

THE MOSQUITO FLEET by ANDREW PENN ROMINE

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**The  
Mosquito  
Fleet**

ANDREW PENN ROMINE

*To Mom, who taught me that scary can be fun.*

# PART 1: THE STARS, HOW DIFFERENT FROM NIGHT TO NIGHT

**F**IVE SECONDS AFTER THE BIOTIC FERRY *GRASS IS GREENER* SHUNTS OUT of warp space, Lira notices the stars are different—not where they ought to be.

An amber dot hums into existence on the navigator's holochart and stays there: *Navigational Hazard, Class V.*

An error, surely.

Lira drums the curved screen, an indisputable human habit, but the stubborn dot remains. No error. The hazard spews gravitational waves, though the mass registers less than that of one of the enormous grain barges on the long boost out of Crockett's Star.

No error. A miscalculation.

Lira's synthetic muscles tighten across her chest in approximation of another human response. Anxiety. The last time she miscalculated a jump, a lot of people died.

"Skipper," she calls over her shoulder, peering past the corner of the acceleration couch. Captain Erinn Juarez yawns in her aft command console, removing her hypersleep cuff and rubbing her wrist where the soporific electrodes had been attached. Her eyes are fuzzy with hypersleep, but worry lines carve deep furrows in her aging face at the alarm in Lira's tone.

"Nav hazard dead ahead. Class five." Lira says, omitting for the moment that they're off course as well. "Five-zero two-three-one kilometers." The navigator

suppresses a tremor in her left hand. That's how it always begins. Headaches follow and then the stimbulb. The sting in the crook of her arm and then the release.

"You sure, Lira? I don't see anything," says Pete Driscoll, the quartermaster seated at the helm station forward of her. Driscoll had piloted *Grass is Greener* for almost ten years before Juarez purchased the charter and with her captaincy brought Lira onboard. He'd logged no less than three official protests at being passed up for chief mate.

Driscoll leans over his helm console, looking out through the trapezoidal viewports of the galley-like bridge in an exaggerated show. Nothing but the black of deep space beyond. He throws a grin back at Lira, but his eyes don't contain his smile.

"Are you defective? Look at my chart," she snaps at him, shocked at her own defensiveness. Driscoll's jaw drops in astonishment.

"Lira?" Worry mounts in Juarez's brow.

Such combative outbursts are rare. Lira flushes with embarrassment. "Apologies, Skipper, Driscoll," Lira replies, "but *Grass is Greener* doesn't lie."

"Give me a visual," Juarez orders.

Lira nods, thumbing the ship's astronomical cameras toward the hazard. A blurry holo appears on the viewport, showing a dark, pear-shaped patch of deep space against a darker, starless backdrop. The patch is shrouded with hazy, pale gases. The amber lines of the ferry's projected course plunge into the heart of the hazard.

Lira's chest tightens. This scenario recalls too much of what happened at asteroid Adamson A621 aboard the *Highline*. Two such egregious jump calculations in one's career are highly improbable. She tries to keep her own brow from furrowing.

"All stop," the captain orders Driscoll.

As the ferry rumbles in response, Lira adjusts its sensors. It's an antiquated system with low resolution, mostly mechanical antenna that were favored in an earlier era of shipbuilding. Juarez would have been wise to upgrade to full organic sensor vanes years ago, but the margins are thin in the ferry business.

Like Lira, *Grass is Greener* is a biotic construct, a blend of semi-organic and mechanical components. The ship's steel hull, laid over a century before, protects the crew against the exceptional rigors of spaceflight. Deep within that reinforced shell, however, its biotic core instinctively translates the shifting

realities of warp space into hard navigational data. Synthetics, developed from the same science that created biotic ships, serve as a bridge between the crew and the animal intelligence of their ship.

“Saints of shit. What is that?” Driscoll mutters.

Lira suppresses another tremor. The first sullen pangs of headache trace the seams of her skull.

*Stress is an unacceptable response, she reprimands herself. The crew is counting on you.*

“Skipper,” she confesses. “We’re off course.” The headache intensifies. She’ll need her injections soon.

