

SPINDOWN  
PART 1  
Andy Crawford

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Other titles by Andy Crawford:  
Sailor of the Skysea  
The Pen is Mightier  
Untethered (short story)

For Nina

*2240, Earth Calendar*  
*~3 Earth years since departure of colony ship Aotea from Earth system*  
*~63 cycles (52 Earth years) until arrival at destination, Samwise, a habitable moon of*  
*Abhoth, a gas giant planet orbiting the red dwarf star Gliese 876.*

## CHAPTER 1

Constable Lo spotted the man he was hunting with his head poking out around the corner passageway. “Hey!” he shouted. “Stop!”

The constable was alone, and this passageway of the colony spaceship *Aotea* was empty, aside for a lone whirring DustBot. The fugitive made a snap decision and charged. Surprised, Lo shifted his stance and braced himself.

*Too late.* The fugitive led with his shoulder and sent Lo bouncing off a bulkhead at the end of the passageway. *Earth-bred strength beats these low-gravvers every time.*

“You’re down,” said the fugitive as he scooped up a dropped wearable, eyeing the constable, who remained motionless on the deck. It wasn’t just the difference in gravity from their upbringing — so many Aoteans, even among the constabulary, seemed constitutionally incapable of violence. He stifled a laugh as the little DustBot scooted along and purposefully gave the prone constable a wide berth, obeying its programming — to always stay out of the way of humans — to the letter. Hearing footsteps, the fugitive made a quick scan of the neighboring passageways, located a supply closet, hefted the limp constable, less than half the weight he’d be on Earth, and manhandled him into the cramped space. “You’re still down,” he added before shutting the hatch.

Peering around the next corner of the passageway, the hunted man finally had a moment to breathe. He used the moment to hate. He hated this ship. He hated the low gravity, simulated by rotation, which left him disoriented every morning, his waking body expecting Earth-normal gravity as he rose to his feet. He hated the windowless views, and the endless and featureless passageways, kilometers and kilometers winding underneath the massive cylindrical inner “surface” on which most Aoteans lived. He hated the surface itself — bland structures, a few stories tall, divided by regular and identical walking lanes, and a mirror-like reflection on the other side of the interior cylindrical surface overhead. He hated the false “suns,” massive, fusion-fired lights at each end of the kilometers-long cylinder, progressively lit and dimmed for the progression of every Aotean “day” and “night.” He hated nearly every one of the twenty thousand souls onboard, and he found that, with the barest effort, even those Aoteans he found tolerable could be rather easily swept into that hated pool. And most of all, he hated himself for making the decision to leave Earth and join the crew, and this endless, hellish voyage, in the first place.

The hunted man waited for a bit, watching the sparse foot traffic of the passageway from his corner vantage point, one level below *Aotea*’s interior surface. A shift change was approaching, with an accompanying increase in traffic, down to the scattered watch stations of the machinery spaces below, and back up to the living and recreation spaces on the interior surface. He shook his head at his own luck, for the carelessness of the constable — if the man had just called in his observation, instead of standing there gaping, the hunted man would be cornered by now. He clipped the stolen wearable to his collar, practiced fingers flicking the hard-reset, allowing voice and eye control. With a flick of his eyes he linked it to his own earpiece, setting the volume low, wondering if they knew he could be listening in.

“...witness reported the fugitive seen near Hab 13...”

“... another witness who saw him by aft food service 7...”

“...description put out is too vague; adult male, just under two meters, brown skin, tear in the jumpsuit leg...”

“Lo, report?”

After a pause, the order was repeated.

The fugitive silenced it and chuckled to himself, looking down at his leg. *They handicap themselves*. He had already replaced the torn jumpsuit — thievery was trivial among these people, and in such a culture. A few centuries ago, Aoteans would have been called hippies, or peaceniks, or some other forgotten slur ... no weapons, no surveillance cams, no currency, everything running on mutual trust. Doors and hatches could be locked, but few bothered.

And a single nonconformist could blow up the whole thing. *How can they hope to survive like this?* There would be more nonconformists, undoubtedly. More who cared more for their own whims and desires than the mandates and structures of the routine onboard. And these dupes had no idea how to handle it. They'd learn or die.

It was time to move — dumb as they were, they'd figure out Lo's last known location soon enough. The fugitive easily flowed into the growing traffic of the passageway, exchanging pleasantries with a few Aoteans he recognized just getting off watch. Did they even suspect anything? Why would they? They were on a giant spaceship trillions of kilometers from Earth, with twenty thousand hand-picked pacifists onboard. There hadn't been a single crime worse than petty theft or assault since they departed three Earth-years before. They queued up cordially and climbed the ladderwell to the surface.

