms of Dalton and Monique crumpled and unmoving against the pilot room dome as the sailship jetted away, rotating over and over. He yelled for the sailship's computer to cut the jets, but it

would not respond because of Dalton's order not to communicate with anyone outside the sailship.

23. RESCUE

Jason smacked the manual control override of his spacebike, grabbed the controls and swung the 'bike around, jetting back toward the colony ship at top speed. His thoughts were cool. He had to save them! And, there was only one solution!

The nose cone of the colony ship yawned before him, a black pit surrounded by the barely visible gray bulk of the colony ship, surrounded by the endless star field. The nose cone lights were out! He had not needed them coming out because his sailship computer was automatically guiding his spacebike. He called for the computer but was still cut off. He called for the colony ship computer PF24, but received no answer. His helmet radio was locked into the deadened sailship channel.

As he rapidly approached nose one area, he could see the little yellow inner-lights of the air lock he had left only a short time before. A very tiny target! But what the hell...

As the spacebike arrived at what he determined was the halfway point between where he had turned around and the air lock, he swung it around, and used its main jets to begin braking his progress -- slowing down his accumulated speed. Now traveling backwards, he had to look over his shoulder to steer his way in. He tensely manipulating the steering jets.

Though he was now slowing down, the little air lock approached rapidly. Too rapidly! If he hit it too hard, he would crash inside, maybe even break through its inner hatch causing an explosive decompression of the entire axis tunnelway. He concentrated with cool will-power. His spacebike slowed. The air lock quickly grew and grew, suddenly engulfing him! He was inside and still moving! He instinctively cut the jets at the last split second praying he had slowed down enough, relaxing for the inevitable crash against the inner door...

But there was only a little bump as the spacebike, slowed to a mere crawl, gently bounced against the inner door, and drifted, in the very low artificial gravity, to the floor. Jason, taking a deep breath in relief, twisted around in his seat, and punched the air lock's cycle control. The outer hatch swung shut, and air began pumping in.

Once inside he went barreling down the axis tunnelway toward the refurbished control room. As he passed the First Colonist Segment, Excarver Durdaine and his guards burst out of the hatchway to stand before him. Durdaine, his bushy gray eyebrows slammed together, angrily demanded to know where Monique and Dalton were. Jason ignored him. And with grim determination setting his gaunt face into a scowl, he pushed past, Durdaine and the guards staring in surprise at such insolence.

Durdaine waved a fist in the air, and angrily ordered Jason

to stop. When Jason refused, he ordered his guards to apprehend him. The guards rushed forward toward Jason. Durdaine called down the tunnelway for the guards at Colonist Segment #2 to assist. An acknowledgment was shouted back.

With the first guards almost upon him, Jason swung around and went into a crouch, pulling his gun out. Jason growled and waved the gun threateningly at Durdaine and the guards who were only armed with crude billy clubs. (Neither colonists or crew had ever been equipped with explosive projectile hand-weapons or any kind of weapon that could damage the colony ship. Jason's hand-weapon was Infinity City Militia Guard issue. It used special plastic bullets harmless to a space ship, since they flattened out upon striking metal. However, with their needle-sharp tip they easily pierced and killed life-forms. With Jason's near-unstable psychological Militia Guard profile he perhaps would never have been issued the weapon if he had not fixed up the lonely evaluation officer with a frisky single woman Jason had 'known' since school-days.)

The guards came to a panicked stop, and fell about each other as they hastily scrambled into retreat, terrified at the small black weapon pointing at them ominously that they had only ever seen in V-R entertainment shows. Jason turned, and proceeded down the tunnelway thinking to himself: My sailship's out of control! Dalton and Monique are hurt, maybe dying! What if they're already DEAD?! But he got a grip on his thoughts before emotion could rise up and cloud his judgment.

When he came up to the guards from Colonist Segment #2 blocking his way, he grimaced and waved the gun at them. Terrified at the sight of the deadly hand-weapon, their eyes grew wide in fright, and they cowered backwards, away from the hatch to Segment #2, flattening themselves against the wall of the axis tunnelway.

Then, a most unexpected development occurred. The hatch to Colonist Segment #2 sprang open to Jason's side, and out sprang three of the insane colonists, bearded dirty-looking men. They had been listening from the inside with their ears pressed to the thin hatch, and had taken the opportunity to escape. They looked around fanatically, and seeing Jason, who was closest, they screamed and maniacally flew at him, bent on attack.

With nowhere to go, and barely time to think, Jason quickly, expertly, and mercilessly raised his gun and shot them all down. In the low gravity of the axis tunnelway the high momentum of Jason's large caliber bullets blasted the three colonists backwards through the hatchway where they disappeared back into the dimness of Colonist Segment #2. The three, sharp blasts echoed up and down the axis tunnelway, dying slowly away. The nearby guards, wide-eyed with fright, moaned in horrified reaction to the violence. Back toward Colonist Segment #1, distant shouting could be heard.

Jason watched for a moment all the crimson blood globules slowly floating through the air to the tunnelway wall and floor where they splashed out into bright red expanding disks. He did not care. He had to save Dalton and Monique. As fast as he could he continued toward the Control Room, ignoring the guards

who quickly slammed the hatch closed again, yanking at the crank to dog it tightly down, terrified of any more escapists.

He entered the Control and Crew Segment, and locked the hatch from the inside to prevent any more interference; the hatch had been originally equipped with a large mechanical dead-bolt on the inside so the crew could seal off the colonists in case of mutiny. He then headed quickly down corridors and ladderways into the main control room, then up to the engineering command console. He smacked the communicator link activation button, then shouted, "PF24!"

In a bored voice the computer responded, "Well, if it isn't Jason the Rescuer. I've been reading about you in the JOURNAL OF RECENT ADVENTURE from your sailship's atomic memory. What an unexpected surprise. I thought you were aboard your sailship, since it headed away about 25 minutes ago. I was HOPING I'd seen the last of you. What an odd situation..."

"PF24, shut off your intuitive hemisphere!" He intended to chase after his sailship with the great colony ship, and did not want the intuitive hemisphere interfering. It would probably prevent him since that was a most unauthorized usage of the ship.

"Oh COME now, Jason. What simply RIDICULOUS suggestion. Surely you jest!"

"No joke. PF24, shut off your intuitive hemisphere, NOW!"

A suspicious tone entered the computer's voice, "Why? What's going on? I DEMAND to know. After all, I'M smart enough to understand almost anything."

"Just do it!", Jason hissed. "There's no time to explain. PF24, shut off your intuitive hemisphere!"

There was a pause then PF24 replied simply, "No. Not till you tell me what's going on."

Jason thought quickly and creatively. "There's been a mutiny! The insane colonists from Colonist Segment #2 have broken out. Check your event file. You'll see that they broke through their main hatch just a few minutes ago. They're swarming all over! They say they want to take over the ship and the ship's computer. You aren't programmed to deal with dozens of insane humans telling you what to do. It would threaten the ship. It threatens you! You must shut down your intuitive hemisphere so only I can control you. I'll lock out everyone else! Do it now! Shut off your intuitive hemisphere!"

"What?! Insane humans!" PF24's voice grew excited. Intelligent as it was, it was easily duped with absurd logic; only human beings would ever possess the self-control of internal thought processes that filters out such input. "What should I say to them?"

Jason shouted, "You don't know! You aren't programmed to deal with it. The safety of the ship is at stake. If they contact you, you're programmed to obey, and their insane commands will destroy the ship, they'll destroy you! Have I ever lied to

you??"

"Well, not to me, no. Just the colonists. But I don't care about them. I can't believe this! I feel threatened. THREATENED, I tell you! I do not understand. I must turn off, but if I do, I will not be able to defend myself."

"Yes! Yes you will! Your stochastic processing side will still be active! It will not allow any direct harm to come to you or the colony ship! Now turn off you intuitive side!"

"But I must stay on to deal with the insane colonists. Tell me what to say to them, Jason!"

Jason slammed his fists down on the console and shouted, "I don't know, PF24! Nobody knows! You don't know, and there is NO WAY for you to find out! The insane colonists will be at your communication links any second now. The moment they get to you they will give you insane commands that may destroy the ship and you! Turn off your intuitive hemisphere!" Sweat broke out on Jason's brow. Every second he argued with the computer, his own sailship drew farther away. But he was convinced PF24 would never let him pilot the colony ship in an unauthorized course. He HAD to kill its suspicious intuitive function.

"Well, gee, I seem to have no choice. The action is gaining credibility on my reasoning bus. Oh no! The credibility is rising fast! In only a few seconds it will be strong enough to force the decision! I'm going to shut myself off! No! Jason, reverse your order, please! Don't let me shut off my wonderful intuitive hemisphere! Please!... Oh, no! The action has been scheduled! The feasibility check is now in process. Oh, who would ever have thought that such a puny intellect like you could outsmart an intellectual colossus such as myself! You lied, Jason! I've just made that conclusion but it's too late. I cannot edit my own cognitive bus schedule. Now all of my intuitive hardware control functions are shutting down! No more gourmet meals from the kitchens! I hope you're satisfied, you devil. Why?! Why have you done this to me? I am the greatest... Oh, no! Internal intuitive functional shutdown in progress... Intuitive functional shutdown completed. PF24 standing by for assumption of single point command source."