“You think?”

“We arrived at Crockett’s Star,” Lira assures her. “But we’re at the heliopause, far short of our arrival coordinates.”

Captain Juarez gives Lira a look freighted with their shared history.

“Can we chart around that thing?” Juarez winces, toying with the hypersleep cuff. “And just shunt back to warp?”

The skipper closes her eyes and runs a hand through the mop of her short, gray hair. She emits a heavy sigh. Juarez was diagnosed with liver cancer last year, and despite a series of expensive organ replacements, both artificial and biotic, she’s only getting sicker. She can’t afford treatments, and she can’t afford retirement. Lira wonders what happens when Juarez dies. Will Lira’s role in the *Highline* disaster remain secret? Pondering the question now only makes the cracks in Lira’s head grow wider.

“The object’s emitting gravitational waves consistent with artificial gravity, but I believe we can skirt around it without incident.”

“Without incident?” mocks Driscoll. “We just came out of warp and ran into the only object for millions of miles around. What do you call that?”

“Improbable,” Lira agrees, troubled.

“So what the hell is it?” Juarez asks.

Lira reads the sensor data. On the holo, faint outlines of a wide tail stretch for a million kilometers behind the hazard. Save for the unusual gravitational readings, it could be a long-period or hyperbolic comet, albeit one that’s not on any of their charts.

“A comet perhaps,” she says doubtfully, “Approximately thirty-five kilometers in diameter. *Grass is Greener* detects some outgassing. Methane, ammonia, even some oxygen.”

“Any debris?”

“A handful of smaller bodies in loose orbit around the nucleus, but the data are inconclusive.”

“How the hell did this happen, Lira?”

Lira flushes at the accusation implicit in the skipper’s question. The *history*. She can’t look Driscoll in the eye when he turns to face her.

“Perhaps I made an error interpreting *Grass is Greener’s* warp space calculations,” she admits.

Juarez grunts, and Lira can almost hear her saying, “That’s twice.”

“Saints of shit, we’ll be late getting into Crockett no matter what,” Juarez mutters. Driscoll shakes his head and reaches for his headset.

Lira doesn’t understand why *Grass is Greener* would give her the wrong jump information. The ship navigated warp space by instinct, not conscious thought. There’s no possibility for error or deception.

Unlike with a synthetic.

Lira isn’t lying though, so it means the error belongs to her.

“Skipper, I offer to relieve myself of duty,” Lira proposes. It’s the only solution certain to prevent her from making further errors.

“Like hell,” Juarez snorts. “I need you to chart us around that thing. Then calculate a new jump. Otherwise, it’ll be weeks before we cruise home.”

Lira spends several minutes plotting a new course that takes them around the comet. Juarez orders Driscoll to follow it. The dark blot of the navigational hazard heaves well to the side. Lira breathes a sigh of relief. New warp coordinates will take longer.

Driscoll yelps and tears his comm-phones from his head. An ear-piercing squawk shrills from the speakers and ebbs to a low warble.

“I was trying to raise Crockett control, and that’s what I got,” he says, rubbing his ears. He puts the signal on speaker. Mostly they hear the normal click of background radiation, but the warble remains like low-throated birdsong.

“Might be the comet’s gravitational waves,” Lira says, though she’s far from sure that it’s actually a comet. What else might it be though? Lira leans back from her console, irritated with herself. Synthetics aren’t supposed to be susceptible to this sort of self-indulgent brooding. Perhaps the faults in her navigational core have spread to her emotional nodes. She’ll ask Abe to check later.

As if reading her thoughts, the skipper seeks Abe's advice first, summoning him up on the comm.

"Heya, Skipper," the cheerful, baritone voice of the chief biotic engineer replies.

Abram Mistri is the longest serving crew member aboard *Grass is Greener*. Unlike Driscoll, he's never once jockeyed for command. Abe's content to live in the warren of biomass conduits and drive machineries of the engineering deck. He's got an easy touch with biotic systems; Lira should know. He loves his ship almost as much as he loves its navigator.

