

Schism



Drew Wagar

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A short story based on the space trading game Oolite.

Written by Drew Wagar



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Thanks to:

To Simon 'Draco' Ellis for the construction of the excellent Generation Ship OXP which formed the basis of this story. The Image of the Generation ship in this document was created by Simon and copyright remains his.

Ian Bell's quote on the generation ships from his Elite page.

Author's Note

When compared with Status Quo and Mutabilis (my other two Oolite stories) this one is a bit more reflective. There are no space battles or fire-fights here. This kind of tale is much closer to my 'home territory' in writing. I hope you enjoy it.

If you know your 'Elite', you'll be familiar with the 'Generation' ships. Here's the quote from the original 'Elite' manual...

'Before the development of the WS Thru-Space drive, in all its various forms, interstellar travel occurred in large, self-sustaining environment ships - Generation Ships - most of which have now been logged and their progress monitored. There are more than seventy thousand of these immense vessels ploughing their way through the

galaxy, some of them into their 30th generation. The penalty for interference with such a vessel is marooning.'

On Ian Bell's website there is a mention of Generation Ships in his FAQ. His answer to the question - 'Where are the Space Dredgers and Generation Ships?' - is succinct to say the least!

'Where indeed.'

This story was an attempt to have a look inside a generation ship, and see what life was like after 30 generations in space. As ever, feel free to email me with feedback - drew@wagar.org.uk HYPERLINK "mailto:drew@wagar.org.uk" Right on, commanders!

Drew.

(October 2007)

Schism

Miriam strode forward into the Tabernacle, through the massed ranks of acolytes, her eyes never wavering to the left or right. She kept her gaze focussed on the golden curtain. It was to be her day of enlightenment. She was one of the few of her generation to be privileged to see the holy of holies, the destination, the purpose, Nirvana. Today marked the official start of the 31st generation. It had been over nine hundred cycles since 'The Beginning'. Only on this day each cycle could junior acolytes approach the holy of holies.

It was a rare honour. To even be allowed into the Tabernacle, the most holy forward compartment of the world, was a privilege few acolytes could ever dream of, never mind the massed ranks of menials that drudged away in the dark recesses of the interior.

Ahead of her stood the Cardinal, Navigator of Paths, the Supreme Representative of the 'Way'. He alone held the secrets of truth, divined meaning in the future, and had access to the holy relics contained within the Tabernacle; the K'Trols. Relics that were said to burn and maim those that were deemed unworthy.

She was dressed in a ceremonial gown, dyed a deep red, symbolising the blood that had been spilt during the darkness that preceded the great undertaking to Nirvana. Gold embroidered wristbands and collar markings symbolised the richness of the truth. She also wore the mark of the chosen; a heavy jewel encrusted shape. The shape of perfection, the ultimate shape, the shape from which all beauty issued forth; the Cylinder. The scriptures told that it was the shape of the world itself.

Joran flanked Miriam on her right side, likewise he was another

acolyte, though slightly senior to her. It was he who had recommended that she be blessed to the rank of enlightened, for her service to the Way. To her right was another acolyte she had never seen before, flanked by his own senior. Two of them had been chosen.

They were both present for their initiation to enlightenment. A test of their character and worthiness. Miriam had spent the last cycle rehearsing the symbolic moves required and felt she was proficient; however, she knew nothing of the test itself. It was shrouded in secrecy; inviolate.

On cue, both junior acolytes bowed. Miriam adopted the pose appropriate for a female, kneeling and bowing her head, whilst her neighbour bowed straight from the waist as was correct for a man.

'Approach.' The Cardinal intoned. Miriam quivered in anticipation. His voice was enhanced in a most amazing way, it seemed amplified, resonant as if it was issuing from all around the room. A holy man indeed!

Joran and the other senior acolyte walked beside them as they approached the Cardinal. Behind him a shimmering golden curtain blocked the view of the holy of holies, a vista forbidden to the unenlightened on pain of death. Today, if successful, she would see!

The Cardinal dismissed the senior acolytes with a symbolic wave of his hand. He paused, looking closely at Miriam and her companion. Miriam fought the urge to turn to Joran for a look of support. It would have been a serious breach of protocol, and not worthy of his training.

'Janus, Miriam. We welcome you in the presence of your seniors, I the Cardinal, the mighty Oracle and the burning gaze of the Almighty,

thusly to test and remonstrate with your souls. Do not undertake this test lightly. Enlightenment awaits, but failure means banishment to the class of menials. Do you understand?'

