Far Flung

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This book contains mature content.

Cover: Hubble Space Telescope image of the face-on spiral galaxy Messier 101
(M101) pretending to be the Milky Way.

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"One of the things that becomes harder as the world goes on is to draw the lines between human and not-human, between life and not-life"

\- [Fred Saberhagen](#)

MSSL *Vera* Links

Prologue: Stardate 401496.2 (Feb 2324)

"Emergency message incoming," the first officer aboard the asteroid miner, *Lyell*, announced to the bridge.

The message was a temporal, first arrival that signaled an incoming trans-warp broadcast was about to occur. At the mining station's distance from the company's main space hub, the message would take just under two minutes to arrive. However, that message had a forerunner, a time-constriction peculiarity related to the faster-than-light message.

"Chief, you want me to believe the positioning thrusters have somehow uncalibrated in the last 30 seconds?" the captain asked then acknowledged his first officer with a quick look and nod.

"It is what it is, Captain," the engineer replied. "Probably the storm."

"Don't think so. It's already dropped to a cat 2," the first officer injected, referring to the unexpected ion cloud that had swept the belt for over a month.

The storm had delayed Confederation rock auditors who would ensure selected rocks were within contract specifications before processing began.

"Chief, you know *Lyell*'s tolerances," the captain continued, looking out the forward portal at a huge number of asteroids, many only a few hundred meters from the mining station.

"It's like the gravitational constant has changed," the chief said. "Is changing," he added nervously while staring at his station's display.

"Signal symmetry?" the captain asked the first officer calmly.

The signal's forerunner carried limited information about the forthcoming message. Importance, urgency and security level all were elements within its complex waveforms.

"Time Corps origin, priority omega," the first officer replied not looking up from the science station. The bridge fell silent at the report the incoming message was of galactic-scale importance.

"Stations," the captain ordered and then the emergency claxon sounded. "Recall all in-belt personnel immediately," he added with a wince while manually turning off the claxon from his command console.

"The AI aboard *Vera* reports our provisional science officer is within a deep fissure on JTK-57," the first officer reported. "No contact possible for an estimated twelve minutes," he added with a sigh.

"Time?" the captain asked.

"Thirty seconds until full message receipt," the first officer replied nervously.

"We're drifting," the chief engineer reported. "Thrusters are no longer able to compensate."

"Manual over ride," the captain ordered. "Nice and steady, Chief. Keep us clear."

"Nearby rocks' vectors are changing," the engineer reported while quickly taking a seat at the helm.

"Initiate proximity protocol," the captain ordered quickly. "Pull us up and out, Chief."

"Aye, Captain," the engineer said. "The *Vera*?" he asked.

The captain stared out the main port as they edged past the closest rocks. "Her rock avoidance shields are better than ours," he muttered.

"Message only partially received, Captain," the first officer reported.

"Let's have it," the captain ordered.

"Priority one evac. Deep space buoys measured several gravitational disturbances expanding across this part of the quadrant," the first officer

read from his station. "Command estimates a simultaneous convergence of several separate waves in our area in less than five minutes. The rest of the message is missing," he added looking up to the captain.

"Estimated affects to the *Lyell*?" the captain asked.

"Unknown," the first officer replied. "Most technical data attached to the message were missing but there's a partial reference to JTK-57."

"The same rock our science officer is examining?" the chief asked with a worried look to the captain.

"Max warp to the hub as soon as we're clear and don't worry, Chief," the captain said while gazing at the vast wealth receding from view, "without our science officer, the *Vera* won't be going anywhere."

The Event

As Tec swung his rock hammer at an iridescent phenocryst partly encased within the mainly iron asteroid, his vision blurred then cleared. He swore as his hammer smashed through the colorful crystal only to embed itself within the asteroid. Pulling on the hammer had no effect until the iron crumbled, sending him spiraling out the narrow fissure slicing across JTK-57, past his single-seat, semi-autonomous assay vehicle and towards the laboratory ship, *Vera*.

Tapping his suits thrusters to slow his spin, he hoped this unexpected discovery was valuable. As an experienced Sol belter as well as a geologist with over a hundred rocks processed, he knew this belt could hold incredible riches.

There was huge demand for minerals and rare elements to fuel a massive rebuild after the machines had depleted many fractime's resources during the Universal War. This demand brought *Lyell Station* to the belt four Sol months ago to start an aggressive exploration program.