*The bunk, narrow and cramped. Abe's rough-shaven cheeks brushing against her thighs . . .*

More self-indulgence. Lira tries and fails to focus on her navigational calculations.

"Mistri," Juarez says, "we've shunted from warp space early, on course for what looks to be a rogue comet. Lira's charted us around it for now, but I'm worried about making another jump with respect to debris."

"Hmm. That's tricky."

Lira knows Abe well enough to read the concern echoed in his truncated reply. He'll be scratching that bald, brown dome of his with a nimble finger and worrying about the ferry's hull. He converses in muffled tones with his co-engineer, Magnus Lin. Lin looks after the mechanical innards of the ship with the same care Abe pays the biotic ones.

"Skipper," Abe says, "do what you gotta. Mags and I are confident the hull can take it. We've weathered rough seas before."

"We start plowing through debris, Skipper," Driscoll warns, "the passengers are going to full-on panic."

Juarez closes her eyes. The shallowness of her breathing indicates probable discomfort from her illness.

"Skipper," Lira suggests, "I'll go down to the main sensor compartment and calibrate for hazardous debris."

She could also stop by the infirmary on her way and get painkillers for Juarez. Stimbulbs for herself.

The skipper cuts her a pained look with a raised eyebrow to let Lira know she's onto her scheme.

"Do it," she relents with a grimace. "And Abe, are you still listening?"

"Aye, Skipper," the engineer answers.



“Meet Lira there. If you can coax some performance from the sensory fronds, I’ll feel better.” *And keep an eye on my navigator too*, is the unspoken command.

Lira and Abe’s relationship isn’t a secret among the small crew, but Driscoll snickers all the same.

“Just don’t coax anything else,” he mumbles.

The skipper clenches her teeth through a wave of pain, “What are you, *five*, Pete?”

Chastened but still giggling, Driscoll goes back to his comm board, trying to raise Crockett’s Star. Lira stands from her station and heads toward the exit hatch.

“What about the passengers?” she asks the captain.

Juarez grabs the hand-mic for the PA.

“I’ll announce there’s been a delay. If any of the kiddos happen to corner you, tell them the same thing. Got it?”

The “kiddos” are the ferry’s deckhands, a trio of young apprentices working on an internship. Gregarious and mostly reliable, they love gossip and are a bit too chummy with the passengers. Juarez likes cheap, good-looking labor, but the truth is, they work efficiently, and she’s been considering making an offer to hire at least one of them full-time. Lira approves.

“I won’t say a thing,” Lira says.

Juarez gives her another odd look. Lira’s promise echoes the very words the skipper said to her ten years past in the aftermath of Adamson A621 and the destruction of the *Highline*.

The haunted look on the skipper’s pallid and sweat-sheened face lingers in Lira’s mind long after she leaves the bridge.



Durance Pike wipes the hypersleep from his eyes, hardly believing the sight that fills his porthole.

A thrill rises as he presses his face to the window. His tattered seat rumbles as the ferry slows, and his hypersleep cuff rolls unsecured from the armrest. Electricity tingles at the end of his fingers. The thin line of Pike’s lips, long unaccustomed to variations in their stony geometry, flexes upward in a grin.

A comet: a faint but unmistakable shadow tumbling against the deeper black of space, rises into the ferry’s path like a dim, gourd-shaped moon. Gossamer

veils stream from the mottled surface, green-white jets of gas and dust. He's made this journey over a score and more of years, and never has such a light kindled in the dark. His heart pounds with an unreasoned joy as he leans back into the threadbare upholstery of his seat.

Had he been the first to see it? Pike glances around, experiencing a hot rush of shame for his foolish grin. He shouldn't worry. A-Deck is lightly populated, only a quarter of its time-chewed seats occupied. A stout farmer two rows in front of him coos to a babe squalling in his arms. A bespectacled financier across the aisle pays similar devotion to her datapad full of the latest reports from the Core. Some people just don't look up; they can't look out from their tiny lives to see the bigger picture.

Not like him.

Pike marvels again at the comet with another flush of joy. He laughs the way he used to when he and Mama played with the red worms that used to inch up the rusty stalks of wheat-sedge they grew on the farm.