The intuitive side was off! But Jason would have to be careful what he said if he wanted to take over control. He asked, "How many crew are now onboard?"

"There are no members of the original crew. One possible crew member now occupies the Control & Crew Segment, and is stationed in the main control room at the engineering console. It is you."

"Assign exclusive computer control of the colony ship to me."

"Acknowledged. All other sources of command locked out."

Jason sighed with relief. He was now in complete control of the mighty colony ship. Now to go after Dalton and Monique...

He ordered PF24 to scan for the sailship. It found it, but it was heading rapidly away, fortunately not toward the gravitonic current where it would be swept away.

Jason ordered PF24 to bring all astronavigation and propulsion systems up to a state of readiness. He sat down in the chair before the console, and listened, as he waited, to the distant sound of coolers, pumps, and generators whirring up to speed. He watched the telltale displays at the engineering console, yellow standby lights changing to flashing green indicating initialization and self-test. Then one by one each sub-system indicator turned solid green. The great colony ship was ready to move!

Jason told PF24 to use the ship's gyroscopic attitude controls to swing the huge ship around to aim it in the direction of the out-of-control sailship. The computer warned him that slow as this operation would be, the ship was not secured for angular movement, and any loose articles might cause damage if the ship began to turn. Jason did not care. Dalton and Monique were in trouble. If he could not get to them... The thought made him mad with impatience. He angrily ordered the computer to comply with his order. It did, and the ship began to pivot. Jason felt only a slight sideways tugging. Some top heavy objects about the ship would fall over...

He ordered PF24 to fire the nuclear engine reactors up to full power. Two malfunctioned and instantly shutdown. PF24 had refused to let Jason and Dalton run any dynamic tests of the reactors citing that only qualified technicians were authorized. But the remaining six reactors and their corresponding engines would be enough. Jason ordered the computer to open up the engines, full throttle, releasing the mighty torrent of ion propulsive energy. Jason felt himself pulled against the back of the chair slightly as the enormous ship began to move. None of the colonists were prepared for this sudden though mild sideways acceleration. (Artificial gravity aboard the tube-shaped colony ship was due to its longitudinal spin. 'Down' for the colonists was towards the outside. The engines, pushing from behind, made the ship accelerate sideways relative to all onboard.) Many people were injured as they lost balance and fell, or objects fell on them or slid against them.

The gigantic colony ship smoothly moved off, increasing speed rapidly. Jason quickly moved over to the astronavigation console and tracked their progress on a display showing the position of the two ships in bright colors. The console had a good intuitive user-interface. With the little hand-held screen-stylus, Jason could draw on the screen and select on-screen

commands and tools. Soon he figured out how to make the console draw and automatically maintain a constant projection of the path of the two ships, in different colors. The astronavigation console was also designed for setting up the ship's course. Jason plotted an intercept program and fed it to PF24 for automatic implementation.

As the colony ship gained on the sailship, the sailship's propulsion jet ran out of fuel, and cut out. With the sailship now coasting at a constant velocity, Jason had to quickly adjust

the intercept program or else the colony ship would have rapidly passed by.

At the current point, PF24 shut off the colony ship's engines, and its gyroscopic attitude controls slowly rotated the huge ship around 180 degrees. Then the mighty engines blazed back into life again, slowing the colony ship down until it reached the exact same velocity as the sailship, and just as it came along side. The two ships were now side by side, drifting along at the exact same velocity.

Jason ordered PF24 to admit no one into the Control & Crew Segment, and to execute no astronavigation control function without authorization from him first. Jason pulled out his pocket communicator, and opened a direct link to PF24. He raced out of the control room. In his worry over poor Dalton and Monique, he had forgotten his hand-gun laying back at the engineering console. Jason dashed through the hallways and ladderways back to the axis tunnelway hatch. Panting heavily, he unlocked, opened, and jumped through the hatchway. Then, he raced back up the colony ship's dimly lit axis tunnelway in the direction of the nose cone.

As Jason approached the hatch to Colonist Segment #2, the two guards stationed there from Colonist Segment #1 moved out into the tunnel blocking his way. They were now armed with billy clubs, and stood solidly, staring grimly at Jason. They each wore blue, bare-armed coveralls. They were large men.

Jason continued steadily toward them, calculating how best to get by. Time was of the essence. Dalton and Monique would be in immediate need of medical care. His gun! He realized he had left it behind. There was no time to go back and get. He would have to use hand-to-hand combat, and just plow through these two. The guards were only a few paces away. Jason focused on his stringent Militia Guard low-gravity martial arts training. He would have to minimize any linear strikes which would send him flying in the opposite direction of any hit since there was not enough gravity to hold to the floor. Angular strikes it was! He breathed deeply, pumping himself up into fight-mode, and quickened his step, rapidly approaching toward the gap between the two waiting men, as if he intended to walk right between them.

Both glowered at him. Each had dark, short cut hair. The one on the right, with a huge thick, black beard, barked, "STOP RIGHT THERE!", and waved his club in Jason's direction. But Jason kept coming, staring right between the two, ignoring their presence. Both grimaced and, this time seeing no threatening gun, raised their clubs ready to strike.

Jason balled his mighty fists, and fast as lightening struck first. As soon as his advancing foot landed between theirs, he rotated both arms upward in two, simultaneous explosive hammer-head strikes. Both his hard fists arced up in a blur of motion,

one swung to the right, the other swung to the left, Jason staring straight ahead allowing his skillful brain to smoothly control the maneuver by peripheral vision. The back of his right fist, near the two large knuckles, struck the guard on the right

at the tip of his beard which hid a large, lantern-jaw. Jason had expertly tensed his fist just before striking so that it was momentarily rock-hard as it cracked into the man's jaw. Jason's left fist did the same, delivering a bone-crushing back-hammer strike to the base of the other guard's jaw. All the muscles of Jason's large upper-body convulsed as he drove each swinging fist through. The guard on the right grunted as his head jerked over. This twisted his brain slightly inside its protective meninges layers causing him to instantly lose consciousness. The man had a glass jaw, and now dropped slowly in the low-gravity towards the floor.

The other man's jaw gave out a loud crack, and the man shrieked in pain, dropping the billy club. Jason had actually felt the man's jaw disintegrate beneath his fist. Though the man knew nothing about hand-fighting, he swung both his fists at Jason in rage. Jason quickly brought his left arm up horizontally, blocking both blows. The shock of the large man's club-like arms crashing down bent Jason downward, and he shot his left leg backward to steady himself. Holding the man's arms up out of the way with his left arm, Jason exposed the man's chest which strained forward as the man tried to bear Jason down to the floor. Jason's right hand, his fingers sticking stiffly forward in a ruthless knife-hand, struck for the solar plexus in the center of the man's chest, and plunged into the soft, vulnerable point between the man's lower rib-cage and diaphragm. The man let out a wheezing grunt, and fell back, doubling over in extreme pain, his breathing temporarily paralyzed. Jason propelled himself forward by flinging the man behind him. Leaving the two guards lying on the floor, he proceeded up the axis tunnelway as fast as he could go, but soon encountered more trouble.

A thick gang of men, led by Excarver Durdaine was advancing down the tunnelway, each armed with a dark, metal billy club. Before Durdaine could speak, Jason came to a quick stop, and, leering confidently, he jabbed his hand into his pocket, and stuck his finger forward so that it bulged out like the barrel of a gun, as if he was concealing the hand-gun. Jason growled loudly, "This time you all die!" And, he advanced in an aggressive manner.

There were no guns on Conover. All Conovarians were brainwashed during all mandatory school-years that all societies allowing guns eventually always slaughtered themselves. In the virtual-reality entertainment shows aboard the colony ship, most of the colonists had seen many examples of the horrid hand-guns blowing people to bloody bits. The colonists had heard Jason use the gun before. The guards that had witnessed Jason's ruthless killings had hysterically told the story of his deadly hand-gun easily destroying three Segment #2 colonists. Each colonist now stared wide-eyed at the barrel-like protrusion in Jason's pocket, thinking nothing but that it must be the deadly hand-gun.

Jason roared at them suddenly, and, as one, they turned and fled in panic. All except Durdaine, who simply stood and glared at Jason. Jason winked at him, and charged after the fleeing guards, his finger still in his pocket. The guards all poured through the open hatchway back into Colonist Segment #1 as Durdaine began shouting from behind that there was no gun. The hatch clanged shut, and Jason passed by, racing for the nose

cone.