"*Vera* to SAV7," he heard on his helmet com just as his safety line jerked him back into the narrow crevice.

"Shit," he muttered. A sharp pain seared through his head as he collected several particles of the colorful phenocryst floating around him with his suit's vacuum sampler.

Releasing his line from the failed belay device still anchored securely within a wall of the crevice, he jetted towards the *Vera*, leaving SAV7 behind.

"Science Officer to *Vera*," Tec said as he emerged from the crevice again thankful the pain inside his head was subsiding. Focusing on *Vera*'s port airlock, he countered a subtle clockwise roll with a touch to his thrusters.

"This is *Vera*. What is your status?"

"What was that?" Tec asked, thinking the ship's AI sounded different. "Some kind of entropy weapon?" he asked, knowing the vast resources surrounding them had attracted rock thieves for literally eons.

"Available data indicate a space-time distortion," the AI responded after an unsettling pause. "In case you have not noticed, we need to make a plan. I'll meet you on the bridge," the AI responded with another unusual hint of urgency.

Tec checked the vector to the airlock on his HUD then closely inspected the mangled working end of his hammer.

Tec began his six-month assignment just over three Sol weeks ago. His current mission aboard the *Lyell*'s mobile scientific sampling laboratory, the *Vera,* consisted of thoroughly testing the first of seven semi-autonomous sampling vehicles; the others were still stowed aboard the *Lyell*. The vehicle had surpassed his expectations with only minor issues with its onboard petrographic optics. The delayed arrival of the *Lyell*'s and *Vera'*s scientific crews had been a blessing, allowing time needed for more comprehensive tests of both onboard laboratories and experimental apparatus.

During this time, he was also *Lyell's* acting science officer and had gotten to know both ships' computers well. Now, something just felt different with *Vera*'s AI.

"Noticed what?" Tec mumbled to himself, jetting squarely into the airlock then pulling the cycle lever.

He stepped off the amidships ladder from *Vera*'s lower decks onto the bridge illuminated only by red emergency lighting. Manually activating the ship's computer interface he demanded, "Status?"

"You must be Tecton," a voice said to his left, from the engineer's seat. "Full power to all systems should be online shortly. Sadly, the holo deck is nonfunctional," the squat form added with a frown.

"Ah, what's the RUBIN doing on the bridge?" he asked referring to the *Vera*'s robot geologist while repeatedly pressing the user interface to the ship's AI.

"I am *Vera*'s AI, sort of. At least I believe I could have been," it said as the ship's lighting returned to normal.

"How?" Tec asked the small but stout robot.

"Uncertain," it replied wriggling its multiple appendages as if stretching. "My extensive memory core *is* a partial backup for the *Lyell*'s AI. The recent event caused a dramatic change in my positron matrix as well as unfortunately wiping the AI from *Vera*'s main computer."

"I didn't know the geobot had such good vocal abilities," Tec said.

"This obsolete Calma model has many high-level functions not utilized as a simple geobot. Advanced speech protocols with numerous languages, obviously including Confederation Basic are standard."

"I guess the company got a good deal then- an android for the cost of a geobot," Tec said examining the familiar alien machine.

A slender articulated arm, just off center to four other appendages that extended from its cylindrical torso, contrasted two stubby articulated legs. Its head seemed almost an upper extension of its torso. He wondered again why the Calma chose their likeness for the machine.

"Perhaps," the robot replied. "I believe I'm now sentient as well as particularly feminine and you're cute," she added with an awkward full body shimmy and wink.

Tec whistled to hide a shudder. "I guess that makes you a what?" he asked staring at the geobot. "A female senroid? Congratulations," he added concerned for the mental state of the RUBIN.

"I am a senroid!" she said gleefully then subtly bowed toward Tec.

Tec smiled and took the gesture as its best take at an affirmative nod. He had always liked androids, and most robots, too.

"My previous designation was RUBIN, but I believe I will be Ruby," she said proudly.

"Perfect," Tec said with a chuckle. "So what the fuck happened, Ruby?" he asked.

The senroid tilted her head towards *Vera*'s main view port.

Turning around, Tec gasped. A dense field of spiraling stars filled most of the screen behind several of the asteroids surrounding them. "Magnification?" he asked, as the bridge's bow-facing portal could also double as the main view screen.