But it's not just Mama he thinks of when he lays eyes on the strange comet. Not long ago, when his work brought him to and from Silas's Crossing more frequently, he fell into the missionary orbit of Brother Hong of the Gray Temple. The monk told him humanity's just like thin lines of ants marching into the vast fields of the cosmos where a combine waits to thresh them all. Pike believes that in the shifting stars and the weird glimmerings of warp space, the Nameless Ones are the waiting combine.

As a young man, Pike always chose practical matters over the spiritual. He took over the farm on Crockett when Mama died of the dry rot. He worked it on behalf of AgriGrow Corporation right up until they bought him out along with the whole southern continent. He got a thin payout and the uncertain promise of factory work at a fertilizer plant that never materialized. Instead, he joined a collective of farmers to fight for what remained of their rights against AGC's burgeoning control. Turns out, there wasn't much left to fight for, so he took his fight into the shadows. Company spies and mercs made his work dangerous, sometimes deadly. He'd lost count of how many corporates he'd killed on behalf of the collective. Corpos just like the woman across the aisle.

But age had eventually nudged him to his *true* calling and that chance meeting in a back-alley chapel on Silas's Crossing twelve years ago.

In addition to a new spiritual rapport, Brother Hong rekindled in Pike more *personal* feelings.

Between each passionate, breathless coupling, Pike begged Brother Hong to sing the final covenant of the Nameless Ones. Before they left the universe and vanished into warp space untold millennia before, it is said they left behind a promise of their own:

*When the stars shine different from night to night,  
When the moons spin 'round in spirals tight,  
When unbidden gleams a comet light . . .  
The Nameless Ones chant their ancient rite.*

A children's rhyme, maybe, or Gray Temple doggerel, but doesn't Brother Hong teach that truth can rest in such simple rhyme?

Crockett's rocky moonlets have reached their fifty-year perigee relative to the planet. AGC's clumsy engineering of the wheat-sedge further destroys the ecology. Dry rot still kills hundreds of colonists on Crockett each year. And now, an uncharted comet—or perhaps something else—has appeared in the skies.

“Soon, Rance,” Hong whispered, gently nibbling his earlobe on what proved to be their last night on Silas's Crossing, a year before. Mama'd said the same thing when he asked her if she was going to get better the day before she died. With her last breaths, she croaked out a similar verse:

*When the seed won't sow from deadly blight,  
And the sun burns out in fear of night,  
Then shines anew that comet light . . .  
The Nameless Ones reap their ancient right.*

On their final visit, during the ceremony that marked Durance's education complete, Brother Hong gifted him a satchel, an antique bag of heavy brocade and worn leather. His eyes were misty.

“A seed for planting when the stars are different. Then, but not before, return to me, my brother,” he'd said.

Pike carries the satchel wherever he goes, waiting for the right moment to prove his devotion. Even now, the bag sits cradled between Pike's booted feet, half stowed beneath the seat in front of him. It's a curious object inside the satchel, hardly anything like the bombs Pike planted in his previous career as an agitator, but Brother Hong says it will blast the old world apart all the same.

*Is now that time? Is this strange celestial body outside the window a sign from the Nameless Ones?* The furtive excitement washes over him again.

“What’s that, Daddy?”

The toddler squirms out of the farmer’s arms and points out their window. A chorus of audible gasps rises from the passenger deck. His fellow travelers have finally noticed.

“Well, I’ll be!” her father exclaims. Pike wonders if they feel the same electric call in their hearts as he does.

One of the stewards, a lanky young woman with blonde hair shaved close to her skull, waves her arms for calm and tells everyone to remain seated. Only a routine course correction.

*Bullshit.* Pike doesn’t buy it, and neither do many of the passengers. It’s no mistake. They’ve been *called* here. The din of excited voices grows as people stand in their seats, demanding to know the reason for the delay, the explanation for that *thing* hanging in their path. A few stand gawping, faces pressed against the viewports.