And he had another decision to make. Hide or strike?

Not much of a choice to make. Checking his mental topography while he weaved between the structures on the surface of the aft Can, as the cylindrical interior of *Aotea* was commonly known, the hunted man considered his targets. Engineering was too far and would require a pass through the dangerous bottleneck of the Ring at the aft end of the Can. So was Operations, at the forward end. He cringed when he realized the nearest.

*Medical*. Not his first choice, but it was the most logical. Just a few “blocks” away, easily accessible from the surface, and with numerous entrances and exits.

The wide automatic doors of the infirmary, a clean-lined white structure larger than most onboard, were unguarded. A yawning admin tech perked up at the front desk, but the hunted man strode confidently as if he knew exactly where he was going. He rounded the desk, took a lift to the second deck, and headed down the passageway.

He stepped silently, turning away to examine a display when a doctor passed by. The long-term-patient wing was mostly empty, except for a constable seated at the end of the hall at a corner juncture.

*Damn*. There were a dozen doors along the passageway, but it wasn't clear which one the officer, a junior constable named Khan, was watching over. He ducked back behind the corner before she turned toward him. He took the long way around the perimeter of the level — the other passageway leading to the corner was much busier with a handful of outpatient appointments. An idea came to him, and he looked at the time, then turned and headed for the cafeteria.

He carried the tray haphazardly as he strode down the outpatient passageway once again. He passed a laundry cart and grabbed a small towel, tucking it into his belt to look more like an orderly. He looked down and angled the tray to obscure his face, but the constable wasn't paying much attention anyway. *Idiots*. Finally, she perked up when he stopped in front of her, a quizzical expression on her face.

“Which room?”

She looked down at a projection from her wearable. “Isn't it early for lunch?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Can’t I do a favor for a friend?”

“He’s in room seven, but—”

He didn’t let her finish, lashing out with a free hand and striking her neck.

“Stay down,” he said as she went limp in her seat.

*Idiots.* He put the tray down on her desk, and checking that there was no one else in the long-term passageway, sprinted to room seven.

“That you, Khan?” came the voice as he pushed open the door.

“No, not Khan,” answered the hunted man. The infirmary room was small — barely big enough for the bed and the medical device, snaked with tubes, that surrounded it.

The patient chuckled when he saw who it was. “Did you even break a sweat?”

“I’m afraid not.”

The reclining man sighed. “That’s a shame. I expected better.”

“Sometimes we can’t tell the difference between what we hope for and what we expect.”

The hunted man reached out and took hold of the cluster of fluid lines. “Ready?”

Another sigh and then a nod.

The hunted man pulled abruptly, setting off a cacophony of electronic complaints. He shook his head to himself and snorted. He had also been expecting more from *Aotea*’s constabulary.

Then the alarms started — not the machines, but in the overhead. If he had a lens, the wearable could display directly onto his eyeball. But he didn’t, so he projected the wearable’s display onto the back of his hand — it had an alarm too, just a red pulse, silent since the hunted man had muted it earlier. *Huh.* Maybe they weren’t quite so bad as he thought. He couldn’t help but grin as he sprinted into the passageway. At the next turn he almost crashed into an orderly, who let out an exhausted exclamation.

They were waiting for him at the lift bank. Three constables, two armed with stun sticks. *Finally brought those out...* For a moment he considered fleeing the other way — he was pretty sure there was a ladderwell in the corner of the structure, but he heard footsteps.

So he made another snap decision and charged, at the same time wrapping the towel around his left fist. Once again the constables were caught off guard, almost bumping into each other in their confusion. The first gave an awkward thrust of the stun stick, which he absorbed with his towel-hand, punching sharply with his right into the constable’s ribs. As that one went to the deck with a grunt, the second waded in, swinging the stunner with more vigor. *Not enough.* The fugitive blocked it at the handle with his forearm, turning and striking with an elbow to the chin, and wrenched the stunner free of his grasp as the constable collapsed. The last constable had wisely backed away, yelling into her wearable. *Not far enough.* The hunted man leapt forward, pressed the trigger, and thrust the stunner into her belly, sending her to the deck.

And then the lift doors opened, six constables charged forward, and upon feeling the unfamiliar shock to his skin, the hunted man went limp and was hauled away.

He sat in an uncomfortable chair in the constabulary briefing room, meeting the eyes of each of more than a dozen constables and inspectors. They shook their heads, and a few looked down at their feet.

He stood up. The hatred, at least some of which had been deliberately manufactured in his head, morphed into disapproval.