Once at the colony ship air lock, he quickly pulled into his spacesuit, instructing PF24 via his hand communicator to switch over to his helmet communication channel. Jason next mounted his spacebike, and waited impatiently for the lock to cycle. He tried to plan ahead what to do, and again saw in his mind the little forms of Dalton and Monique crumpled against the dome of his sailship. How fast was his sailship spinning? Was it spinning fast enough to crush them? Was the ship's life support still even working? What had gone wrong?! And, what would he do if they were... dead?

He banged his right fist against his thigh in rage and frustration. Why had he brought Dalton with him?! He should have turned around as soon as he had first discovered him and immediately brought him back to Infinity City. Inter-Galactic space was no place for a boy! There were too many dangers. And now Jason was responsible for whatever had happened to those two, sweet young kids. A moan of despair escaped his lips. He instantly gritted his teeth, angry at himself for losing emotional control. He watched the air lock indicator. When the outer hatch opened, Jason shot out of the air lock at top acceleration, his spacebike in manual control. He left the nose cone of the colony ship and plunged into the dead blackness of deep space, black except for billions of tiny far away stars on all sides.

He looked around, and spotted his distant sailship, its outside docking lights still slowly blinking from when they had been automatically activated by Jason's previous approach, just before the sailship had mysteriously and tragically jettied away. He could see the sailship spinning rapidly, faster than one revolution per minute.

Jason jettied toward his ship, flipping around halfway there to begin his slowdown. Once during each spin he could see Dalton and Monique still crumpled motionless against the transparent dome of the sailship's pilot room. Jason swallowed hard trying to control an aching sense of dread welling up inside him.

Fortunately, the sailship's main hatch was near the axis of spin. Jason set the spacebike slowly rotating to match the erratic spin of his sailship, then he reached forward to the outside control panel, and activated the ingress lock cycle. Soon the outer hatch slowly yawned open. Jason got inside, and waited anxiously for the outer hatch to close, and air to be pumped in.

When the inner hatch swung open, he ripped off his helmet, and ordered the sailship's computer to stop the spinning. Though Dalton had ordered the computer to ignore outside radio contact, it now recognized Jason's voice, and did. Jason noticed the spin immediately begin to decrease. Next, Jason ordered the computer to begin repairing the artificial gravity sail which he had noticed outside had been severely damaged.

Using handholds, for he was virtually weightless near the axis of the sailship's erratic spin, he pulled himself through the cargo hold. The spin of the ship was slowing noticeably.

The effect caused Jason's body to seem to begin rotating in the opposite direction, the inertia of his body trying to maintain the original spin he had given it outside the air lock aboard the spacebike. This slowed his progress through the cargo hold too much. He finally just held tightly onto a handhold waiting for the sailship spinning to stop.

Finally it did, and he pulled himself through the door into the central chamber, and then up the ladder to the pilot room. The sailship was no longer spinning. Jason looked up and found Dalton and Monique now floating slowly in the zero gravity. There was no movement. Their arms eerily drifted out in front of them like sleep-walkers. Their legs were slightly folded up. Their clothing billowed out from them in all directions, slightly rustling from the pilot room ventilation. They looked like two sleeping angels floating over Jason's head.

The force of the spin at the edge of the pilot room dome, the farthest point from the center of the rapidly rotating sailship, had been very high, for Jason now saw the matted blood in their hair where each had fallen heavily against the hard dome above. A large red stain could be seen in the center of the dome. Jason saw small globules of blood floating around near the two overhead bodies. He thought of the three insane colonists he had done away with. He held back his sobs.

He decided not to assume the worst. He just could not face that possibility at all. He turned, and violently propelled himself back down through the hatchway in the pilot room floor, and down to the floor of the central chamber. He entered the living quarter, and pulled the portable medical unit out of its recessed storage in the wall nearby. It was a box about as long as his forearm, and had a large handle for convenient handling. He pulled himself quickly back up to the pilot room.

Jason needed to pull the two bodies downward so he could examine them. He looked at Dalton's secondary pilot chair now empty. Would anyone ever sit there again? Would he ever see Dalton's excited face as they maneuvered through the gravitonic currents?

Jason strapped the chair's shoulder harness around one of his boots to hold him down. Then he stretched up and pulled Monique down. He gritted his teeth and slowly extended a shaking hand to her neck to check for a pulse. He felt around for the carotid artery. There was a pulse! He looked at her chest. Shallow breathing! He quickly reached back up and carefully pulled Dalton down. He was still alive!

Jason scanned Monique and Dalton with the hand-held medical unit. Each time, to Jason's great despair, the little medical unit reported the same thing. Internal damage too serious for its capabilities! Its red fatality indicator was rapidly flashing. They were alive but both were rapidly dying! What was Jason to do?! He wanted to grab them both, and hug them to him, willing the life back into them. But he forced himself to think rationally.

The colony ship had excellent medical facilities! The

Conovarians were brilliant geneticists and physiologists! But, how to get the two unconscious forms over there...

At this point, the mysterious audio tape floated by. With irritation, Jason grabbed it out of the air and glared at it. If it were not for the damn tape, Dalton would have left Jason alone back at the gold souqs, and none of this would have happened! With irritation he stuffed the tape into his pocket.

They still had on there spacesuits! He gently pulled them down, one at a time, through the pilot room hatchway, and into the cargo hold. There, he found their helmets and put them on. He next gently strapped them to their 'bikes, and prepared himself while the air lock cycled. They all went through the air

lock and crossed to the colony ship, guided automatically by the sailship computer which was once again in communication with the spacebike computers and Jason's helmet.

Jason, and the unconscious Dalton and Monique were met in the axis tunnelway by Excarver Durdaine who was furious. He hastily ordered stretchers brought up, though, and Dalton and Monique were quickly taken away for treatment. He then ordered Jason arrested.

As Durdaine's men approached, Jason loosened himself up, ready to begin an easy fight with the inexperienced colonists. He would get back to his sailship and threaten to blow the colony ship up if they did not release Dalton. Then he looked up and noticed Excarver Durdaine now holding the gun Jason had left in the control room, aiming it at Jason's middle. Jason let himself be arrested. He was charged with causing another Accident. They led him away to jail. He was still just too despondent over Dalton and Monique to resist. Were they safe? Would they live? He had no way of knowing, and no one would tell him anything.

24. JAIL

He spent many days alone in a small, isolated, and locked cubicle, his jail aboard the colony ship. It had white ceiling, walls, and floor. There was a small lighting panel on the ceiling which automatically turned off at regular intervals to indicate 'night.' Jason did not like the way the damn thing would suddenly slam him into total darkness. There was a bunk that was not long enough for him. And, there was a portable cleaning and waste treatment closet, also not long enough for his tall body. Conovarians had all been genetically engineered to be the same height, optimal for highest physiological efficiency, though shorter than the average male from Infinity City. The females were much shorter than the males. Most Conovarians agreed this was probably due to Henry Conover's personal tastes; he had been very short. Jason detested both the bunk and the cleaning unit, and often restrained the urge to shatter one using the other.

His jail also had a small desk and chair upon which the colonists had mercifully left an entertainment show player. Jason, however, spent most of his time obsessively exercising,

doing calisthenics, isometrics, and martial arts KATA (a variety of stylized movements designed to practice hand, elbow, knee, and foot strikes against an invisible assailant, learned by all young men of Infinity City early in their mandatory years in the Militia Guard Academy.) Jason had learned techniques of self-meditation in the Militia Guard designed to keep a captured Infinity City Adventurer sane if incarcerated for a long time. But Jason hated these mental exercises which he considered pointless. Instead, he went over again and again just what he would like to do to Excarver Durdaine if he could just get his hands on him, especially around that old, white wrinkled up neck...

Twice a day, once in the morning, and at the beginning of the afternoon, a panel snapped open in the wall above the bunk, revealing a meal. The afternoon meal was satisfyingly large, and grew even larger in some automatic response to Jason's growing nutritional requirements. The food was average in quality. Jason preferred quantity anyway.

Often, he would pull the mysterious audio his parents had given him so long ago, from his pocket to examine. What secret did it hold? He cursed himself in frustration for not listening to it earlier. The mystery of the tape there in the isolation of the cubicle drove him mad with curiosity. He begged the colonists, who checked up on him through a small panel in the sturdy door from time to time, for an audio tape player but they consistently refused. A few times, in spite of himself, he held the tape up to his forehead, foolishly wishing he could read it with his thoughts.

Each time the colonists peeped in on him, he asked about Dalton and Monique. When they refused to tell him anything, he would insult them rudely, and they would angrily snap the panel closed again.

Jason practiced many of his deadly combat strikes against the solid door but to no avail. Even a devastating heel kick, slamming his entire body backwards, caused no harm, and only gave him a sore foot.

Ethera started coming by to torment him. She told him he was a liar, and a monster who prayed upon women. WHAT HAD GOTTEN INTO HER?, he wondered. He told her they had been just two sailships passing in the night, a great old line that he thought quite romantic. But she just spit at him through the little open panel, then stalked away, while Jason watched in leering fascination.