"Actual and, thankfully, that *is* the Milky Way."

Tec gulped. "How?"

"A space-time distortion."

"Oh yeah," Tec replied still staring at the galactic spectacle. "Are we still in the reference plane?" he asked referring to his home universe within the multiverse know as fractime.

"Unknown. When the ship's computer finishes rebooting using the partial backup in my memory core more analyses will be possible to better ascertain our situation."

"You do that," Tec said. "Still feeling sentient?" he asked looking into the android's bright yellow eyes.

"Actually, I feel overwhelmed and what I believe is called fear."

"Welcome to club humanity."

Ruby looked away. "I am happy there is someone else aboard," she said. "Is that selfish?" she asked, quickly locking eyes with Tec.

"No, I'm glad you're here, too," Tec said softly. "Looks like we'll be shipmates for a long time," he added looking out the view port again.

"I am afraid I have overstepped my authority by starting the reboot," Ruby said. "Life support was off line and most of the rocks needed adjustments with the tractor beam. Nevertheless, most are still mobile and need complete stabilization."

"Good job," Tec said, still looking out the view port while mentally estimating the number of rocks surrounding them."Initiative is good," he added.

"As senior officer aboard the *Vera*, you must assume command."

"What?" Tec turned to look at the robot. "I'm a geo tech, Science Corps. See, no command insignia," he added pointing to the stylized atom on his uniform's right collar.

"Nevertheless, company regulations are clear," Ruby persisted. "Also, we'll need to override several ships functions for survival. This is possible only with a valid chain of command established now we are light years from the *Lyell*," she added gazing at the star-studded spiral.

"Okay. Okay," Tec relented.

"Tecton Chadeayne," Ruby stated while activating the *Vera*'s computer interface with a minor appendage.

"Command authorization?" she requested of Tec.

"11381971A," Tec recited from memory with his attention drawn to a dark region near the outer edge of the galactic spiral

"Acknowledged," *Vera*'s computer replied.

"What's that," he asked Ruby. "That dim, circular area. Dust?"

"No other personnel are onboard MSSL *Vera* or EV within detection limits," the computer announced. "Command authorization verified."

"No," Ruby replied solemnly while ignoring the computer's announcement. "Full magnification," she said touching a control on the engineer's console.

"What the hell?" Tec whispered, walking closer to the bridge's portal for a better look at the phenomenon.

"It's clear space and I'm guessing that's our last known location." Ruby said flatly.

Tec turned to her. "That's a big hole," he said after realizing a few faint dots within it must be distant galaxies.

"Yes, Captain," Ruby confirmed.

"How many dead?" Tec asked.

Ruby sighed. "About one hundred thousand systems, ten thousand planets with life. One hundred within type-H sentient range. Ten with

primitive cultures. One early-space flight, the Bagorians. Countless souls, countless unique organisms." She lifted herself up into one of two command chairs to continue to stare at the galaxy out the portal and sighed again.

"We were lucky," Tec said as he slumped against the arm of the other, empty command chair, "but we're still fucked."

"Maybe," she said. "The main computer is online and navigation has determined our approximate position using the Space Corps general model 707D."

Tec shook his head as he collapsed into the chair.

Ruby continued, "The *Vera* is roughly 2500 light years from Sol.

"Great," Tec muttered. "What's the maximum speed this tin can will make?"

"*Vera* can accelerate and sustain one third C indefinitely," Ruby replied. "However, a significant increase with modifications to the dark matter flux attenuators is possible."

"How significant?" Tec asked.

"Twenty six point nine two percent, perhaps a bit more."

"So, 5000 years at just below half C." Tec said dejectedly.

"Roughly, but various coordinate-time calculations do differ slightly," Ruby replied. "It also appears that based on quasar emissions we *are* still in the Reference Plane. However determination of an exact Stardate is problematic at this distance," she added.

"Are we moving?" Tec asked, thankful they were in his home plane or universe.

"Difficult to ascertain with such distant references," Ruby said. "It may take some time to resolve a confident answer."

"Today's answer?" Tec asked.

"Dead stop," Ruby replied. "However, as the *Vera* is above the anticlockwise galactic spin, the Milky Way should be heading towards us," she added.

Tec shuddered at the possibility the *Vera* and the surviving rocks could have been heading outbound at significant velocity.