“That was pathetic. If that was a real VIP instead of DCI Gregorian, he’d be dead by now, thanks to you.” He eyed the deputy chief inspector, Kiro Gregorian, who just a half-hour before had been the “patient” in the infirmary room, and appeared to be hiding a smirk. Constable Khan met his eyes with a sheepish expression and then looked at the deck.

He wanted to rail against the culture of *Aotea*, the idea that non-violence disapproval and discussion could solve everything, that all conflict could be avoided, and the listlessness that

resulted from such ideological devotion. But he held that in. “You’ll have my report by tomorrow, and I expect a written report from each and every one of you as well, on what you observed, and the mistakes you made, and how they can be prevented.”

They were silent.

There were positives, but he kept silent about them. There were other targets aside from Kiro and the two he’d “killed” earlier, and after stumbling for the first few hours, at least they had reacted quickly enough to subdue him following the attack in the hospital. But there shouldn’t have been more than one successful attack.

“Is that clear?”

They responded in unison. “Yes, Chief Inspector!”

Cyrus Konami knew there was more to say. But the chief inspector suspected he was already on thin ice from the higher ups — he’d had to beg and plead and finagle for months before they agreed to his plan for such a large-scale, ship-wide security drill.

“Very well,” said Konami. “Back to your duties.”

He didn’t hate these people, and this ship, and this culture, frustrating as they all were, he decided. *It’s not hate*, he told himself, *just boredom*. And perhaps just a slower adjustment than he thought it would be.

*I’m not a hateful man*, he thought to himself. He even managed to smile and nod to one of the few constables who had demonstrated some aptitude and ingenuity in the drill.

*Just bored. And tired.*

As he left his office for the day, he yawned, even though he wasn’t tired.

## CHAPTER 2

Trillions of miles from Earth, on the largest and most advanced spacecraft ever constructed, a shit filter was clogged. Not “evacuate the people spaces and don HazMat suits!” clogged, but “might cause a slight stench once-in-a-while” clogged.

Data Technician 1<sup>st</sup> Class Theo Muahe sighed as he scanned the display monitors and past the abnormal readings on the console in the cramped Sewage and Water Control station. If he had been claustrophobic, this particular watch would have been a nightmare, but First Muahe was used to the tight quarters in many of *Aotea*'s watch stations and machinery spaces. Numbers for gas partial pressures, particulates, acidity, bacteria, and dozens of other details of the complexities of maintaining the potable water systems for every shower, kitchen, and head for the twenty thousand souls onboard the colony ship *Aotea* danced cleanly over the crystalline display. *Technically, everything's green.* But Muahe wasn't the type to pass off a problem, however minor it might be, to the next watchstander. He looked again at the first few log readings, confirming his suspicions. All the numbers were in the normal ranges, but bacterial and particulate logs had jumped a few ticks, after several hours of nearly identical values.

“Damn shit filters...” he mumbled.

A chirping interrupted his log reading, and Muahe turned his attention to his wearable, projecting it onto his lens. The multi-purpose device displayed a simple alert from the NetBug tracer he had started before reporting for his proficiency Sewage and Water Systems watch. *Shouldn't be full yet,* he thought as he read the alert. The tracer had noted that hard drive 271w, one of thousands of identical data storage drives, was prematurely full. A black spot took his attention for a moment. *Gonna have to re-lens the damn thing.* His heart sped up when he realized there were no spare lenses in the watch station; he'd have to wait until he was back in his quarters. *S'okay, Theo, you can still see it just fine. A little speck is no big deal...* He took a deep breath, recognizing that he sometimes had trouble differentiating between trivial issues and major problems. A half minute of concentration told him that this one was the former.

He shifted his attention back to the Tracer he had started immediately before he took the sewage watch. The data sponge he was tracking down was just the latest nuisance in his primary duty as part of the team that managed the data systems and automated programming of the massive colony ship *Aotea*.

With practiced fingers dancing in the air, DT1 Muahe quickly navigated to the hard drive in question, and found to his surprise that it was mostly empty. “Huh,” he grunted. He queried the NetBug again, and after a few seconds, the tracer returned with the same result as before — hard drive 271w was full. Commands through his wearable simply queried the hard drive's own logs. But the NetBug tracer was much more thorough, actually trawling the quantum-molecular data net itself. *So who's lying? My tracer or the hard drive?* He groaned as he realized he wouldn't be able to go right to sleep when he got off watch; his own nagging sense of duty would compel him to solve this little mystery. His primary responsibility would have to wait, though; as a fully qualified crewmember of *Aotea*, DT1 Muahe was required to periodically stand watch at most of the major ship's systems to maintain proficiency. He returned to the sewage system logs.