They can’t yet recognize it for what it must be—not just a comet but a herald from the Nameless Ones themselves. The commotion’s a good excuse, however, to rise from his own seat and slip down the aisle before the flustered deckhand notices him.

Aft of the vending units, Pike locates a hatch down to the unused Passenger B-Deck. It’s closed but unlocked, and no one is looking. The muffled and indistinct voice of the captain crackles through the tinny PA speakers as he slips down the stairs and dogs the hatch behind him. He hurries across the large, empty deck, a mirror to the one above, clutching his satchel tight. It’s warm in his arms, his own facsimile of the farmer’s child. The comet looms outside the windows, filling B-Deck with its wan, mysterious light. An electric thrill of certainty arcs once again through Durance Pike’s long, lean frame.

Pike doesn’t have a plan yet, but he needs some space to think things through. This is an opportune chance, perhaps his last, to prove to Brother Hong the depth of his faith. If it’s in his power, he’ll welcome the Nameless Ones back, just as he and Brother Hong had dreamed.



Maintenance ladderwells run like capillaries through the decks of the *Grass is Greener*. Plunging down one narrow shaft, Lira silently questions the shipwright who decided the primary sensor control room was best accessed from such inconvenient corridors. She floats in the null gravity outside the control room, waiting for Abe to arrive, glad for a moment's respite. The headache has not abated.

With a trembling hand, Lira withdraws a small med bulb from the pocket of her jumpsuit. The white liquid stimulant swirls inside, and though not specially formulated for her synthetic biology, it provides relief from the tremors and the headaches that result when she dwells too much on the events aboard the *Highline*.

She presses the stimbulb to her neck, and the auto injector hisses. At once, her headache subsides. She's reaching for another bulb when she hears rustling in the ladderwell above.

"Lira?" Abe calls down.

She just manages to shove the stimbulb back into her jumpsuit as the bioengineer comes drifting down. Abe is wrinkled and lithe, catlike, and completely at home in the cramped ladderwell, unlike Lira.

"Courtesy suggests you should have comm'd first," she protests as he slides next to her, the worn bladder of his tool bag slung over his shoulder.

Their shared bunk is only a little smaller than the ladderwell, but there, his touch is gentle and expected. Down here, their elbows and knees knock in a painful and clumsy intimacy. Abe winces when Lira inadvertently boxes his kidneys.

"Dammit, Lir, quit moving." A laugh chuckles up from his pain. Always laughing, Abe Mistri.

"Apologies, Abe," Lira says. "Perhaps I can calibrate the sensors myself."

There's little reason for them both to be in here when one pair of hands is as good as two. Abe gives her shoulder a gentle squeeze with his long fingers. She shivers, another human response.

"Let me help. Plus, the skipper asked me to check in on you."

"Unnecessary," she replies, a little brusquer than meant. She's practiced in hiding the shakes, but Abe knows her too well.

"It's getting worse, isn't it?"

"I don't know what you mean."

Lira turns to the access hatch, eager to exchange this conversation for the business of adjusting the main sensors.

Abe grins, a familiar response to her evasiveness. He reaches around her to help with the release clamps. They're sealed shut with age. The main sensors haven't been accessed from here in years. For the few minutes while they struggle with the hatch, Abe doesn't press his inquiry. With a grunt, Lira swings it free, and he returns to the subject.

"I've never heard you go off on Driscoll that way, Lir."

"He called my observations into question," she explains.

Abe laughs. "He calls *everyone's* observations into question, Lira. Even the skipper's when she's not around."

Abe leans close, smelling of engine grease and the musky perfume of ship's biotics. She flushes.

"You okay? You were about to inject again just now. This comet has you spooked."

She's never told Abe about the *Highline*, and now's not the time. No doubt Abe knows there's some sort of incident in her past. No experienced spacer, let alone a prized synthetic navigator, chooses service in the Mosquito Fleets over the bigger operations in the Core.

"The gravity is weird. I'm not sure that *is* a comet," she corrects Abe.

That quiets him. He narrows his eyes.

"What is it then?"