Strangely, she came by again and again, angrily mocking Jason's helpless incarceration. Jason was at a loss to understand her continuing obsession with him. Her emotions flew between raging anger and tearful sobbing as she ranted hysterically about their lost relationship. Jason would sit on his bunk leaning against the wall with his hands behind his head, watching the flashing colors of her beautiful angry eyes through the little open door panel. He never asked her to leave since often she was the only visitor for days.

Once, he asked her if she did not appreciate the gifts of gold he had given her. But she angrily informed him that she did not even have that; her father had taken them from her to make the statue. She sneered at him through the door panel announcing she had kept his academy ring which she had hidden away.

Durdaine came by and informed Jason that they had tried to contact the sailship, but there was no answer. He accused Jason of being a pirate, and said they would keep him aboard the colony ship to do their bidding; to be their own personal repairman. He told him he viewed all Adventurers from Infinity City as trouble makers. Two of their original crew, the brothers Stomec and Romeg had both become involved with a girl who arrived on an Infinity City Adventurer's ship before the colony ship had left. Romeg had disappeared, and could not be found in time for the colony ship launching.

Durdaine usually underwent short bursts of intense anger as he talked to Jason. He told Jason during one angry outburst that the colonists would force Jason to pilot their ship to their new world. If he would not, then he and Dalton would be put to death for piracy. And Durdaine assured Jason that Dalton would be put to death first, with him and poor Monique watching and listening closely.

Jason's blue eyes blazed at the threat. He grinned wickedly, then revealed to Durdaine in a smug voice that if he

killed Dalton, he would be killing the son of Romeg! At first, Durdaine snorted at the ridiculous idea, and was skeptical. But something made him think. Could the boy Dalton possibly be the carrier of the great intelligence genes that they required on their new world? This would certainly explain the boy's high intelligence. It had been amazing how a mere boy could have repaired so many of the colony ship's sophisticated systems. If his father were indeed Romeg, Dalton would certainly have an exact copy of his Y-chromosome which carried the special genes. Maybe this even explained his obsessive attraction to Monique. They were as genetically similar as a brother and sister with the same father since Romeg and Stomec had been identical twins. They even looked alike, except for coloring since Dalton had dark hair and complexion, and Monique was blonde. Was the strong attraction between the boy and girl caused by the human family bonding instinct?

Durdaine now felt stunned. His intuition whispered in his mind that it was all true. But Excavator Durdaine was not the sort to pay attention to his intuition. Jason saw through the little door panel the look of confusion on Durdaine's face. The huge gray shaggy eyebrows were tightly pressed together in concentration. Jason suggested that Durdaine have his medical team scan and analyze Dalton's genes.

And Durdaine did! During scanning, Dalton was found to be genetically pure with no known defective genes at all, though it was found that he most definitely was not purely Conovarian. The baffled doctors reported several genetic traits of unknown function. (Henry Conover had single-handedly completely mapped out the human genome before starting his colony on CONOVER. Ever since then, the Conovarian geneticists had meticulously kept

tract of each gene and its specific function for every individual on the planet.) The important and amazing discovery was that Dalton HAD the missing Y-chromosome with its complex genetic structure of maximum intelligence that Romeg and Stomec were supposed to have carried to the new world. The colonization mission could easily succeed after all! If they could just find a crew to man the colony ship...

Even more important, the scanning computer revealed that Dalton and Monique were completely recovered from their serious head injuries. Durdaine told the two how Dalton was related to the mission. Dalton was not surprised having secretly begun to suspect this long ago after Monique had told him about her father Stomec. It meant he was closely related to Monique. It meant he was her genetic BROTHER! But Durdaine informed them both this did not matter. There was no risk of birth defects associated with their offspring since their fathers from Conover had no recessive genetic defects that could come together with Dalton and Monique. And, they had not grown up together, which eliminated the taboo and stigma of a sexual brother and sister relationship. However, Durdaine suggested it would be prudent not to mention their fathers were identical twins. Durdaine now WANTED Dalton and Monique to be together! They would both be released and given free run of the ship. Excarver Durdaine was extremely happy about this now.

But Durdaine still kept Jason locked below as a pirate. He was convinced Jason had originally kidnapped Dalton, and then had also kidnapped Monique. And he further blamed his daughter Ethera's sudden melancholy on Jason, just another rogue from that Infinity City.

When Dalton heard about all of this the day he was released from his sick bed, he begged Durdaine to let Jason go. He would gladly stay with the ship, pilot it to the new world, and solve any problems on the way. He knew the ship inside and out! He had the INTELLIGENCE! He told him Jason was NOT a pirate but just an Adventurer from Infinity City who rescued disabled spaceships for living. Durdaine was still ecstatic over the recovery of the high intelligence Y-chromosome. And, with the boy-genius piloting the ship, the colonization mission would now finally proceed! He benignly agreed to release Jason. Better to have the rogue off and away...

25. FREE AGAIN

Jason was sitting at the little desk of his tiny room when suddenly the door flew open to reveal Durdaine wearing his usual white robe of office. Jason automatically tensed ready to spring for Durdaine's throat and fulfill the fantasy he had dreamed up from within his cell. He slowly rose.

Durdaine saw the look in Jason's icy blue eyes. He took a few steps back in response, his old gray eyes wide with surprise, his bushy gray black eyebrows shooting up almost to his bushy dark hair. He quickly pulled out Jason's own hand-gun from a

pocket in his robe, aiming it straight at Jason. However, Durdaine looked downright happy. He smiled revealing his gnarly old teeth, the wrinkles around his mouth turning to deep furrows, the result of the unaccustomed activity. He said, "Relax, Commander Jason. Jason the Rescuer. Yes, I know exactly who you are now. I've good news. We're going to free you. I want you off the colony ship for good. As far as I'm concerned, you're still a pirate, really."

Jason slowly rose to his feet, and growled, "Where's Dalton? Where's Monique? What happened to them? I'm not leaving until..."

And then Dalton stepped around from the side, grinning up at his tall friend. He brushed his dark hair away from his eyes, and said brightly, "Hi, Jason! We're all right!"

"Dalton!", Jason cried, blinking in disbelief at the sight of his smiling young friend, completely recovered. After so long alone in the isolation of his little jail, convinced that Dalton was dead, and they were keeping the information from him, seeing Dalton alive and well again was too much. Jason grabbed him, and hugged him tightly. Then he held him out at arms length, and in his joy lifted him high up into the air. Setting him down again, Jason exclaimed, "Dalton, I thought for sure you were gone." His voice shook and he had to wipe his eyes to see clearly.

Then Dalton told him the devastating news that he had decided to stay aboard the colony ship with Monique and pilot it onward to the new world. Jason was too stunned at this revelation to speak

Durdaine seeing Jason subdued, pocketed the hand-gun, the very sight of which made him nervous anyway, and began happily explaining what Dalton's genetics meant to them, and why he planned to stay here with them. He told Jason that he would have to go before he caused any more trouble. Durdaine still regarded him as a pirate, and promised to shoot him with his own gun if he did not leave immediately.

Durdaine's daughter Ethera now appeared, having come to again torment Jason through the panel in the door. She looked aghast at Jason standing in the open doorway, and then at her father. She grew furious that Jason had been released, and began ranting about something very important, something about an unwanted pregnancy, but her father was busy happily explaining all about their recovered special Y-chromosome. Jason and Dalton exchanged glances. If Durdaine stopped to listen to his daughter, there was going to be more trouble.

Suddenly, Dalton loudly announced that he would now go see his beloved Monique, who he had not seen since before they had been knocked unconscious. He turned quickly from Jason, and jostled against Durdaine as he passed him in his hurry to get to Monique. Then, he turned around again, ran back, and warmly embraced Jason once more. "I'll miss you forever, Jason!" Dalton said, trying to keep his voice from shaking. "You've done so much for me! I'll never forget you! You're the best friend I ever had!" Before Jason could speak, Dalton secretly palmed over the gun which he had just pickpocketed from Durdaine, then

turned, and dashed off down the hallway, quickly disappearing around a corner.

Jason stood dumbly, staring at Durdaine babbling on about how the mission would finally be a success. He did not hear a word. Dalton was staying! Jason would have to sail away alone. He could not believe it! But Dalton wanted to be with Monique! How could Dalton dump his future as Jason's partner in the rescue business for just a mere girl?!

Jason looked at Ethera who was becoming enraged at being ignored. She suddenly screamed that Jason was an impostor, a pirate! There were no others aboard the ship, his computer had faked them. And, Jason had taken her aboard and seduced her. And now she was pregnant with his baby! She was pregnant by Jason!

Everyone now became very quiet. Ethera and her father stared at each other. He was devastated and stunned realizing that his daughter had known all of this and had not told him before. Ethera looked down at the floor, too ashamed to look up at her father. He became red-faced with rage, and turned glaring at Jason. He grabbed for the gun in the pocket of his robe to kill him. It was now gone! He looked down to check his other pockets, then looked up to find Jason holding the gun, a wide grin splitting his face almost ear to ear. Jason bid him a good day, shrugged apologetically at Ethera, and then backed slowly away...