Janus answered with an immediately positive response, confident, head held high and eyes level. Miriam cast her mind back through all the purification rites and rituals she had endured. She had searched her soul for any impure thoughts, fasted for weeks and days to bring her closer to an enlightened state. She had been ceremoniously washed this morning. Had it been enough? She was beset by sudden doubt. Failure was a fate worse than death, to be banished to the outer reaches, to work on the bottom of the world, maybe to be sent to the lowest reaches - 'Hull' itself - the thought terrified her. Today's test was going to be a life changing event regardless.

She had come this far, there was no turning back.

'I humbly submit.' she replied, using the correct response and gesture.

'For your delay,' The Cardinal replied, 'You shall be second. Janus, step forward.'

Miriam acknowledged the rebuke with a small bow. Knowing she had lost some favour in the Cardinal's eyes. Concentrate!

The Cardinal stepped back as Janus stepped forward. At some unspoken command, a section of the floor rose silently out of the ground. It stopped at table height. Various coloured panels decorated its surface, covered in words. Symbols and pictures Miriam couldn't read or understand, yet somehow she knew they were the holy language of the enlightened. Would she be taught them? Might there be more she could learn? She could see some of the pictures actually moved on their own. How could that be?

Suddenly one of the panels glowed brighter and tilted forward, its display resembling a humans right hand.

The Cardinal stepped aside, 'The Oracle will now speak.' he said, 'You will obey him, Janus.'

Janus acknowledged the command with a curt nod.

Another voice filled the room, deeper, stronger, strangely metallic. It seemed almost inflectionless yet it was imperious, a voice that demanded, required and expected attention; the voice of the Oracle itself!

'Access request acknowledged, palm print identification please. Place your hand on the reader.'

Janus slowly placed his hand on the display, splaying his fingers to match the diagram. A line of green flickered down, illuminating his hand from behind.

'Access denied. Subject not recognised. Security measures implemented.'

Miriam was unsure of the import of the words to start with, but the tones of the Oracle were aggressive, confrontational. The Oracle was not impressed! She felt fear course through her.

Miriam involuntarily stepped back as Janus let out a scream of pain. She saw his hand begin to smoke. He jerked it back, terrified, his palm burnt. He held his right wrist in his left hand, moaning.

'You have been found wanting.' The Cardinal intoned gravely, 'You are hereby stripped of all rank and title. You begin your new life as a menial on the lower levels, there to consider the error of your ways.'

Miriam was too numb to react as Janus was roughly led away by his senior. To be found wanting! Janus' life was over, she knew as far as the enlightened were concerned, he no longer even existed. It was as if he'd never been born. To even associate with him now would mean banishment. She averted her eyes.

She heard the door close behind them. She was alone now with Joran standing mute behind her, the Cardinal in front. The strange device she now knew to be a holy relic, one of the K'Trols.

This is terrifying! Will I fail as Janus has?

'Step forward Miriam.' The Cardinal instructed. She did so. Once again the Oracle spoke.

'Access request acknowledged, palm print identification please. Place your hand on the reader.'

Miriam reached forward with trembling fingers, praying that she would be found worthy. The panel felt surprisingly cold to the touch. She opened her eyes to see the green luminous line tracing around the outside of her fingers. She had never studied her hand so closely, she saw all the lines, fine hairs and marks as if for the first time. Was she soon to be maimed? The urge to pull her hand away was almost overpowering.

'Authentication successful. Access granted. Welcome Miriam.'

Miriam almost fainted with relief and then her eyes widened in amazement.

The Oracle knows my name! How can such wonders be?

She looked up at the Cardinal in awe. He was beaming.

'I pronounce you a senior acolyte.' He announced, 'You have been found worthy by the Oracle. You may thus be blessed with enlightenment. Touch this relic.'

The Cardinal motioned with his fingers to a small circular device on the display. Miriam touched it gingerly. Another holy relic she was permitted to touch!

As she did so, the strange golden curtains seemed to flicker. Miriam stared as they miraculously disappeared. She staggered back.

She was totally disoriented by what she saw. Behind the golden curtain there was not a vision of the future, or the glowing light of the Almighty. It appeared to be a glass sphere, suspended in... nothing. It was an inky blackness behind. She could see nothing at all.

She turned in surprise.

'Enter.' The Cardinal instructed with a slight nod.