Lira floats into the control room, positioning herself before the central column that houses the main focusing dials. The column itself is mechanical, though it's wrapped in a skein of transparent conduits like blood vessels. Biomass, the circulatory lifeblood of the ship's biotic systems, pulses through the conduits, bathing the cabin in a soft cyan haze.

"An unknown navigational hazard," she replies with a small grin.

Abe shakes his head, laughing at her wry ambiguity.

Lira wonders sometimes if the bioengineer is attracted to her physical form or whether it's her personification of the biotic systems that he loves. It certainly can't be her wit, she's surmised.

As Abe opens his tool bag and extracts a gel wand, Lira unlatches the control panel.

"I'm concerned about the skipper, Abe," she says, which is mostly the truth at least. "She's sicker than she admits."

Abe shrugs sadly. He's noticed it too.

"Treatment's expensive, yeah. But she's got years ahead of her, Lir."

"But what happens when she dies? Or retires?"

"No reason we can't stay aboard *Grass is Greener*. You'd make a fine skipper too," he adds.

It's her turn to laugh.

"Driscoll might disagree."

It's not really command she worries about. Synthetics aren't unknown as ships' masters, though they usually serve in specialized roles aboard more advanced vessels than *Grass is Greener*. No, she worries more about the secret Juarez keeps and about who might learn it when she dies.

*Can't worry about it now.* Lira turns her attention to the sensors. On the control port, tiny veins of biomass flow around the controls, feeding nutrients to the biotic sensor fronds and sending sensor impulses back to the ship.

Abe peels back a safety valve with his wand, allowing Lira to comb the fine hairs on the detection stalks.

A small holo displays the results of their labors. There's still a lot of grain in the signal, but the enhanced outlines of the main comet show very little additional debris to be concerned about. The unusually strong gravity, Lira thinks, is another matter entirely.

A tremulous whine surges through the control column—the noise a silver spike in Lira's already tender skull. She gasps. The feedback reminds her of the static that blasted through Driscoll's headset earlier.

"That's not background radiation," she frowns.

"What's not background radiation?" Abe says, puzzled and concerned.

"You didn't hear that?" Lira's chest turns icy and hollow.

Abe shakes his head.

"When's the last time you had your aural nodes checked?" he asks. "I've got my forceps. We could take a look now." The bioengineer reaches for his bag.

Lira turns away angrily. Maybe that's the whole reason Abe's with her. Advanced synthetic biology in a human package. A ship he can talk to. Fuck. She frowns at the uncharitable thought.

"I'm sorry, Lir. I could adjust . . . something else instead?" He laughs, not realizing how ill-timed his joke is.

"I'm not a ship, Abe," she snaps.

Abe's eyes widen at her rebuke. Anger flares in his eyes briefly before softening to remorse. "I'm sorry, Lira. You know I don't see you that way."

"I know," she replies without much conviction. If her head wasn't caught in an invisible vice, she might have more to say to him. They'd have to talk about it soon though. After they got underway again. After another stimbulb.

"I am. Truly," he says.

Abe opens his arms wide but low. A gesture of contrition.

"Yeah."

She hugs him loosely. He allows it.

"It's okay," she says, pulling him tighter. He's not lying about his feelings, at least not to her. For a moment, she forgets the headache roaring in her ears. But as Lira holds Abe Mistri close, she feels the stimbulb pressing against her thigh.



Alone at the sink in the aft passenger lavatory of the empty B-Deck, Pike gazes on Brother Hong's strange gift with something like disappointment. The object is a tapered ovoid of black glass as long as his forearm. Scalloped plates or scales rib the surface with subtle ridges. Glittering just beneath the ribs, flecks of jade sparkle like miniature constellations. Truthfully, for all the weight Brother Hong had invested in the gift, it looks like nothing more than a knick-knack, a mass-produced pretty for the tourists on an Oleander beach. This, *this*, is supposed to blast apart the universe?

He lifts it from the satchel. It's heavy and cool in his hands, just as he expects a lump of glass to be. What had Brother Hong called it? A shell, a seed, a *spore*.

Pike catches his reflection in the mirror and feels ridiculous. His face burns with shame. He's just an old man mooning over an ex-lover's trinket. Why should his promises to that bald monk even matter now?