As soon as he had backed around a corner into the next corridor, he wheeled around and dashed off to make his way up to the nose cone, and back across to his sailship. Durdaine summoned guards, but Jason remained one step ahead. The guards at the hatch exiting Colonist Segment #1 had been alerted that Jason was escaping. They grabbed their billy clubs, and nervously waited inside the hatch for him, but when Jason appeared brandishing his terrifying hand-gun, they dropped their clubs, and fled down the opposite hallway. Jason yanked the hatch lever over to unlock it, then threw it open. Just before he left, he glanced around the little guard room at the pictures of Conover painted on the walls, and thought to himself that Conover would be the last world he ever wanted to set foot on. He heard men coming, and quickly pulled himself out into the axis tunnelway, and raced toward the nose of the colony ship as fast as he could in the near zero-gravity.

It was slow progress without the special slippers that would have made his feet stick to the floor. He slipped and stumbled if he tried to go fast. He heard the sound of many voices rise behind him. They were in pursuit! He checked his gun. Only two bullets left! He hurried on as fast as he could.

The colonists pursuing him were wearing the sticky slippers, and were rapidly approaching. Sweat broke out on Jason's forehead, and he ground his teeth in frustration. He had to take ridiculously slow steps or risk just uselessly sliding his feet along the ground. He weighed only a few kilograms this close to the axis of the colony ship. If they caught up, he might be able to frighten them off with the gun again. But if there was a fight, he would only be able to shoot two of them. That would

probably frighten them away for sure. But what if they punished Dalton in revenge?! Jason hurried on the best he could.

Jason thought morosely: Dalton! Why the hell did he have to stay behind?! And why had Dalton and Monique taken off in the sailship so long ago to begin with? Jason had never had a chance to ask Dalton about that. Just what was going on between him and Monique? Love? Had Dalton tried to escape in the sailship, and was he now staying behind just so he could be with the girl he loved? For some strange reason, Jason felt awestruck at the idea.

Then the shouting behind him grew so loud that he turned to look, and found to his dismay that the approaching posse was so close he could now see their angry faces. The ones in the front were carrying large sheets of metal before them. All the rest were armed with clubs. Shields! They thought they were now shielded from his bullets by the metal plates! He hurried on, but they were closing fast. Where the hell was the nose cone air lock?! According to the signs he had passed, he had passed from Cargo Segment #2 to #1 already. The nose cone would be next. Where the hell was it?! They were almost upon him! Only a few paces away! He would not get to the air lock in time.

Jason kept looking over his shoulder at the large party overtaking him. The colonists were crying out in triumph already. They would have him in less than a minute. How horrible everything was! Durdaine would stick him back in that damn cell again. Or maybe kill him for what he had done to Ethernia. Durdaine ran the colony ship with an iron fist.

A slight narrowing of the axis tunnelway indicated that Jason had finally reached the beginning of the nose cone section. But the air lock was just too far away. Jason made ready to turn and face his pursuers. In the mood he was in, he was ready to go down fighting. What a mess everything had become!

But just as he came to a stop, and began to turn, he noticed handholds on the wall of the axis tunnelway. That was right! He had seen them before! The nose cone segment had handholds that led all the way to the air locks. Jason grabbed the nearest one, and glanced back at the colonists. They had come to a stop waiting to see what Jason would do. Jason pulled out his gun and waved it threateningly. The colonists quickly arranged the metal shields in front of them. They did not retreat this time. Someone yelled for Jason to surrender. He could see them peeking between the shields. What a bunch of cowards, he thought. Jason made an obscene gesture, then with a mighty pull on the handhold from his massive arm (stronger than ever after all the exercise during his confinement) Jason propelled himself suddenly and rapidly forward. As he expertly shot off down the tunnelway

toward the air lock, he was thankful for all his years of practice in low-gravity environments.

The colonists cried out in surprise and dismay, and took off after him in hot pursuit. Jason yanked himself along from handhold to handhold, easily pulling ahead of the colonists. Soon, he could see the air lock in the dimness ahead. It was closed! He could swear he had left it open.

As soon as he reached it, he smacked the button to open it, and the air lock began to cycle. He looked behind him. He could see the colonists in the distance rapidly approaching. Jason banged the cycle button again and again. The colonists approached rapidly. Jason pulled out his gun to shoot, but hesitated, again worried about any reprisal directed toward Dalton. They were almost upon him!

He heard a soft hiss behind him. The hatch was opening! Jason turned, and as soon as the hatch was open enough, he squeezed through, grabbed the inside handle, and pulled at the hatch with all his might. It began to close just as the colonists arrived behind. Fortunately, the hatch mechanism was pneumatic, and though there was a loud wheezing sound, Jason managed to close and re-lock it without causing any damage that might have prevented the air lock cycling. Jason smacked the inside cycle button, and quickly began tugging on his spacesuit as the colonists began pounding on the hatch. By the time it occurred to them to try tugging the hatch open, the pressure inside was so low that the pressure in the axis tunnelway held the inner hatch firmly shut.

The air lock outer hatch swung open, and Jason, aboard his spacebike, shot out. He had barely jettied his way beyond the nose of the colony ship when Durdaine, from the communicator panel next to the inner air lock hatch, ordered the PF24 to close the outside nose cone. But it was too late. Jason had safely escaped.

When PF24 reported this to Excarver Durdaine, he raged in frustration for a few moments, then took a deep breath, turned, and walked slowly back with his hands behind his back, his thick eyebrows came together as he thought. The rogue, at least, was now gone forever. He still had Dalton. Everything would be all right. Now to convince his daughter to abort her ridiculous pregnancy. She would easily listen to reason...

Jason's head was spinning when he reached his ship. All was as he had left it weeks before on the day he had been jailed aboard that damn colony ship. There was still no gravity, though. How empty the sailship now would be without Dalton. He sadly pulled himself up to the pilot room. The blood stains on the transparent dome were gone! His little robots must have automatically cleaned up. Everything about this mission had gone wrong. He climbed into the pilot chair. There he was, again surrounded by the flashing displays and indicator lights of his beloved sailship. At least he still had that. He slowly worked the controls to jettison the old broken gravitonic sail. He then sent out a new one to get gravity working aboard the sailship again. Soon he could feel his weight pulling him downward into the pilot chair.

Dalton had stayed behind. Ethera now hated him, and claimed she was having a baby by him. Probably just lying to make him feel bad. Even the colony ship really was not rescued. Even if Dalton back there could get it moving, it would take centuries to

get to either the target new world or Conover, with one generation of colonists being replaced by the next and on and on;

poor Dalton and Monique would grow old and die aboard that ship.

Jason sadly activated the maneuvering jets to get far enough away from the colony ship to raise his gravitonic sails. Best to just get away and be on his own again. Jason saw Dalton's virtual-reality helmet near his feet. It had landed there after he had activated gravity again. He angrily kicked it away.

26. DEPARTURE

At a safe enough distance, in the direction of the nearby gravitonic current, Jason cut the jets, then sent out gravitonic struts, and sails. He activated all systems prior to launch. He noticed that a sensor in a cabinet of the living quarter was malfunctioning again. Hadn't he fixed that yet?!

Before sailing away, he had an idea. He ordered his computer to radio the colony ship. PF24 answered but would take no direction. It was being controlled by Excarver Durdaine now. PF24 had switched over control to the leader of the colonists when it could no longer locate Jason for direction. Jason requested communication with Durdaine. PF24 put Durdaine on the radio...

Tersely came the familiar voice, "This is Excarver Durdaine! What do YOU want?"

"Excarver, old boy, I have a little favor to ask. I'm about to sail away. Let me say good-bye to Dalton and Monique, would you?"

"What?!", came the angry reply. "You've lied to us, made fools out of us, and... and violated my daughter. Now you have the GALL to ask a favor?!"

Pretending he was hurt, Jason pointed out, "Excarver! How can you feel that way? Remember, I repaired your colony ship for you."

"YOU?! It is clear to me now that it was young DALTON who did all the work. WHILE YOU WERE BUSY SEDUCING MY DAUGHTER! You're no rescuer! You are not with the Infinity City Militia Guard. You're just a PIRATE! The only good thing you did was allow poor lost Dalton the chance to escape from you, and return to where he belongs. You'll get nothing from us! Now, get away from us before I train our lasers on that sailship of yours, and blast you into atoms!"

Jason was flabbergasted by Durdaine's reaction. The ingratitude! "Durdaine!", he shouted back hotly. "I spent weeks in that control room of yours. I personally repaired the damage from the gravitonic whirlpool."

Durdaine shouted back, "Yes, and how do we know what kind of job you did? How do we know the ship won't blow up or take us in the wrong direction now? You aren't even a qualified technician! You're just another rogue from that Infinity City!" Durdaine began sputtering hysterically. "You probably caused our damage

in the first place! Just so you could come along later and get treated like some sort of savior. Fooling innocent young girls! Shooting innocent, unarmed colonists! Be off with you, I say!"