“Damn filter clogs,” he grunted. Accumulating debris in the water would occasionally gum up the works of the chemical cleaners that maintained bacterial levels near zero.

“Where's the RoverBot?” he muttered to himself as he scrolled through menus on the console as fast as the eye could follow. The sewage station shared a roving maintenance robot with some of the neighboring systems; minor maintenance like cleaning filters was usually left to the Rover. *Atmospherics plant? Damn it!*

“Voice: get me the Atmo watch.” Unlike most Aoteans, Muahe routinely switched between voice, ocular, and tactile control of his wearable, finding each method to be more useful for different tasks.

“Atmo, MT2 Taki,” answered a musical, feminine voice.

*Taki? Oh yeah, that little MedTech. I like the way her hips move...* DT1 Muahe cleared his throat. “Atmo, Sewage. Where do you have the Rover?”

“With a TechBot. Joint servo broke.”

Jacks-of-all-trades in electronics and delicate machinery, TechBots served as general practitioners and surgeons for other Bots, though it was unusual for a RoverBot to require unscheduled repairs. “How much longer?”

“Hour or two.”

*Goddamnit.* He tried not to let his frustration show through the comms system. “Thanks, Atmo, Sewage out.” Muahe closed the connection and shut his eyes, for some reason feeling a tad more energized. *At least we get off watch at the same time. Maybe she'd like to get a drink or a dip in the Pond...* Then he recalled the anomaly the NetBug found. *Damn.*

The bacterial and particulate readings were still technically within specification, so he was not bound by the regulations to do anything but note it in the logs and mention it to the next person on duty. But nothing was more irritating than relieving a watch only to have to solve a problem the last guy was too lazy to fix. *If only I had a UI today...* Periodically all watchstanders would be accompanied by an Under Instruction watch, usually a youngster still working on their ship's qualification. And this would be an excellent job for a UI — he vaguely recalled that the Sewage qualification card had a Practical Factor requirement for manual clearance of a filter clog. He shook his head unconsciously. *Guess it's all on me, damn it.* He didn't look forward to squeezing his bulky frame into the maintenance crawlway, and dreaded even more the too-snug feeling of the thinsuit and breather he would need to wear to open up the purifiers.

“Might as well get it over with,” he mumbled as he made his way through the cramped passageways, instinctively ducking his head under various pipes and other obstacles for the tall. He was so busy minding the head-level obstructions that he nearly tripped on an insectile DustBot, and cursed at the indignant squeal from the little fist-sized cleaning robot, ubiquitous throughout *Aotea*.

The thinsuit locker was unhelpfully placed next to a bulky suction pump, leaving him little room to actually don it. And to add insult to injury, the breather seal was broken, eliciting an involuntary growl of frustration. He projected onto a bulkhead and navigated to the logs for this locker. It was signed by MRT2 Gustafson, dating about three weeks ago. *Gustafson, damn it!* Every time a breather was used, the regulations said the user had to replace the filter, recharge the tank, and apply a new tamper seal. The seal helpfully turned red if there was any leakage. Cursing, DT1 Muahe hooked the breather up to the pressure test device, only calming slightly when the readout came up clean. *Okay Gustafson, you charged it and put the filter in, so that earns you a reprieve... but if you forget the fucking seal again, the brotherhood of the watch be damned, you're getting reported!*

The maintenance crawlway was even more confined than he remembered; he hadn't had to traverse it for several months. Every step required a contortion — around a pipe, or an electrical box, or a data conduit, or one of hundreds of other components. By the time he reached the purifier lockout space, he was massaging a cramp in his hamstring. As soon as he shut the hatch behind him, he spent a full, luxurious minute stretching his muscles. He pawed through a few choices on the tiny display and temporarily shut off the flow through these filters. It took another minute for the purifier bank to drain with a telltale *glug-glug*. He took a deep breath and thumbed the release for the purifier bank entryway. Under the thinsuit hood, he barely heard the hiss of equalizing pressure as the narrow hatch opened.