Miriam slowly walked forward into the darkness. Her eyes slowly adjusting from the brighter lights of the Tabernacle.

She saw a point of light ahead of her, then another, and another. She began to realise there were tens, no hundreds, no! Thousands! Tiny pinpricks of lights glowing fiercely in the darkness. In other places there were glowing colours, swirls and strands dancing and enveloping the tiny points in radiant patterns. She turned to see more and then fell backwards, landing unceremoniously on her behind as the vista behind staggered her mind, her robes and gown falling loosely around her.

The sphere she found herself in seemed to be attached to a terrifying, immense wall which stretched upwards, downwards and to both sides as far as she could see. She felt dizzy, scared and utterly small. She was outside the world, looking back on it! The world was suspended in a void, peopled with brilliant points of light!

She tried to recall what the scriptures had said about the enlightenment. She recalled nothing about going beyond the world. There was nothing beyond the world, that was the truth she had been taught! Everything that had ever been created was here, contained within, and yet...

She slowly stood up and pressed her hands up against the inside of the sphere. The surface was freezing cold. Those points of light and swirls of colour were far beyond the boundary. What was out there? What were those points of light? Souls of the saints perhaps? Light shining in from the blessed afterlife? Would she be able to find out? A thousand questions.

At the front of the sphere was an odd protrusion, another panel, similar to the one that had been used to test her. It was transparent, she could see through it. When she looked through she could see a set of concentric green circles suspended in the air, apparently between the panel and the edge of the sphere. Startled, she looked up and behind the panel, there was nothing there. A day of miracles.

She looked back into the panel, noticing one of the points of light she'd seen earlier appeared to be framed in the centre, as if the panel had been set to look straight at it. At the bottom was a small section of text, most of which meant nothing to her, except the final few lines. She gasped as she read it. It was a prophecy, the holiest word in the lexicon of the Way.

Tianve.

A word everyone knew, from menial to acolyte. It meant destination; deliverance. Was that tiny point of light where all souls were bound? In smaller text below were more words.

Arrival 423 Years, 6 Days, 22 Hours, 56 Minutes.

She swooned. Joran and the Cardinal had to retrieve her from the sphere and reinstate the golden curtain.'

She lasted longer than most.' Joran said.

'Thus was ever the enlightenment.' The Cardinal responded with a faint smile. 'She will do well.'

In the next few months Miriam learnt many things. Her duties included surveying the primary rituals, strict religious observances carried out by the menials and orchestrated by the acolytes. Any deviations from the scriptures had to be harshly dealt with. These rituals were described in detail in one of the holy books known as the Op-Orai-Shan-Mai-Nuelle.

Within the holy book the rituals were laid out in painstaking detail. Miriam had had to learn the holy text, the symbols and meanings. She discovered numeracy and algebra, calculus and trigonometry. Holy tools for divining mystic paths.

Her primary responsibility was for forty menials assigned to a particularly complex ritual known as the Rai-Ak-Tor-Mai-T'-Nence. It dealt with the handling of many complex relics. Both acolytes and menials alike had to don special coverings during parts of the ritual. Many of the relics were hidden, brought out, checked for various ailments and then restored to their respective places. At one time a menial omitted to don his covering during a key component. He was

cursed with a terrifying wasting disease that stripped the flesh from his bones within days. He died in agony. Miriam had to orchestrate a retribution. It was clear to her that the Almighty required strict obedience in these matters.

Miriam was summoned to the Tabernacle on regular occasions there to learn the use of the holiest relics, the strange and wonderful K'Trols. Many things she learnt in the Tabernacle amazed and bewildered her. She had learnt that their world was not a permanent abode, it was a V'sel, a miraculous means of movement through the void she had seen in the sphere.

Their V'sel was on a journey, transporting them from the Time of Apocalypse to the Time of Nirvana. She had learnt much about the folly from which they had fled; from the 'Earth' that had been cursed with pestilence that only the anointed and their servants had escaped. The destination, the holy oasis of Tianve, was an extraordinary distance away. Such distances could not be measured in anything less than a remarkable unit, and Miriam had had to understand the concept of 'Ly'tch'eers'. Even the points of light she had seen required detailed explanation; they were 'Ztars', places throughout the void where abodes resided. Remarkably, after all the generations that had passed, their journey was only just over two thirds complete.