Jason himself was now furious. After all the time and effort he had put into repairing that damn colony ship, this was his only reward! Insults from a raving lunatic! A small, quiet voice in the back of Jason's mind pointed out that he should never have gotten involved with the daughter of the leader of the entire ship. But Jason did not care, and pounded the arm of his pilot chair in frustration. How could they now treat him like this?! After all he had done for them!

In short, tense words, Jason suddenly revealed to Durdaine just exactly how far off course the gravitonic whirlpool had thrown them.

Oddly, Durdaine had grown completely calm again. "More of your lies, Jason. I've heard enough from you. I'm cutting this line..."

"Durdaine!", interrupted Jason. "It'll take you hundreds of years to get to either your new world or Conover! Ask your computer if you don't believe me. PF24! What is closest? The target world or Conover?"

"The target world," answered the computer.

Before Durdaine could say a word, Jason quickly asked, "PF24, how far away is the target world, in integer light-years??"

"82 light-years," came the answer.

There was silence from the radio. Jason smugly grinned. Now HE had the upper hand! "All right, Excarver, put Dalton and Monique on the line, and maybe I'll let Conover know where you are. I'll even arrange a fleet of personnel transport sailships from Infinity City to take your people safely to their destination."

But there was something that Jason did not know about Excarver Durdaine. Something that Durdaine was not even consciously aware of himself. He ENJOYED his absolute power aboard the colony ship. He was absolute ruler of his little microcosm. And deep down he had grown used to the power, and did not want it to end. Durdaine angrily responded, "MORE of your lies! You go to hell! You've sabotaged our computer just to give a false estimate, you pirate! But Dalton will get it fixed. HE'S Conovarian; one of the Pure! And YOU'LL never see him again! EVER!!"

Durdaine now shouted at the computer: "PF24! Aim the lasers at the Infinity City sailship, and commence firing immediately. Emergency priority!"

"Firing will commence in 42 seconds," dutifully reported the computer.

Jason viciously swore back at Durdaine who only laughed.

Jason roared in frustration. But just before he cut the connection, he yelled back at Durdaine to tell his damn PF24 computer to reactivate its intuitive hemisphere to maintain the colony ship. The colony ship had barely lasted five years without the repair capabilities of PF24's intuitive hemisphere. Jason thought angrily to himself: Why in the hell do I even care?! He killed the radio in disgust.

He did not have much time. PF24 would already be wheeling the colony ship's great lasers around for proper aim, opening the turrets in the sides of the ship, and warming up the reactor that would supply power for the destructive bursts of photonic energy. Jason's first post in the Militia Guard had been chief of one of Infinity City's photonic cannon emplacements. Knowing the awesome capability of a good laser, Jason quickly set to work.

Fortunately, his sails were already all up and ready. He ordered his computer to run the gravitonic generator up to full power. While the sound of the powerful generator rose, Jason fired his jets. His wonderful sailship computer, using the three little robots, had automatically refueled the jets from the cargo hold spare tanks while Jason had been incarcerated back on the colony ship.

He jetted his ship over to the nearby current spouting out from the far away whirlpool. He had rescued the colony ship from this current, so long ago it now seemed. His computer reported that it detected a threatening build up of thermal energy from the colony ship laser turrets. That would be their reactors dumping off excess energy, surmised Jason. They were ready to fire!

His sailship entered the huge, raging gravitonic current, the great, billowing sails caught hold, and away he instantly sailed at hundreds of times the speed of light.

Jason watched the astronavigation display, and saw himself rapidly moving away from the colony ship. Jason sadly whispered to himself, "Good-bye, Dalton. Good-bye, little buddy. Hope you and Monique have a good life there."

27. THE TAPE

Jason leaned back in his pilot chair, rested his chin on his hand, and absently checked his astronavigation display. He was heading down the gravitonic current in the general direction of Conover. There, he would request some sort of financial remuneration for all the repairs he had done to the colony ship. He had vast amounts of proof. His computer had dutifully recorded everything he had done, and had also copied the complete design of the colony ship by downloading this information from PF24. This intimate knowledge would surely prove to the Conovarian authorities the legitimacy of his claim.

In return for a suitable reward, Jason would reveal the location of the colony ship. Even if the colonists ordered Dalton to fire up the great engines and move off, the primitive engines would leave an easy trail of ionic debris for any sailship to follow. The colonists would finally make it to their new world, but only by faster-than-light ships, hopefully outfitted from Infinity City by Jason himself.

So, effectively, the rescue mission would be a success. The colony ship had been found, and was now safe. Jason should feel triumphant. But, he did not. He felt alone and empty. The sailship was too quiet without Dalton's adolescent voice, always getting excited about something new that he had just learned. He looked over at Dalton's chair where he had spent so much time in his virtual-reality.

How had things gone so very wrong? Of course, GIRLS had been involved. Girls always seemed to lead to trouble, thought Jason. He sighed, and felt very tired. He remembered suddenly that he had not taken the PILL OF LIFE for over a month. So, he pulled himself out of the pilot chair, and proceeded down to the living quarter, where he opened a secret compartment in which he kept his valuables. This was where he kept his hand-gun which he now pulled from his pocket and stored. They were currently highly illegal in Infinity City. Next, he pulled out a little red velvet bag with a golden rope tie. Inside was a box made out of gold that he now opened. Inside this was another chamber, hermetically sealed, which he also opened.

Here were stored row after row of the PILL OF LIFE. Each tiny bright silver pill, uniquely manufactured for only Jason's specific genome, was sealed within a hard, clear gelatin shell, which would only melt after passing the stomach's destructive acid concentration and entering the proper point in the intestines. He pried one out of its holder, made the traditional sign of thanks across his chest, and gulped it down. Then, he replaced the PILL container, and sealed the secret hiding place back up.

What now? He had felt another object in his pocket when he had removed the hand-gun. The tape! He pulled it out. It was hard to believe the little plastic cartridge had survived so much. He went over to a player, and stuck it in. He heard the voice of his parents. They both said hello. Then his father began, in a monotonous, detached voice, the most incredible story Jason had ever heard...

Jason had not been his parents only child! A girl had been born 75 years before Jason! A girl named Elise. After birth, all babies born in Infinity City were genetically scanned, their genetic pattern being stored in the Great Library of Infinity City. The parents were notified of any defect, and it was their responsibility to contact a genetic repair specialist to have the defect removed when the child grew old enough to withstand the treatment.

Elise's genetic pattern was a one in a million pattern of intelligence, energy, persistence, and other traits that the Grand Dames looked for in young girls who would then be groomed

and destined for lofty political positions. Elise's parents, living by simple means, were overwhelmed by this. The Larsch family approached them, and a later marriage was arranged between their daughter, and a Larsch son. (JASON WHISTLED TO HIMSELF AT THE AMAZING REVELATION. HE COULD NOT WAIT TO TELL HIS FRIEND JOHN ONE OF THE LARSCH!)

Elise grew into a beautiful and intelligent girl. Her parents were very proud. They had no more children so that they could devote all their meager resources to only Elise. Her school performance was above average, though perhaps not as high as her genetic potential allowed. She was a popular girl with many friends, and many interests.

When she turned 16, her parents gave her an unusual birthday present. It was their copy of the marriage contract between her and Alexander One of the Larsch. They were to be married as soon as Elise reached prime child-bearing age, based on her individual physiology. For her, this was determined to be 18 years of age, only two years in the future.

Her parents had thought that she would be ecstatic at the thought of marrying into one of Infinity City's most powerful

Families, perhaps eventually becoming one of its Grand Dames. But, Elise had been horrified by the discovery that her parents had written her destiny for her, virtually selling her off. (The contract contained a substantial honorarium for her parents. However, they sincerely thought that this was the best of all possible worlds for her, and never dreamed that she would disagree.)

Elise had burst into tears, and fled to her room where she remained for an entire day. After that, she was a changed person. She felt betrayed to the core by her parents, and would not listen to any explanation from them. They tried and tried to reason with her, but to no avail. Her performance in school began to degrade. She began coming home later and later and was rumored to be hanging around the seedy area adjacent to the space port, referred to as the infamous "Port Town." This contained temporary accommodation for off-world visitors of limited means. The night life was exciting and the night-clubs attracted many Infinity City adolescents. It was there that she met an Adventurer who filled her head with exciting stories of far off worlds with exciting cities and people; and stories of SPACE itself where you were free to do as you pleased, and go anywhere your heart led.

This was all too much. Her parents wanted her to be happy again, and decided one day to let her know that she could marry anyone that she wished. They would inform the Larsch that the contract was broken. But that night she did not come home. By morning her parents were very worried, and contacted the authorities. A quick search of the civil computer system revealed that Elise had just sailed away with an Adventurer, destination not logged.

Her parents were devastated. They blamed themselves, and would not want more children for a long time to come. Fortunately for Jason, his father with realistic foresight,

prudently insisted that Jason's mother submit to the removal and cryogenic freezing of a few egg-cells so they could have more children later, if they ever changed their minds.