He had to get on his knees once again to access the filters, with nothing but a porous grate between him and the innards of each device. *At least this damn breather takes away the stink.* The hatch shut automatically behind him. A small click from somewhere nearby took his attention, but nothing seemed out of place when he glanced around. He disconnected the power for the first machine in the bank and removed the grate, then reached in with a snake-like brush, guiding it through to scour every surface of the interior filter, carefully feeling for any lumps or snags. There was only a hint of dust on the brush head when he pulled it back. *No clog here.* He paused, for barely an instant smelling the fetid odor of the sludge that passed through these filters by the gallon. He took a deep breath as he replaced the grate, but all of a sudden his lungs were on fire. He jerked back involuntarily, slamming his head into the back panel of the next bank of purifiers. Dazed, he tried to stand, gulping the air in great gasps despite the burn. Hand over hand, he tried to pull himself back into the lockout space. *The seal... the fucking seal...* His left arm began to shake uncontrollably. He awkwardly slurred the voice control for an emergency call. "Sewage... purification bank 7. Can't... breathe..." he managed to croak, vision blurring. And the blackness took over.

## CHAPTER 3

Chief Inspector Cyrus Konami prayed for a murder. He shook his head, admonishing himself — perhaps not a murder, but maybe an assault — even a bar-fight, unheard of for Aoteans — or a burglary, a theft... even just some disorderly conduct. From his small, folding bunk he stared at the wearable, still clipped to his shirt, willing it to produce the report of some interesting emergency. Anything to break the monotony of life aboard *Aotea*, especially life as the chief inspector. *Top cop on a ship of twenty thousand souls... and more than three years outside of Earth, just one crime of note. Only one crime more serious than vandalism. The Case of the Poisoned Cigar.*

Well, it hadn't really been poisoned; a jilted lover from the Bio lab spiked a batch of fobacco with a fungal strain to which his rival was allergic. The next time the poor guy puffed up on a fresh cigar, his throat started to close up. Luckily, emergency response was lightning fast when all the living space inside *Aotea* consisted of just a few square kilometers. *It wasn't even that hard to solve.* The suspect had confessed after being left alone in the interview room for just an hour.

*Maybe the SNH guys really were onto something, getting rid of Earth media.* Decades before the expedition left the lazy orbit around a medium sized asteroid in the belt, the Society for a New Humanity had laid down specifications for the media that was allowed onboard, even if they couldn't actually enforce those rules until they left the system. Chief among those restricted were those vids and texts believed to glorify aggression or dishonesty. Even the occasional bored teenage vandal couldn't seem to dissemble their way past a rookie cop. But that nagging concern remained — Aoteans might be pretty damn agreeable folks... but what happened when someone misbehaved? Humans were the same everywhere, he was convinced — Lagos and Singapore might be two of the most different cities on Earth, but his time working as a cop in both cities had taught him that people did the same awful shit to each other everywhere. Agreeable and honest as they were, and as technically skilled, he was sure that Aoteans were not ready for the real shit that people could do to each other. Especially with the boredom of a decades-long journey.

A whine shifted his attention. His brindle dog Kostya ambled over and licked his fingers. "You want a treat, I guess," said Konami. "Well, tough. You can't always get what you want." He knew he'd give in later, even though the jenji breed, the only dogs onboard, were famously even-tempered; Kostya's single whine was the extent of her begging. Konami scratched behind her ears and she closed her eyes contentedly, finally strolling over to the waste tray in the corner. He wondered if the amiable canine was his biggest reason to live these days.

"How much can a man sleep?" he muttered to himself and yawned as he rose to his feet. Lately he had been averaging more than ten hours per day; aside from the latest drill, there was rarely more than an hour of work to do at the Constabulary, and he only stood a proficiency watch at a system station once or twice a month. He had taken to volunteering for extra duty shifts, even at the most hated watch-stations like Sewage and Reclamation, just to pass the time. Since he covered someone's watch the previous day his waking time was reversed, and he felt discombobulated — well rested but awake during the ship's night. *Nights, days, months, years... what do those words even mean to us out here?* The only intrinsic rhythm aboard *Aotea* was the rotation amidships to simulate gravity, and this was just about once per minute. The four-kilometer-long, six-hundred-some-odd-meters-in-diameter cylindrical living space, divided in two pieces commonly called the Cans, steadily rotated to produce the centrifugal force that held everything tethered to its inner surface at a little over a third of Earth's gravity. Day and night were simulated by bright lights, a faux sun and moon, at the ends of the Cans. *Will we even*

*stay awake all “day” and sleep all “night” when we arrive?* The length of the day would very slowly increase, throughout their long journey, in order to match the multiple Earth-day-long periods of light and darkness on their new home, the moon called Samwise, which revolved around a gas-giant called Abboth, orbiting a star more than a dozen light years from earth.