Each K'trol had a purpose. Some seemed to be able to check how well the rituals had been performed. She was gratified to see that the rituals she conducted were rated amongst the best. Each ritual was given a P'Cent, a numeric which approached the perfection of one hundred; apparently a holy number. Other K'trols provided visions; images of places both past and present; some even of events as they were happening; they were known as V'Deo; the seeings.

Miriam was tending to one of these when suddenly the illumination in

the Tabernacle changed from its accustomed soft warm yellow to an intense and vivid red. A strange call echoed around the walls, putting Miriam in mind of some of the birds and reptiles housed down in the mid decks. It was a strange wailing noise, repeating at regular intervals. She looked up in concern. Joran, who was nearby, shrugged to indicate his uncertainty.

'The Oracle! It prepares to speak on a matter of import!' The Cardinal announced, stepping forward towards them and raising his arms. Silence fell, and for a moment everyone was utterly still. Then, without spoken command, they all bowed and knelt down, facing the golden curtain as tradition demanded. It was the voice of the journey, the disembodied one. The Oracle.

What the Oracle truly was, no one short of the Cardinal knew. It was considered as a guardian, perhaps an angel sent to guard their progress. It spoke in riddles, using words few understood. The Oracle rarely spoke and most never heard it at all. Miriam considered herself to have been especially blessed to have heard it once at her initiation. It was clear from the looks of surprise on the other acolytes, even the most seniors ones, that this was something most unusual.

The golden curtain began to fade away.

Miriam's mind was awlirl, why now? Was a prophecy about to be given? She kept her eyes firmly closed, terrified she might catch a glimpse of glory again. She wasn't prepared! Surely certain death would greet her if she looked!

The Oracle spoke.

'Trajectory violation. Foreign object detected. Corrective action required.'

The words were spoken once again by a strong authoritative male voice, with that strange, gritty, metal tone. It was not what she had expected at all. She had hoped for enlightenment, for explanation, for definition. She words meant nothing to her.

What does it mean?

The red light around her faded back to normal, the soft yellow comforting glow returning to the Tabernacle.

The Acolytes raised their heads and looked up to the Cardinal for guidance and explanation.

The Cardinal stood still for long moments, before looking back around at the acolytes.

'Something approaches in the void.' The Cardinal said simply. Then he dismissed all the acolytes besides Miriam and Joran.

Miriam felt chills run down her body. She shivered involuntarily. Something out there in the void? What could possibly be out there in the darkness between the distant Ztars? Her imagination began to conjure up visions of dark and sinister creatures, spirits between abodes, stalking their V'sel, keeping just out of their vision. Surely the void was the void?

The Tabernacle became silent as the other acolytes left quickly.

'Miriam, Joran! V'Deo K'Trol. Conduct the ritual Lonn-Raanes-Kanne.'

Miriam and Joran jumped at the imperious command from the Cardinal. With practiced reverent moves and gestures they completed the manipulation of the ritual. They were rewarded with

one of the panels before them lighting up with a vista of lights. Suddenly the lights seemed to zoom out from the centre of the panel, as if they were moving impossibly fast through the void. In the exact centre of the panel a faint grey object appeared and slowly grew larger, taking on form and definition.

'Pray, what is it?' Miriam whispered as the object continued to grow. It was not a uniform grey, but appeared to be made of regular shapes; rectangles, triangles all connected together to make a vaguely wedge-like semi-circular creation. It was slowly spinning in the void. From certain angles Miriam fancied it resembled the disembodied head of a snake. Faint light occasionally caught the edges of the object, flickering brightly in the darkness. It looked like metal.

Joran shook his head, 'It is like nothing I have ever seen before.'

The Cardinal looked at their panel for a long time without saying anything. He performed rituals of his own and then gestured to the K'Trol that Miriam knew summoned the Oracle.

'Oracle.' He intoned, 'Analysis.'

Ann-Eley-Sis?

The words meant nothing to Miriam. Was it a name? She was humbled by the realisation of how much she still didn't know about the holy words.

The Oracle responded in kind, with words that came so fast and complex that Miriam was bewildered in moments.

'Dimensions, sixty five, thirty, one hundred thirty, mass one hundred metric. Hull composition...'

Hull? How could it be from Hull?

'...unknown alloy. Power source, unknown. Trajectory intercept in thirteen hours, twenty two minutes. Oxygen Nitrogen atmosphere detected. Control mechanism unknown...'

Unknown K'Trols? Relics from elsewhere? This makes no sense!