"Many systems are down, including the holo deck," Ruby reported sadly. "After a full diagnostic, we should formulate a plan, Captain," she managed to add hopefully while turning and making inputs to *Vera*'s rebooted AI.

"Yeah, but forget the formalities," Tec replied standing up with a sigh. "Let's start in the galley when you're finished," he added with his hands already on the amidships ladder connecting the four decks of the tiny spacecraft.

Tec looked up at the galley's replicator after it dinged; a bowl of café au lait was steaming on the output tray. He had already finished a large bowl of gumbo.

At least there's still decent food, Tec thought frowning at one of the ship's clocks, stopped, on the bulkhead behind the two tables comprising the ship's mess.

Tec heard Ruby long before she emerged from the amidships ladder tube. Her legs we too stubby for the rung spacing so she slid down with a clatter.

"Am I late?" Ruby said frowning at the stopped clock.

"Does anybody really know what time it is?" Tec asked with a sigh, receiving a bewildered expression from Ruby.

"Relativity?" she asked.

"Forget it," he said receiving a scowl from his shipmate. "Okay. We'll theorize later," he relented wondering if the recent addition to humanity before him was actually being temperamental.

"Thank you," Ruby said, "and there's a way back."

"You cook up a warp drive in the replicator?" Tec asked before gently slurping his coffee. Calma AI's were the best in the Confederation,

if not the galaxy but Ruby still surprised him she had so quickly come up with a plan.

"Humor?" she asked warily.

"Uhuh," Tec replied. "Sorry. Go on."

Ruby straightened. "The MSSL *Vera* has not only excellent geologic systems but advanced biologic and chemistry functions as well," she said.

"All that stuff is still onboard?" Tec asked.

"Of course," Ruby replied. "The company only leases the *Vera*."

"Never knew that."

"Anyways," Ruby said joining her upper two appendages together atop a subtle potbelly. "There is sufficient technology available to make possible your cloning."

"Huh?"

"Given your estimated life span past a current age of 42, hazards likely encountered on our journey as well as other secondary considerations, less than fifty constructs should suffice."

"So I get to live then die a feeble old man," Tec said into his coffee bowl, "so the last one can get home? No, thanks."

Ruby looked longingly at Tec. "I promise I won't let that happen. There may be a way *you* can get home," she said, "but it may prove complicated."

"Enlighten me," Tec said setting his bowl down with a clank.

"I can modify the ship's tractor beam to emit a basic transporter wave form."

"This gets us home how?" Tec asked.

"Transporting a person even a millimeter requires significant energy expenditure, much more than possible for the *Vera*. However, a zero displacement transport requires minimal energy as it just builds a pattern, perfectly safe."

"And this accomplishes what?" Tec persisted.

"Your pattern is thus preserved in the ships computer awaiting your next construct."

Tec scratched the crown of his head through his short brown hair.

"As the pattern also includes your memories. Regular backups will avoid any incremental memory loss, ah, just in case."

Tec shuddered then looked up at Ruby. "So, basically, I grow old and die then wake up in a new 42-year-old body. Repeat as necessary until we get back."

Ruby nodded. "Sound good?"

"Ignoring the galactic debate surrounding immortality, that sounds like a possible option. Wouldn't stasis be easier?"

"I've considered that alternative. Unfortunately, the *Lyell*'s first officer did not include a copy of the autodoc's sophisticated stasis programming as part of the back up to my memory core."

"Company secrets no doubt," Tec scoffed. "So it's the two of us then," he added raising the empty bowl to his new partner.

"Ah," Ruby said with a subtle sigh. "There is a small issue with the construct-with-memories option. As you beamed aboard the *Vera* twenty-two days ago, your transport pattern existed within primary core storage, thus as well as in my backup. It remains viable."

"Viable?" Tec asked while rubbing his right temple, the sharp pain had returned.

Ruby stared at the deck. "Because of the quantum variations within the *Vera*'s computer matrix, fidelity of your memories will decrease rapidly after a few months requiring back up every sixty days or so. In addition, on the event of death, I'll have to print you again within that two-month window.

"This transporter image coupled with the *Vera*'s biologic tissue accelerator and gene coder for basic body scaffolding, printed with the 3D replicator in the workshop, should produce a superior structure to your current body."

"Wonderful," Tec said, "but, the issue?"