Konami had been ecstatic when he got the call five years ago that *Aotea* had reconsidered his application. That excitement was only tamped down when he learned the reason they reconsidered: the first chief inspector had hung herself. There was no explanation, just a terse farewell note. It had certainly seemed suspicious at first, but after five Earth-years on the job, Konami was starting to sympathize. And she had been on the job for ten years during construction and initial settlement. *Though if she really couldn't take it anymore, why not just bow out of the mission?*

The excitement was gone. At the beginning, just the concept of being the first humans to leave the solar system – real pioneers, like no one since the first settlers on Mars – was enough to set his heart beating. Just a few thousand souls in deep space, with nothing but the blackness around them, and if the ship had had windows, nothing to see but the stars. And the dream of a wholly new society, even a wholly new people, to be created at their destination.

But after five years onboard, he still felt like an outsider. Most Aoteans younger than thirty Earth years had spent almost all their lives onboard, and at forty-one, Konami was older than nearly everyone else besides the most senior officers, technicians, and the SNH bigwigs. And now he had fifty-five more years in deep space to look forward to before they reached Samwise. There was a culture here that he still didn't fully understand. It was more than just the tenets and history of the Society for a New Humanity – it was an earnest optimism and belief in not just a better future, but a wholly new future, unlike any society humanity had ever conceived. Try as he might, Konami had never been able to silent his inner cynic; he believed that people were people, and tended to have the same flaws no matter where they were or how they lived.

He tried to look on the bright side. *Ninety-six isn't so old... a few organ replacements, a month of gene therapy, and plenty of time to raise a few kids, play with the grandkids, maybe spend a few decades in retirement.*

It didn't work. *Fifty-five Earth years is a goddamn lifetime — even more than a lifetime, if we go back far enough.* He shook off that train of thought as he showered and put on the roomy blue jumpsuit that served as the working uniform for most of the men and women onboard — only the badge on his breast served to distinguish the Constabulary's uniform from those of his crewmates.

The lack of sky no longer felt disorienting, but looking up and seeing ground, dim as it was in the low lighting of the simulated night, still felt awkward when he was “outside.” On a whim he donned his low-light lenses — feeling a bit silly, since they were fashioned to look just like stylish sun-shades — souvenirs from an Earth stakeout-gone-wrong, years ago. His captain had awarded the goggles to him as compensation for the chronic problems a flash grenade had caused his night vision ever since.

Tiny shapes of ant-like children played ball on a green hundreds of meters above him, defying one's instinctual sense of up and down. Their minuscule shadows, cast by the dimming fusion-fired lights from along the dividing Ring kilometers aft, danced and merged like inkblots. A spider-like presence on the corner of the green could only be a robot, though Konami could not recall the colloquial used for the handful of landscaping robots onboard to maintain the surface fields and parks. *GreenBots? GardenBots?*

Even stranger, at least when he first arrived, was the arcing curve of the surface. There was ground “above” him, but also where the horizon should be in the spinward and anti-spinward directions, gracefully curving “upwards” and around. Forward and aft were the massive

bulkheads and arches of the Ring dividers, separating the forward Can from the forward Operations section of the ship, and the forward Can from the aft Can. He lowered his gaze and meandered onward, taking a circuitous route to loosen his legs.

He stopped for a minute at the wide windows of a kindergarten, one of the few classes with similarly reversed days and nights to accommodate the handful of parents who routinely worked the night shift. Thirty youngsters, no more than five or six years old, played among the padded furniture of the playroom far more gently than Konami's memories of the children in Lagos and Singapore, or his own childhood in New Orleans. Two seized the same toy, and after just seconds of a bewildered tug-of-war, a MOMbot was between them. The furry, vaguely humanoid robot distracted one with tickles and the other with a dexterous one-handed juggling act, the toy in question promptly forgotten. The Bot's cartoon-like countenance gave Konami the willies, but every Aotean who grew up on the huge vessel, including Konami's youngest deputy, adored the MOMbots. Constable Ginsberg even had a habit of periodically visiting one of the older units — Konami had learned that the robots, a decades-old Mercurian model designed to supervise children while their parents were core-mining, were programmed to form deep attachments to children that could last for decades.

He couldn't help but have some pity for the children — all their lives, into their middle age, would be spent on *Aotea*. Was it possible to fully mature in such a limited environment? In such a structured society? They would certainly face challenges, whether on this long journey or on their alien destination. How could a few square kilometers of metal and habitat, and the cult-like strictness of the SNH culture, prepare them for that unknown?

At the cafeteria, Konami tried to respond with more than a grunt to the greetings from others in line; pursed lips and raised eyebrows told him once again that his acting was sub-par. *At least it's pasta day*. He doubled up on carbonara, smiled at the faceless ServiceBot, and took a seat at an empty table. He closed his eyes and tried to clear his mind of everything but anticipation of the food when his wearable chirped to life.