'... Origin, unknown.'

The Oracle became silent once again. Miriam and Joran looked up at the Cardinal, seeing their own fears and concerns mirrored on his face.

'Your eminence?' Joran asked, keeping his voice as humble as possible, 'Do you know what transpires?'

The Cardinal looked up, his expression heavy, as if a great weight had dropped upon him. He stared out into the void, his countenance weary and strained.

It was a long while before he spoke.

'It is another V'sel.'

Miriam and Joran had quickly been instructed by the Cardinal in a new ritual. It was named 'Eire-loq'. They were dispatched to venture down into the far end of the world, into the realms peopled by the En-Jinn menials. Neither had ever been there before.

The way led them through the heartland of the world where the mighty shrines of past prophets and saints were arrayed around a central piazza. This was the absolute centre of the world. A huge space devoted to those who had given their lives to further the cause. Many

of the shrines carried inscriptions that were not decipherable; others were written in glowing letters that could no longer be copied. All were venerated and many rituals and processions were held through the cycles to mark significant events. Miriam always felt inspired by them, wondering what act of valour she might do to play her part in their glorious voyage.

The way became tedious after this, as they were forced to clamber forward in an ungainly fashion, through the sections of the V'sel inhabited by the menials. Gone were the glowing walkways and elegant craftsmanship of the forward levels; now it was metal walkways, dark and gloomy, stained and grimy from time immemorial. The menials, the unwashed, the sub-caste lived and worked here. Miriam averted her eyes, not wishing to be defiled. The shadowy bodies of the menials darted out of her way, scattering in fear.

Ahead was a large door. Joran and Miriam immediately set to work with their ritual.

The Oracle spoke again

'Foreign object now approaching airlock. Docking in ten seconds. Cycle complete in thirty seconds.'

How does the Oracle move through the world so fast? It's taken us almost a day to make this trip!

Within a few short moments the door hissed open, revealing the room beyond. It was a large empty bay, with austere vertical walls, and bright illumination. Miriam and Joran had little time to take in the vista before their eyes were drawn to the object in the middle of the bay.

Sitting in the midst of the enormous room, tilted slightly to one side, lay the unknown V'Sel. It was mostly a dark grey colour, metallic, assembled out of regular panels as they had seen on the screen in the Tabernacle. In some places the hull was darkened to black, and they could see holes in the metal as if something had burnt through the outer parts. Dominating the forward part was a large clear panel. It was just possible to make out a room visible beyond. Jutting out from the front of the V'sel was a large protuberance, a long elongated cylinder. It looked aggressive and sinister, almost as if it might be a weapon of some kind.

Joran and Miriam cautiously moved forward, walking around the circumference of the V'Sel.

'Can it truly be a V'Sel?' Miriam asked, 'It is so small!'

'There has always been heretical thinking that other life might exist out in the void, ' Joran admitted uncomfortably, 'And that it might take on other forms.'

'Devils, imps and so on?'

Joran motioned for her to be quiet, 'The correct term is 'Ai-Ly-En'. We must prepare. If the forces of darkness are present, we must be ready.'

They both donned their holy coverings and conducted a ritual of cleansing.

Protocol satisfied, they moved close to the V'sel, walking around it. Miriam stood close to it, listening for any sound at all; there was none. The V'Sel was as silent as a tomb.

As they both approached the far side Joran signalled her across.

Miriam joined him quickly.

'Cast your gaze upon this.'

Miriam looked closely. There appeared to be a rectangular mark on the rear of the V'sel, with a panel next to it. It looked vaguely similar to the K'Trols in the Tabernacle.

They exchanged a look.

'We are tasked to investigate.' Miriam said.

Joran sighed, 'I feel this might be best left alone.'

'The Cardinal gave us strict instructions.'

Joran nodded thoughtfully. Miriam looked closely at the K'Trol, and touched it gently.

There was a hiss, and the rectangular panel sank away, and then folded aside into the interior of the V'Sel. A blast of musty air drifted out. Beyond a short dark passageway led inside. The smell reminded Miriam of the darker parts of the levels of the menials.

Miriam took a 'glow' from her robes and stepped inside, leading the nervous Joran behind her.

The interior of the V'Sel was surprisingly ordinary. There were lockers, access panels and more K'Trols. All of these seemed to be unresponsive. Above they could see what appeared to be lighting of some kind, but once again it was defunct. They found what appeared to be a kitchen, equipped with utensils that looked completely familiar, with recognisable forks and knives.