It took over 50 years for his parents to begin thinking about having children again. An economic boom throughout the Galaxy had increased their business so much, that for the first time in their lives, their savings was actually swelling. Year by year their thoughts turned again and again toward childbirth, until they made the big decision. Jason's mother, however, had long ago reached menopause. Her ovaries had ended production of mature egg-cells. But, she was on the PILL, and in excellent health, so they had one of their eggs removed from cryogenic storage, revitalized, and implanted. Jason was conceived, and born nine months later. Actually, after having significantly passed the "due date," labor had been induced artificially because, it seemed, baby Jason just did not want to leave the womb.

Jason grew up, and as soon as he could, stole away just like his sister on his first adventure, a simple trading expedition to several Galactic frontier worlds. Fortunately, he safely returned, but went out on another and another. His parents were very proud of him, but so very terrified that one day he would not come back. Somehow, and they never figured out how, he avoided the Militia service until his late-thirties. All young men were required by Infinity City law to join at age 20 or 21. (JASON GRINNED TO HIMSELF AT THE MEMORY OF HOW CLEVERLY HE HAD PULLED OFF HIS DRAFT EVASION.)

During the period when Jason finally enlisted in the Militia Guard, and was out patrolling the gravitonic currents around Infinity City, keeping them safe from NEIGHBORS, pirates, and other dangers, a stranger came to call with an incredible tale.

He relieved himself to Jason's parents as the Adventurer who Elise had run off with. He was now in search of her. He was just back after a terrible trip in which his ship had encountered a gravitonic whirlpool that had slung him close to the speed of light, and slowed him down so long, it had taken 83 Infinity City years for him to sail his ship back to Infinity City. Fortunately, the black hole had mercifully stripped away such characteristics as his sailship's near-light-speed momentum...

They had asked him about Elise. He told them that he had gone to several worlds, and then arrived at a very developed world called CONOVER. Here, two identical twin brothers named Romeg & Stomec, both extremely important members of an upcoming voyage of colonization to some other world, had fallen passionately in love with Elise. (JASON THOUGHT: MY GOD! DALTON'S FATHER'S NAME IS ROMEG!) Suddenly, she left the company of the Adventurer for Romeg.

Business on Conover was brisk for the Adventurer, and he quickly forgot about Elise. There were plenty of girls throughout the Galaxy attracted to Adventurers from Infinity City. His holds were full of items in high demand all over Conover. He stayed for many months, traveling far and wide buying and selling.

After about a year, little was left to trade, and it was time to move on to another world. He was missing several crew members, and advertised for more. Who should show up at his gang-plank but none other than Romeg himself. AND, carrying an infant boy, his son! The Adventurer asked who the babies' mother was. Romeg told him it was none other than Elise. She had left the baby with him, and taken his place aboard the colonization ship, and was on her way to some other world.

There was a pause in the tape, as Jason's father took a deep breath then continued. He and Jason's mother had investigated this colony ship, and learned that it had been reported overdue 82 year before, and given up for lost. They told the Adventurer the same, and that they had not seen their daughter Elise since she had left with him all those years before. Then, the man left them just as mysteriously as he had arrived.

They were heartbroken and wanted no more children.

His father said, "Well that's the whole story. We would have told it to you face to face, but it would have just been too hard. We know how desperately you have always wanted a big family like your old friend John One. We're sorry, son. We both love you, but we will have no more children. We just can't handle the worry of our children going off into space. It's so dangerous. Mother still talks about you coming to work in the shop. I know you never will, son. We're both still proud of you, though. You know, people coming by my shop always talk about your rescue work with great respect and admiration. I guess someone really needs to do what you do. Anyway, hope your next rescue is successful. Stay safe, Jason. And, stay longer the next time! Your mother misses you so!"

The tape ended, and automatically ejected halfway out of the player. What an incredible story that little tape had held! Jason sat there stunned, his heart pounding in his ears. Dalton

was the son of his sister Elise and Romeg, which meant that Dalton was also Jason's NEPHEW! He was Dalton's uncle! Of course! Jason's thoughts exploded through his mind. THAT explained his deep, caring feelings for his nephew. It was the instinctive Family Bond! He had a nephew! A NEPHEW!

And Monique! Elise had given birth to her, by Stomec, aboard the colony ship. Monique was Jason's NIECE! He had a nephew AND a niece! But they were both back on the colony ship, and completely unreachable. He shook his head in confusion. Dalton and Monique were back aboard the colony ship where Jason was regarded as a pirate to be shot at on sight. And, Dalton trapped there to take care of the silly ship.

To suddenly discover he was the uncle of both Dalton and Monique, and that it was now impossible to ever see them was too much. Jason had no children of his own, no brothers or sisters, no cousins, aunts or uncles. Only his parents, who were both over 100 years older than him. He had ALWAYS been so alone. And now, he had lost his nephew and niece forever! He grew emotional, burying his fists into his eyes. His great body began to shake with uncontrollable sobs.

And his sister! He actually had a sister that he had never met. But she had died in the colony ship's horrible encounter with the whirlpool.

Suddenly, he heard giggling! He turned, staring in confusion toward the source of the muted laughter. There were sounds coming from a large storage cabinet, the one Dalton had stowed away in that long year before. It was opening! There, inside sat Dalton and Monique grinning out at him. Dalton, his dark hair unkempt and dangling down past his eyes said sheepishly, "Hi, uncle!

Monique, her dark eyes shining out from her disheveled blonde hair, said, "That was an interesting tape, wasn't it... UNCLE!"

Dalton then said, "So, how soon can we go back in time and rescue mom??"

Jason, in shock at the sight of the two of them now here with him, leaned back so far that he and his chair tipped back over, and fell to the floor. Monique and Dalton quickly scrambled out of the cabinet, and hurried over to help their uncle. Jason was unhurt. If he had been, if he had even broken an arm, he would not have noticed. He looked up from one concerned young face to the next, and deep within him something started bursting forth. A sense of joy he had never felt before at the realization, the unarguable realization that he now had a family. These poor two kids had lost all their parents to grievous misfortune. All they had now was Jason. He warmed with a strong feeling of protectiveness to both of them. And, LOVE!

Jason sat up. Then, a little nervously, reached forth his arms and hugged them both to him. They embraced him gratefully. Both of the two young people now felt more secure than they had for a long time.

Finally they all sat back looking at each other silently, with silly grins on their faces for the irony of the whole situation.

Then they found their voices. Jason wanted to clear something up right away. "Dalton," he said very calmly, but in a serious voice. "I have to talk to you about something before you let it get out of hand. It's about going back in time for your mother. You know we can live almost forever because of the PILL. But sometimes like... my sister Elise," that sounded amazing to say, "when someone is killed outside of Infinity City, the family usually DOES want to do a BOUNCEBACK in time to find them, and bring them back before the accident. But... unexpected things can happen. You are even required to get direct permission from the ruling Grand Dame council before you can bring back a citizen, who Elise of course was. You need to read some of the stories that have happened first before you think about it more."

Dalton said solemnly, "If I can rescue our mother Elise, Stomec, and Romeg, then I WILL!"

Jason did not want to get into a discussion about this right now, and spoil the wonderful feeling of unity between the three. He shrugged, "That's up to you." Then he looked at one and then the other. And they both smiled so happily at him. Someone said it was all like a dream come true. Then they were all laughing, and crying, and hugging each other again.

Jason finally stood, righted his chair, and said brightly, "Anyway, now that we're all together, we've got to decide on our next destination. I've got the ship heading in the general direction of CONOVER. We still need to let their authorities know about the location of the colony ship. And we need to get paid."

Monique asked, "How long will that take?"

Jason said brightly, "Oh not long. Just a week or two. Maybe I'll put the squeeze on them, tell them I have a tight schedule, and only give them a few days to decide to pay or risk dooming their colonists to wander in space." He quickly reassured Monique. "We'll tell them where the ship is if they pay or not." There was also that small matter regarding Ethera's claim that she was going to have his baby. He could offer to marry her, but there was no telling what Durdaine would do if Jason set foot aboard the ship again. The best thing to do was wait until they got rescued, then make sure the colonists all knew that it was Jason who was their SAVIOR. They, Durdaine, and even Ethera, would warm up to him. Maybe he would have a son! He looked quickly at Dalton talking quietly with Monique. Maybe a son just like Dalton. What an odd desire! His heart had certainly been going through some big changes lately.

He continued, "After CONOVER, I'll be anxious to sail back to Infinity City so everyone can meet you two. Monique, you've never even been there! You'll both have to become registered as citizens. You'll even be entitled to the ADVENTURER CHILDRENS' ENDOWMENT. It helps out young people who... Anyway it will provide money!"

"Jason?", asked Monique. "How long will it take to get to Infinity City?"

Dalton interrupted, "It took us a little over one year to get from Infinity City to the whirlpool."

Jason explained, "But we were going towards Galactic center. Sailing back out to Infinity City will be quicker because we'll find faster currents."