"...purification bank 7... can't breathe..." was all Konami could make out as he grimaced and dropped his fork, and he sprang to his feet, dashing out of the cafeteria and redonning his goggles.

*Who's on Emer this morning?* He voiced a non-emergency call to the watch station. The Emergency dispatch station responded just as he stepped outside, shielding his eyes against the bright white light from the aft end of the ship; his goggles enhanced the gentle moon-like glow of the lighting during ship's night into a blazing beacon.

"Emer, Loesser." *Good, Maria's quick on her feet.* Inspector Maria Loesser was, for all intents and purposes, third in command of the Constabulary after Konami and Deputy Chief Inspector Kiroshi Gregorian.

"Maria, Cy. MedTechs on their way?"

"Affirmative," answered Maria. "Call was from Purification Bank 7."

"Roger, Emer. On my way." *Wait a minute...* Konami tried to recall some of the details of his, frankly, slightly less-than-intensive ship's qualification process. Because of his senior position even as soon as he arrived onboard, he had the distinct impression that his qual watches and qual boards were made easier for him. Nonetheless, he had felt the same distinct surge of pride on being presented with his "star canoe" qualification pin that he imagined all Aoteans felt. For Konami, however, that pride had been short lived, quickly overwhelmed by the boredom and resentment of the long journey.

Nevertheless, he was pleased to find that he actually remembered some technical details of the Sewage and Water systems. "Maria, the Purification banks use hazmat, right?"

"Affirmative. The MedTechs have breathers and thinsuits."

“Roger. Cy out.” *Guess I’ll have to stop by one of the lockers.* He made his way through narrow alleys to a maintenance hatch, doffing his low-light goggles once inside the neutrally lit machinery spaces, and climbed down to the moveway level. As big as *Aotea* was, even the most far-flung watch stations on the Cans were within walking distance. But for emergencies and convenience, rapid fore-aft moving walkways were maintained every hundred meters or so at a lower level. Konami stepped onto one of these and was zipped along to the aft Ring. He nodded a greeting to a technician taking apart an electrical relay next to the moveway.

The moveways were useful for travel along the longitudinal axis, but not around the polar axis. The Rings were ten-meter-long cylinders, one in between the Cans, and one at each end, between the living spaces and the free-floating null-g operations and engineering spaces forward and aft of the Cans — but separated such that they could rotate freely. Aoteans used the Rings to travel both in the spinward/anti-spinward directions, and between the living space and Operations and Engineering, as well as between the two Cans. Konami thumbed his emergency authorization into the Ring callbox and listened to the whirring rumble as it spun up to match the aft Can’s rotation speed. Anyone else currently needing or riding the aft Ring would have to wait, but everyone onboard was long accustomed to such occasional inconveniences. He felt antsy as he stood there waiting — his instincts were telling him he had to *move*.

The Ring locked to the Can with a thunderous *ka-chunk* and the doors slid open. A cheery female automated voice announced “Moveway one two,” and Konami stepped onto the Ring car and took a seat on an overstuffed sofa opposite a sleepy but irritated looking young couple in khaki jumpsuits. *Probably just got relieved from reactor watch.*

Konami shrugged, pointing sheepishly to the badge emblem at his breast. “Sorry folks, got an emergency in Sewage. I’ll just be a moment.” The young woman scowled at the interrupted journey.

“Please strap in now,” directed the automated voice, and Konami snapped the padded straps over his chest. The Ring disengaged loudly and reduced speed, then sped up again and re-engaged to the Can. The rapidly changing “gravity” made Konami’s guts churn, but less so than his last time on a Ring. *Maybe I’m finally an Aotean...* “Moveway zero four” said the voice.

After another short jaunt on the moveway, Konami climbed down two more levels and followed the sound of anxious MedTechs, stopping at a thinsuit locker on the way. Agitated MedTechs were not a good sign. He voiced another call.

“Emer, Loesser.” There was an edge to Maria’s voice.

“Maria, it’s Cy. Report.”

“The purifier lockout space inner hatch — it’s stuck. It won’t budge.”

## CHAPTER 4

*Fuck!* In thinsuit and breather, Konami squeezed himself into the corner of the purifier lockout space, staying out of the way of the weld tech cutting through the inner hatch. *Goddamnit... how long 'til brain death starts again?* He decided not to interrupt the doctor, who was awkwardly huddled with the MedTechs, and Konami recalled that more than five minutes was pushing it. The hiss of five breathers, plus the whine of the welding torch, were loud enough that the doc and MTs were nearly shouting back and forth. Konami projected the time from his wearable. *Seven minutes, almost eight. Heads are gonna roll when we figure out what caused this damn hatch to stick.* Even the hatch-cut had to be delayed; with the inner lockout hatch cut open, there would be no way to clear any potential toxic gases from the purification bank, so they had to rig the length of crawlway outside the space as a sort of extra airlock. Just in case, they stayed in their breathers until they could get a second verification that it was safe.