Further on they found the room behind the glass panel they had seen

from the bay. The room was filled with K'Trols, all dark and silent. Two large chairs were positioned in front of them, affording a clear view out of the panel; a window looking forward out of the V'Sel. In front of both of the chairs was a protruding rod, which split into two parts near the top. It was clearly designed to be grasped in two hands, though what its purpose might be they could not tell.

The other K'Trols were arranged around a large oval panel divided into four quadrants. What purpose it might serve neither Miriam nor Joran could define. Right at the bottom of this oval a small panel was dimly lit. Miriam moved closer to it. There were words there, but written in a script she could not read or even recognise.

'There are words here! Look!' Miriam said, pointing. Joran joined her, but then shook his head.

'Not a language we can read. I wonder what it says.'

'Perhaps a prayer, or a blessing of some kind. Its form is reminiscent of a poem or lyric.'

'Or a curse.'

Cobra Mk3.

Hull Integrity 24%. (Maintenance Overdue!)

Power Levels: 8%. (Maintenance Overdue!)

Hyperspace: Damaged

ECM: Damaged

Forward Beam Laser: Damaged

Shields: Offline

Lifesupport: Minimal / Nominal

Status : Standby

Nothing else appeared to be functional. In the middle of the room was a hole, a tube-like passage way leading directly downwards, with a thin ladder connected to one side.

'We proceed?' Miriam asked.

'We must, if we are to discern the secrets of this V'Sel.'

They cautiously clambered down the ladder and emerged into a larger room. The musty smell was stronger here. Miriam wrinkled her nose in response. As Joran joined her she shone her 'glow' around the enclosed space.

It seemed to be a sleeping chamber, immediately in front of her was a bed of sorts, with a mattress covered with restraining straps. She turned and found the other side of the room was identical...

There is something there...

Miriam staggered back with a short scream of fear.

There was another bed on the far side of the room. Upon it lay the desiccated body of a man, staring back at her from empty eye sockets. A gaze that must have been immovable since before she was born.

Miriam and a team of four menials had been directed to discover all they could about the strange V'Sel. Miriam had found the task

distasteful, yet strangely compelling. The menials had been tasked and organised into working through the V'Sel and defining its purpose. Miriam had supervised and written up their discoveries. After many intervals Joran checked with her to see how the investigation was proceeding.

'So, what news on the derelict V'Sel?' Joran asked, 'Have the menials discovered its purpose?'

Miriam sighed heavily. 'It's not a derelict. Not precisely.'

'Pray, what do you mean?'

'It's still operational.'

Joran looked surprised. 'I was led to believe it was ancient, a century or more. A V'Sel that small could not still be powered. Or have I been misled?'

'No deception was intended. The V'sel is old, the remains of the unfortunate occupant have been interred. The ritual of Ann-Eley-Sis indicated he was indeed a human. This was no ay-li-en V'sel. It has been adrift for a long time, at least seventy or eighty cycles.'

'Yet...'

'The V'sel still functions. We discovered a K'Trol which re-animated it, several more K'Trols within became active as a result.'

'No power source could still be thus blessed after such an interval without rituals!'

'None that we know of.'

'There is more that you have yet to tell me.'

Miriam walked slowly over to the window, looking out at the flickering distant Ztars. 'It is most assuredly a human V'sel, the language and scripting is unknown, but we do not expect it will take long to decipher.'

'What is it that concerns you?'

'The technology aboard is far more advanced than our own, that much is clear from our cursory examination. There is little provision for victuals aboard, a few quarter cycles at best. Such a V'sel could not get so deep into the void by any means we can postulate. Thus it represents a serious anomaly being found here, almost six ly'tch'eers from the nearest abode.'

Joran stared at her. 'A human civilisation able to traverse ly'tch'eers of space in only quarter cycles? Impossible surely. You have made a mistake, surely it must be some ancient space traveller from a previous millennia.'

'The dating is conclusive. Old, but not ancient. Oh, the menials have theories of course; all futile speculation. Our scriptures tell us that our magnificent V'Sel and those like it remain the pinnacle of human endeavour, and yet...'

'A satisfactory explanation eludes you.'

'Indeed.' Miriam felt uncomfortable, 'I have found some references in the derelict to what appears to be a mechanism for this amazing travel...'

'Yes?'