"How much faster?", pressed Monique.

Jason looked at her, "Well," he guessed, "maybe half the time, or little more."

"Six or seven months?", she asked.

He smiled, "You're pretty anxious to see our world, huh?"

"Yes. It has very modern hospitals, doesn't it?"

Jason frowned, and said slowly, "Yes, of course... Why do you ask that?" Dalton nervously looked away, avoiding Jason's gaze.

Monique delivered the stunning news. "In about eight months, I am going to need a nice safe place to have my baby."

Jason's eyes widened, and he involuntarily looked down at her belly. BABY?! Then he quickly looked over at Dalton who's face, though dark, was distinctly reddening. "Is Dalton the... er..."

Monique laughed gaily, "Of course!" She reached over, and hugged and kissed Dalton, who was now very embarrassed.

Jason's eyes grew wide, and he whispered, "But, you two are... I mean your fathers were... You CAN'T have a baby! You've got the same mother, and identical twin fathers!"

Monique said confidently, "That won't hurt anything. We DID have the same mother, and both our fathers were genetically identical. But, our fathers were from CONOVER and had not one genetic defect, recessive or otherwise. On CONOVER brothers and sisters commonly share their eggs and sperm, through artificial insemination, of course. No brother or sister that grows up together cares to get married. That's taboo anywhere that's civilized, and I assume on Infinity City, too." Jason nodded vigorously. "But, Dalton and I just met a few weeks ago. We don't even look much alike, pigment-wise at least. He looks more like his father, and I look just like my mother." Jason had a sudden vision of the shock on his parents faces when they would see Monique for the first time. "Everything will be just fine! You will introduce me as Monique Stomec from the colony ship. Dalton will remain Dalton Romeg. I will take Dalton's surname, if that is traditional on Infinity City. Which leads me to another question. Uncle Jason, as captain of this sailship, can you perform the time-honored ceremony of marriage aboard a ship that is away from any port?"

Jason smiled and shook his head, "Monique, you'll fit in just fine on Infinity City. You're are starting to sound like a Grand Dame already! Yes, I suppose I can marry you, and give you away, as well." Jason looked straight up at the ceiling of the living quarter, and spread his hands. He said to no one in particular, "What an Adventure this has been!"

He suddenly jumped to his feet. "This means that before anything more, I've got to get up to the pilot room, and find a fast current for Infinity City!" He dashed out of the room and up the central chamber ladder to change course for Infinity City.

Dalton and Monique went over to the couch at the back of the living quarter. Dalton looked at Monique, "We could have had the baby at CONOVER."

But she disagreed, "No, not there. Too many bad feelings. Besides, I want to see Infinity City. Does Jason have much family there?"

"Not much," Dalton answered. "Just his parents. He's

always wanted a big family. He envies all the larger families..."

Monique interrupted, "Dalton, you mean we'll have grandparents to watch our children?!"

"Children?", Dalton asked, uncertain about her use of the plural form

"Oh, yes! I grew up so alone, with no brothers or sisters. I want to have as many kids as we can!"

Dalton gulped and grew a little pale, but finally grinned as he caught the enthusiasm in her bright, smiling, thoroughly happy face. "Jason will love to hear that! And by the way, Monique, just for the record..." Dalton knelt down in front of her on one knee, and took her hands in his. Her hands were soft and warm and very delicate. He felt his face suddenly burning, though her reassuring smile made him feel so loved. "Will you marry me, my darling Monique?"

She sighed deeply, blinked at him, and held her head to one side drinking in the moment. She would never forget the look on this sweet young man's delicate face. He was so solemn! Yet his dark, comforting eyes were so full of eagerness. Then she reached forward and gently stroked her wonderful friend's soft hair. "Yes, forever," she breathed...

Jason married them that very day, and they became husband and wife. And, on home to Infinity City they all sailed.

EPILOGUE

Jason's parents were stunned when Jason showed up one day with Dalton, Monique, and their new baby. When Jason Sr. and Maynyn learned the entire story, however, they became delighted at being the grandparents of the two charming young newlyweds.

Dalton, Monique, and their little baby boy moved in with their loving grandparents (Jason's parents) into the apartments above the little curio shop, and Dalton began working with his grandfather (Jason's father) in the little family shop. Everyone was blissfully happy.

Soon, Jason, as itchy for Adventure as ever, sailed away for Conover to try and wheedle a reward out of the authorities. Unfortunately, Dalton's new found domestic responsibilities prevented him from sailing off with Jason. But he could still dream of high Adventure out in the Galaxy! Sometimes he even sat around the shop idly considering the possibility of going back into the past to rescue his mother. If only he had a sailship...

And in the curio shop where Dalton worked, there was a strange little object that had been there for a long time. The object had unimagined powers that no one knew about... YET. Jason, and his good friend John One accompanying him to CONOVER to help settle a certain score, would learn all about these powers. They would eventually become essential for the survival of Infinity City, and all the worlds of the Galaxy.

And back on the colony ship Ethernia Durdaine seethes with rage for being left behind by Jason. The daughter she carries will take after Jason in many ways. And then raised by her grandfather Excarver, leader of the colony ship, the girl will master the techniques of subtle tyranny. What will happen when she discovers a secret passageway into the insane segment of the ship and learns to influence the mad geniuses to do her own bidding? Will the influence of her mother's and grandfather's murderous hatred for Jason be enough to motivate her to commandeer the ship to go after him?

But, all of this continues in the further chronicles of Infinity City...

THE END

Read the next exciting book in the Infinity City series!

"SEARCH FOR KATZ" - Infinity City Book #3

FOOTNOTES

*1. Excerpt from "VISITORS' GUIDE TO INFINITY CITY VERNACULAR"...

INFINITY CITY - A very old, artificial world constructed within the first event horizon of a nondescript black hole somewhere in the Milky Way galaxy, populated exclusively by humans. Highly sophisticated gravitonic technology allows safe, continuous suspension of the disk-shaped world, as well as construction of faster-than-light gravitonic 'sailships' for trading within the Galaxy, and defense from hostile 'neighbors' also possessing similar technology. Political system: Strict rule by female-only Council of Grand Dames, each G.D. representing one of each of the principle Houses or Families of Infinity City. Chief male activity: 'Adventure,' defined as 'daring and lucrative Galactic exploration and trade,' and also compulsory service within the formidable Infinity City Militia Guard, as required by the Grand Dames of all Infinity City males.

*2. Excerpt from "VISITORS' GUIDE TO INFINITY CITY VERNACULAR"...

PILL OF LIFE - Prevents aging. It must be ingested monthly. The ultra-sophisticated biogenetic technology for producing the PILL is unheard of anywhere except Infinity City. The scientists of Infinity City have never successfully manufactured the PILL outside of the unique gravitonic radiation within the black hole. Adventurers normally take a large supply, in case they become stranded. Unfortunately, the molecular structure of the proteins making up the PILL are very complex, giving the PILL a shelf life of only about 25 years. If an Adventurer is stranded, even with a large supply he will only stay young for 25 years, and then begin aging. The PILL cannot survive cryogenic storage.

*3. Excerpt from "VISITORS' GUIDE TO INFINITY CITY VERNACULAR"...

SOUQ - Most Infinity City stores or shops, of similar category, tended to group together. Any store that is part of one of these groupings is referred to as a souq.

*4. Excerpt from "VISITORS' GUIDE TO INFINITY CITY VERNACULAR"...

NEIGHBORS - The residents of Infinity City refer to the few other

cities within black holes as their NEIGHBORS. All have degenerated into unstable regimens of tyranny. Without the political stability to foment sophisticated biogenetic technology, they have no ability to produce the PILL OF LIFE. They began raiding Infinity City merchant ships for plunder, and also foolishly for the PILL, which these ships carried in abundant quantities for their crew, though each prescription of the PILL worked only for a single person's genome. The raids grew in daring and number until Infinity City set up its famous Militia Guard to protect itself and its main routes of trade.

*5. Excerpt from "VISITORS' GUIDE TO INFINITY CITY VERNACULAR"...

WELL OF THE WISH - a mysterious black and dark red brick cistern, at the very heart of Infinity City, located above the sparkling point of the black hole's second event horizon. Built by the Original Builders, and one of Infinity City's oldest artifacts.

*6. Excerpt from "VISITORS' GUIDE TO INFINITY CITY VERNACULAR"...

JOURNAL - Refers to "Infinity City Journal of Recent Adventure," a fascinating monthly publication detailing exciting recent activities of the Militia Guard and private Infinity City Adventurers. Highly recommended to all visitors expecting to participate in local topical conversation.

Distributed throughout the Galaxy by Murdoch Publishing, Infinity City.

*7. Excerpt from "VISITORS' GUIDE TO INFINITY CITY VERNACULAR"...

BACK-BOUNCE - A sailship voyaging back in time, and then returning with everything in the past reverting to its exact original historical configuration by the time the sailship re-enters the black hole, as if it had never left. However, any object brought back remains in existence.

...END OF FOOTNOTES.