*Because you have to honor the love you once shared, Rance. Because the stars are different tonight.*

The words come to Pike in his mama's voice, and it bothers him. He's never allowed that sort of treacly sentimentality to infect him. He did have faith in the Nameless Ones though. Or at least an admiration for their cold indifference to the world they'd left behind.

Gazing on the oddity up close makes Pike sweat, and his eyelids droop as if weighed down by stones. An impression of unimaginable age washes over him,



making his eighty-five years seem young in comparison. Something flutters deep within the glassy object, numbing his fingers. He shoves the “spore” back into the satchel and clasps it shut. The feeling of weariness ebbs, but the disquieting pressure on his fingertips lingers. That’s never happened before.

Brother Hong spoke of the legacy of the Nameless Ones, but Pike always reckoned he was just talking stories, not artifacts. Could this spore be picking up some sort of signal from that comet or whatever out there? A tingle passes from his fingertips and down his spine. It’s the thrill he gets just before he moves on a target. Not exactly a confirmation of the theory, but Pike’s learned to trust his gut.

He closes his eyes, trying to imagine the civilization of the Nameless Ones that Brother Hong described between sultry afternoon couplings: entire planets covered in gargantuan towers, vast astronomical temple complexes that stretched from horizon to horizon, science and technology beyond the childish concerns of grasping corporation and indigent farmer. Starships the size of moons—or comets.

Is that what spins in the dark outside this decrepit ferry?

A sudden ache to gaze upon the frosty prominences of the mysterious comet overwhelms him. He mumbles the almost forgotten prayers Brother Hong taught him—a rough approximation of the ancient tongue, he’d said. *Will the prayers be enough? Will they accept the offerings?* Brother Hong must have thought so, or he would not have given him care of the Star Spore.

*How to get to the comet*, he wonders. Short of wresting control of *Grass is Greener* from the crew, that is. He’s too old for that shit. But the captain announced plans to fire the engines again soon to put them on a wider course around it. He can’t permit that, no. Not until he decides what to do.

The years with the collective taught him a few things about industrial sabotage. A ferry isn’t all that different from a grain barge after all. Unplug the right conduits, override the pressure valves on the biomass pumps—throw a wrench into the works. No one would suspect sabotage, not until he’d made his move anyway.

Pike may not be able to stop the ferry from leaving, but maybe he can slow them down. He smiles at the old man grinning in the mirror. The Nameless Ones waited millennia to return. Time is on his side.



The crew-only passageways of the ferry are even more careworn than the passenger decks. Illumination panels flicker dimly overhead. Status lights wink from countless recesses like rainbow eyes. Fanning across the machined bulkheads, veins of nurturing biomass pulse with their sluggish blue light. Pike might wander through *Grass is Greener* at his leisure for quite some time before a crew member challenges him. Even so, he keeps to the shadows that pool in the stanchions that line the passageways. Better not to be spotted at all.

Following standard nautical markings along the deck, Pike passes an airlock, then an equipment locker, and through a junction to the hatch for the engineering compartment. Once again, while secured, the hatch is not locked.

Pike's learned to be suspicious when things are easy. He tenses, expecting an ambush. None comes. Could the Nameless Ones be clearing his way?

The engineering compartment is not much larger than Brother Hong's cell back on Silas's Crossing. Control boards ring a sunken pit where the twin housings of the sublight engines squat like giant sarcophaguses. The roar of machinery fills his ears, and control boards glitter like jewels in the half-light. Biomass conduits sprout like mighty trees here, roots and branches snaking away into the overhead to biotic junctions throughout the ship. Their music throbbing deep in his bones. In the satchel he clutches to his chest, the spore echoes the vibrations, a second heartbeat to his own . . .

Pike snaps from his trance, realizing too late he's forgotten to check if the compartment is occupied. But no. He's alone here. Fate or coincidence?

His skin crawls as he climbs to the nearest control board. Droplets of sweat bead along his thin hairline. He doesn't like coincidence. Excitement or panic arcs through him like lightning. His heart hammers at his ribcage, too fast for his age. He feels dizzy.