'I feel I cannot tell you. I must take this to the Cardinal alone, it is my

responsibility.'

'If you believe this in your heart.'

'And yet, if this V'Sel really was from another civilisation...'

'All humanity was destroyed in the apocalypse, according to scripture. 'Joran instructed, 'Why else were we few blessed to seek Nirvana?'

'Perhaps others survived the wrath and ventured into the void at another time? Yet the Cardinal has always claimed this not to be the case.'

'You would doubt the Cardinal?' Joran looked alarmed.

'I find myself confused.' Miriam admitted.

'Perhaps it would be better to eject this V'Sel back into the void from whence it came.' Joran replied. 'Our purpose remains. Perhaps this is a test, thrown in our path by the powers of darkness to examine our faith.'

Miriam shook his head. 'The V'Sel is real enough. I do not believe it is a fake, constructed by man or God for such a purpose. I must discover everything about it.'

Joran looked concerned, 'Is that wise? You might be led to question the Cardinal! Even question your faith? Take heed that such a path will not lead to ruin, Miriam.'

'I understand.'

Miriam took her time to understand the import of what she found. She wrote her findings with care and diligence. What she had found was

astounding and terrifying. She did not know how it would be received by the Cardinal. She recalled all she had been taught about integrity and value and felt comforted. The truth was what was important. The Cardinal would be pleased with her efforts. She sought an audience and it was granted immediately.

She bowed appropriately and handed him the report. The cardinal acknowledged it, placing it beside him.

'Tell me in your own words, my child.'

'What I have discovered is unsettling, father. I claim abrogation for any heresies you might perceive me as uttering.'

'Rest assured.'

Miriam took a deep breath.

'The V'sel had a name; the 'Kobayashi Maru'. The man aboard was known by the name of 'Gregory Malenchenko'. Names which appear to have significance, but we have no idea what they might represent. The V'Sel itself had been attacked, by weapons beyond our understanding.'

'Unorthodox indeed.'

'We discovered the mechanism by which it travelled through the void.' Miriam said hesitantly, 'It was propelled by something they called a 'Witch Drive', which allowed them to move at will between the Ztars in a twinkling of an eye if the account can be believed.'

'Evidence of the occult then?' The Cardinal mused, and then said with a smile, 'A V'Sel imbued with the Devil's own magic?'

'I do not think...'

'I meant that only in jest. I am sure the Devil has better things to do than inhabit the en-jinns of V'sels!'

'We have deciphered the V'Sel's log.' Miriam whispered, 'The V'sel appears to have been launched from an abode known as 'Sotiqu'. Aboard the V'Sel is a store of dates and locations, Ztars and abodes. There is a map contained within. A map of every Ztar between our origin and Tianve, complete with exquisite detail.

The cardinal returned her gaze, 'Details?'

Miriam shook her head miserably. 'Indeed, your eminence. All the systems are mapped, with detailed planetary descriptions; vegetation, climate, resources... and indigenous life. Tianve is listed as a having a huge population...'

The Cardinal looked at her askance, 'Of?'

'...Cats.' Miriam said miserably.

'Cats.' The Cardinal said impassively, 'Most interesting. What do you conclude?'

Miriam looked desperately at him, 'There is only one conclusion! Mankind survived the holocaust we fled! They continued to advance, invented new technology, managed the leap to the Ztars and over the millenia formed a sophisticated society that reaches to the furthest Ztars! Our purpose circumvented; obsoleted; bypassed; nullified!'

'Our destination?'

'Our Nirvana, Tianve, already colonised, and for many centuries.' Tears sprung to her eyes.

The Cardinal rose to his feet, walking around his desk, apparently deep in thought, 'Then our scriptures are wrong, or at least, incomplete.'

'What do we do?' Miriam said, bereft.

He took a decanter from a small cupboard on the wall and then slowly, deliberately poured two drinks into a pair of crystal glasses.

'A drink my dear? Such a moment of revelation requires savouring. Much needs to be done.'

Miriam was too astonished to answer. The Cardinal was not angry with her. He had assimilated her findings much more stoically than she had expected. She took the proffered glass and sipped it.

Miriam felt the liquid course down her throat. It felt warm and comforting. It was accompanied by a strong, heady feeling. Alcohol! She gasped involuntarily. It was such a privilege to consume such a rare anointment. It was usually only used to bless the shrines of saints.

'Father? This is unlooked for.'

'You have earned it my child. What do you believe we should do now?'

