

- and with a doomed groan, he remembered himself. His mind lapsed back to mundane reality, crashing out of blissful dreams.

Cool air was lapping gently over him. He sensed light glowering beyond his closed eyelids. Asleep forever, and still he needed more. Reality had nothing to match the dreams.

Laboriously, still closing his eyes to the room, he pushed his elbows up over the rim of his tublike bed and let the hands drop onto the worn cushions there. It was a few seconds more before the next giant leap towards action saw them tense, hauling him up into a sitting position. Bitterly, he opened his eyes.

And there he was, same tired old face in the mirror. Captain Ken Jensen, reporting for duty. Normal life was the duty. Not that all the people back home would have seen it as a normal life. Well, any of them would be welcome to it.

Jensen was the captain of this little Explorer ship, the *Darchus*: one invisible speck in an infinite universe, flying slowly about to make discoveries for all the abstracted astronomers back home, and maybe some keen entrepreneurs or colonisers too, if they ever struck lucky. The mission was simple, and evidently eternal: go to star systems nobody has ever been before, find out what they're like, and transmit everything you find back to Earth. He was reminded that, to the perceptions of everybody back home, he had now been on this mission for seven hundred years.

Seven hundred years. Jesus. And that was eons, Earth's long orbits, not the fleeting years of one of those hot little planets he often visited.

Of course it didn't *feel* like seven hundred years, except when he woke up. Most of it hadn't really been years at all - travel at nearly light speed like this, and time slows down so much that your years pass in seconds. In *inside* time, his crew had only been journeying for fifty-eight years. And out of that, of course, there was all the time spent sleeping to take away too. The crew of the *Darchus* lived in their beautiful dreaming realm throughout every journey, intoxicated and entranced by artificially-induced wonders in the blissful sleeps that endured for years, their selves freed and dissolved, only to be gradually pieced back together until they woke up in stunned realisation once again. Waking up to the same old you, the same old faces, the same old ship, and the same old emptiness, after the sleeps: this was the toughest part of the life.

It was all so numbingly obvious, so depressingly familiar. Dismissing thought with concerted action, he arched his body and clumsily clambered out of the sleepsuit, lumbering forwards, his moist skin already drying in the air. Life was imprisonment. There was no escape from the ship, from the mission, until death, or until the *Darchus* chanced upon other people who had somehow got here first. He tottered grimly towards the long mirror leering truth at him, and touched the closet door posing as wall beside it.

As the door peeled away, the crimson sheen of a captain's uniform gleamed back from behind it, and the same old hopeful questions leapt out. Would there be people to meet this time? Might they stumble upon intelligent life at last, or any developed life? Would they finally get the chance to retire, leave this unending universe of freezing emptiness and desolate wilderness, finally go home?

Whatever that was.

He pulled some crispy boxers from an opening drawer and dragged them up into place. The thick socks rasped over his soft feet.

He pulled out a shirt at random to wear under the jacket. He looked at it. The white one with frills. Sick of it. Like all of them. *You* try going a lifetime on a single wardrobe, he imagined himself saying to an avid live audience back home. The others got to choose, get new ones made and old ones destroyed. But a Captain had to keep all his uniforms.

The trousers and the jacket, those skin-deep illusions of importance, were slowly noosed around his body. His feet clicked into the gleaming black boots and he wearily straightened up. He turned to look into the long mirror again.

The impeccable uniform had transformed his dourness into the mark of sullen authority, his lazy stance into the assured kind of complacency. Jensen would have liked to get fat, so that the uniform would appear as hollow and unsuited as it was, but the Net, marshalling every cell of his body with its microscopic nanos, would never let him. He was confined to semblance.

The Net. He groaned inwardly, glancing to the low ceiling. He was dressed and ready. There was no further excuse to delay conversing with it.

"OK, Net," he said sourly. "What's going on?"

The ship's computer intelligence stirred, activating its toneless, sexless voice for the first time in many years: I have awoken the crew. We are approaching the system of Barvene. We need to select which planet in the system we are to investigate first.

Jensen nodded dourly, unsurprised. "Right. Get the command staff to come to the Control Room, and we'll get it over with."