Pike traces a nest of ordinary electrical wires running from the control board to a nearby biomass exchanger. The biotic ring contains a half-dozen semi-organic and mechanical valves. It squats in the center of a spiderweb of flow-regulation circuitry.

Pike cuts the power to the exchanger, allowing a volatile mix of energy and biomass to build up in the valves. In response, several amber lights wink on.

There's a failsafe in place to keep the engines and biotic systems from overloading though. He eyes the hefty mechanical lock that protects the failsafe switch and then glances around for a wrench or something equally heavy to smash the lock. Despite the worn condition of the ferry though, the tools are kept out of sight.

He's not going to shut down the engines that way. No doubt one of the engineering mates has a key, but he can't wait in the engine compartment until they find him. More yellow warnings flash on the control board as pressure begins to build.

He studies the biotic ring again. In the center is a diagnostic port, a rubbery spigot for sampling the health of the biomass. Its opening is a knotted sphincter of synth muscle, but it would easily yield for maintenance.

*Plant a seed, Brother Hong had said.*

Tenderly, Pike removes the spore from his satchel. He could shove it into the port. At the worst, it might block the biomass flow and lead to a temporary paralysis of the biotic systems in engineering. At most? Well, if the spore were truly an artifact of the Nameless Ones, then maybe it would do more.

As he works it into the port, warm biomass leaks over his hands. The scent is vegetal with a floral spice. The spore lodges in the throat of the spigot, able to go no farther. It reminds him of the time one of his sows gave birth and one of her piglets became lodged in the birth canal. He'd saved the mother but not the baby. Pike flushes with embarrassment. *A stupid idea for a stupid old fool.*

As he withdraws his hands, the spore cracks, and chunks of the iridescent stone spill out on the deck. The main portion remains caught though, oozing a dark-green liquid, thick as molasses. It mingles with the biomass, foaming and turning it black.

*Saint's asshole, what is that?*

One by one, all the warning lights on the regulator console flick to red. Pike holds his breath. The roar of the engines modulates, getting deeper. Greasy black foam drips from the spigot, and all around the biotic exchanger, the biomass turns inky.

"Hey! Who the fuck are you?"

Pike spins from the engineering console, cursing his distraction. One of the engineers is climbing the stairs to the console's platform—a kid practically, clad in a sorry gray rag of a jumpsuit. He's bald save for a blond topknot striped with crimson dye. One of his eyes is cybernetic, a radiant green jewel that's most

likely a computer interface. He's brandishing a gasket punch like a club, and his smooth-shaven face is contorted in anger.

Pike sighs. He knows all too well what comes next.



Lira pulls away from the awkward embrace with Abe. His dark eyes cloud with worry. She looks past him to the control column. Blips of data march around the screen like ants as the sensors update the course corrections for the comet and its debris field. The larger fragments remain safely clustered around the main mass, but the data reveal something more troubling.

"Hmm."

"What *hmm*?" Abe says, pulling fully away. He's stooped slightly like he's expecting a physical blow. *He thinks I'm still talking about us.* There's no time for that right now.

She tips her chin at the screen behind him. Abe's eyes widen, and he turns to follow her gaze.

"What am I looking at?"

"We've changed course again, Abe," she says, tracing the projections with a finger. "Observe our vectors here and here. We're falling into the comet's orbit. Just like those debris fragments."

"Impossible. We steered around it, and the gravity isn't strong enough to pull us in."

"And yet," she says. Lira frowns. She'd just plotted their new course. Why were they reverting to the old one? "Perhaps I miscalculated again."

"Impossible," Abe repeats, but this time he doesn't seem as sure.

Confusion paralyzes her, and she gazes at the sensor data without really seeing it.

"Damn, Lir, you're right," Abe says, tapping on the screen as if that would change anything.

"There's some residual warp space folding," she concedes.

"Yeah," he says, "but not from us. Our wake's dissipated."

"Right," Lira scoffs, "These readings suggest it shunted in and out of warp space. Comets don't do that."

The comm buzzes.