'We must be careful. An uncontrolled disclosure of the truth could cause confusion, panic, perhaps even riots.'

'You believe we should reveal these facts to the populace?'

Miriam frowned, 'It is the truth is it not? Our purpose, if it meant anything, was to search for truth, away from the lies, deceit and

destruction of the apocalypse.'

The Cardinal nodded, 'I thought you would believe. I'm glad I made the right choice in you.'

Miriam felt slightly hot, slightly dizzy. She put out her hand to steady herself. The alcohol must be strong stuff.

'Father. I'm sorry, I don't feel...'

'Of course, the stress of your activities of late will have been detrimental.' The Cardinal said, 'Tell me, do you know what uses alcohol is put too?'

'Of course.' Miriam replied, feeling dizzy, 'It is used to bless shrines and to mark those with established gifts of prophecy...'

'...And to anoint the dead.'

Miriam's eyes widened. A strange lethargy was growing from the pit of her stomach, spreading slowly into her limbs. She tried to move back from the desk, but found she couldn't move. Worse, her legs began to tremble and buckle.

She fell to her knees.

'Father?'

'You see my child.' The Cardinal said heavily, 'I have suspected this ... this revelation for many years. There have been other.... incidents of a similar nature throughout our voyage. Our people are not ready for this truth, not yet.'

'But the truth...' Her voice slurred, her vision tunnelling in around her.

'For now, the truth must be what it was supposed to be.' The Cardinal declared, 'I cannot allow you to have this knowledge and promulgate it.'

Miriam collapsed, the Cardinal catching her as she fell. He held her gently by the shoulders, kissing her on the forehead; her look of trust betrayed cut him to his very soul. He held her close, tears streaming down his face.

'Father! I only wanted to serve...'

'And you shall always be remembered for it. God speed, my child.'

Joran watched as Miriam's body was lowered into the shrine reverently by a team of acolytes. He had organised the ceremony with a mixture of joy and grief. Joy that she would be venerated forever, and grief that he would never speak with her again.

She was lying on a gloriously embroidered and brightly lit plinth, the story of her brave endeavours chiselled into the sides of the plinth for all to read. The Cardinal himself had read her eulogy. It was a remarkable story; how she'd uncovered the Devil's work and defeated his schemes to defile their world.

She was dressed in a pure white smock, her eyes closed and her arms folded across her chest, her face serene. She radiated peace and tranquility. Joran envied her. She had achieved everything and was now in Nirvana.

She was the latest martyr, her tomb a shrine to the truth. The Way would continue, the sacrifice had been made. Her death would give faith, meaning and secure obedience from thousands. She had become what all the acolytes desired, a testament of faith, truth and hope. For a thousand cycles they would tell stories of how her

sacrifice had prevented the terrible ingress of the Devil's work contaminating their world.

Joran recalled the Cardinals testimony of how the derelict V'Sel was possessed by witchcraft. He remembered how Miriam had not told him about her discovery. how she had protected him from danger before he'd even been aware of it. The Cardinal had told the populace how Miriam had insisted on facing the danger herself. She had defeated the darkness of the witch invested V'Sel, sacrificing herself to save them all!

Joran swore he would visit her shrine to pray and thank her every day until he died. Truly she was a holy saint.

The Cardinal turned and sat behind his desk, pressing a concealed button. A small display unit popped up. He typed in an access code to the touch sensitive display.

'Optimum Reliance Automatic Computer Logical Engine; ORACLE online.' A metallic voice intoned,'Please state your request.'

'Ship status?'

'All onboard indicators are green. Deuterium replenishment has been successful. Fusion reactors are stable. Coriolis stability and centrifuge within safety parameters.'

'Excellent. Status of cargo bay four?'

'Occupied. Unidentified vessel type. Four crew members aboard. Rank, menial.'

'Vent cargo bay four to space.'

'Please confirm. Bay is occupied.'

'Confirm.' The Cardinal said in a whisper, 'Priority override.'

The generation ship continued on its almost eternal course. Far behind it tumbled the battered remains of a wanted pirate's Mk3 Cobra, shot to scrap in a police attack years ago, hull panels blown, a true derelict now. It's pilot had attempted an ill advised mis-jump into interstellar space. Marooned.

The Cobra was closely followed by four undernourished corpses dressed in dirty rags. They had attended to it in obedience to their master's wishes. Now they would attend it forever in the empty void.

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