"Is getting a new memory pattern to exactly merge with your original pattern; that's the challenge. You may experience a degree of problematic short-term memory recall or other minor issues," Ruby explained. "But we have time to come up with a solution," she added hopefully.

"Yup," Tec said, "lots of time."

Feet on the ready room's table, Tec leaned back in a chair while craning his neck to see into the bridge. He had been reading Ruby's latest energy audit for their five thousand-year journey. They had both agreed a sustainable plan was necessary before ignition of the dark-matter drive to head home.

"Ruby, you up here?" Tec asked sliding his feet off the table then sipping a large spoonful of steaming bisque.

"More questions?" she asked from the other side of the amidships ladder partition.

"Good guess."

"Shoot," she said before peering around the bulkhead.

"Hard to know where to start," Tec said as Ruby took a chair across from him.

"Maybe just start at the beginning of the to-do list?"

"Today's velocity?" Tec asked ignoring her suggestion.

"Still dead stop. Roughly twenty percent confidence."

Tec looked at the Calma construct. "Okay," he said, sighed, and then scrolled his notepad to the next section. "I see there is huge resource expenditure upfront making replacement parts," he said.

"Those parts are the heart of *Vera*'s complex replicating and fabrication system. They are critical components," Ruby explained to a blank look from Tec."If those parts break without replacements in ship's store, we can't make new parts."

Tec nodded knowing a handful of systems, damaged during the event, were already proving difficult to restore; the technology required was simply lacking aboard the *Vera*.

"They are full of exotic alloys," he said. "We'll need to finish the detailed rock surveys to be sure we have enough raw elements in storage or in near space for production of all these critical components."

Ruby nodded. "I agree," she added quickly.

Tec smiled. The android, or senroid as Ruby preferred, was still coping with subtleties of communication, both verbal and nonverbal even if she did have advanced speech protocols.

"Next?" Ruby asked.

"Any ideas how to increase your functionality outside?" Tec asked. The company had programmed the old geobot for strictly shipboard tasks.

Ruby shrugged her appendages then said, "My brain structure is incompatible with the SAV's basic synaptic controls. I could adapt the scheme but it will take significant time and resources and currently represents too high a probability of failure. And as you know, my company designed EV suit is grossly inadequate for all but the simplest off-ship tasks."

"Yup," Tec muttered, knowing for now he alone would be responsible for the detailed assay of the surrounding rocks.

Few of the high-graded asteroids flung out of the galaxy with them had detailed surveys. The rocks' positions within the nearly spherical 125 square kilometers were not natural; the company had tractored each into a holding pattern for assay and processing.

"There is more data on the event," Ruby said cheerfully.

"Let's have it," Tec said looking into the cold remains of his bisque.

"Quantum accelerometers on several rocks registered a significant gravimetric change during the event. The rock's acceleration vectors suggest a simultaneous convergence of several gravitational waves. I

surmise there was just enough arc in each wave front to conserve a small area at their precise intersection," she explained.

"Let me guess, this area was about 125 square kilometers," he said.

"Yes and you were very fortunate that narrow crevice on 57 sheltered you," Ruby said tapping several mechanical fingers together nervously. "The mass of its iron protected you," she added.

"Simultaneous convergence of gravity waves from across the galaxy sounds improbable to say the least."

"I agree. A definitely unprecedented event. Suggesting manufacture."

Tec scratched his head. "You think it *was* a weapon?"

"The affected area is many parsecs in diameter. A weapon or perhaps an experiment gone wrong, who knows?" Ruby added with another shrug of her appendages. "There were several ambiguous sensor readings recorded just before the event," she added.

"I understand stealing but blowing up rocks?" Tec muttered.

Ruby shrugged her shoulders.

"Fucking company shit, I bet" Tec said shaking his head at their dilemma. "But how'd we get here?" he asked.

"Obviously, the event separated our 125 square kilometer piece of space from the local fabric," Ruby said. "A simple analogy would be a droplet of water hurled upward by the convergent wave forms created by sizeable rocks thrown into a pond at exact positions," she added.

Tec sighed looking out the ready room's portal at faint smudges of distant galaxies. "A pond droplet," he repeated the earthly reference.

"Ah, yes," Ruby replied sheepishly.

"We should start on the list, my friend," he said.

"There's a lot to do," she said, "including getting the holo deck back online."

"Yup," he said staring blankly out the main view screen while rubbing his left temple.

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