Konami inhaled sharply through his mask. *If he doesn't make it...* Since his predecessor's suicide, there had not been a single death onboard *Aotea*. There were occasional crises like choking on food, gestational difficulties, some industrial accidents, and even a short-lived fire, but everyone had been reached by the MedTechs and damage control techs within three or four minutes. *Until now. Shit — I might have to tell the family.*

He suddenly had a realization — he was enjoying himself. Somehow this was what he had missed. Konami knew he should feel some sort of shame at this, but the elation remained. He knew it wouldn't last.

"I'm through!" announced the weld tech as he stood up with the big hunk of alloy that used to be the inner hatch. Before he left Earth, Konami would have marveled that the tech lifted it so easily. On Earth, that hatch probably would have been more than fifty kilos; in the reduced "gravity" of *Aotea*, it was more like fifteen. Konami took the hatch from the weld tech so he could clear out the welding gear, and the MedTechs dove through to pull the prone man into the larger space of the lockout.

Konami informed Emer that they had the patient as he watched the practiced hands of the MedTechs. One stripped off the patient's breather and replaced it with a forced oxygen system, while the other checked vital signs and cut open the thinsuit. Konami tapped into the medical voice circuits, and while he didn't understand all the medical jargon, he got the gist that, right now, they were dealing with a dead man. *Just how dead are we talking about?* Some ancient Earth vid flashed in his memory. *"Mostly dead, or all dead?"* Konami understood that their primary focus was to get oxygenated blood to the brain. The MTs had attached a bag of super-oxygenated neutral fluid, while the doctor made a small incision in the chest and connected the defibrillator.

Moments stretched to an eternity, and finally the doctor nodded. "Pulse present," he reported. "Slow but steady."

*If only restarting the brain was that easy...* While the MTs set up their collapsible gurney, Konami called Emer. "Maria, are the constables in position?"

"Affirmative, Chief." Standard procedure would place constables at every junction from Sewage to the infirmary to keep the path clear for the MedTechs and the patient.

*Well done, Maria.* He hadn't even needed to tell her to call the reserve constables.

Konami watched as the medical team maneuvered the casualty out the lockout space and down the cramped passageway. He almost chuckled at the absurdity of a clumsy TrashBot trying to contort itself out of the way of the team, but stifled himself and turned his attention to the scene. *The crime scene. Maybe.* He scowled as he realized part of him wanted this to be a crime, rather than just an accident. But it was more than that, and Konami recognized another feeling in

his gut he hadn't experienced in years. *This was not an accident.* He couldn't place why he had that feeling.

He began to survey the deck where the man had lain but a loud *whoosh* took his attention. *Must be the fans; flushing out the space to clean the air.* He bent down to inspect the inner hatch, but stood up abruptly. "Oh shit!" *Goddamnit, the air itself could be evidence!* He looked around wildly and found a sample flask laying in a corner. Konami quickly snatched it up and unscrewed it, shaking it vigorously before re-screwing it shut. He frowned at the absurdity, holding the flask up to the light, as if toxins could be visible.

"Inspector?"

Konami turned around. He must not have heard the lockout hatch open over the fans. A tall, lean figure in thinsuit and breather stood in the hatchway, wearing the khaki cap of one of *Aotea's* line officer corps. A smaller figure, also with a khaki cap, stood to the side of the first. Most of the men and women onboard wore the working uniform of the staff and support crew, but the officers in charge of the navigation, power, and propulsion systems of the colony ship maintained their own chain of command and wore khaki uniforms when on duty.

"Uh, good morning, Commander." Konami had to pick his brain for a moment to translate the rank insignia, a pair of crossed silver pine boughs.

The officer spoke softly into his wearable and promptly removed his thinsuit and breather. "It's safe now, Inspector."

"Shouldn't we get an analysis first?" Konami responded, momentarily distracted by the feminine shape as the other officer slid out of her thinsuit. *Is that uniform...* he pulled his eyes away when she met his gaze.

The first officer's name and position were now readily visible on the khaki uniform jumpsuit: CRISWELL on his left breast, XO on his right. Criswell waved his hand dismissively. "The fans. It's safe now."

"And Atmo's sample results are clean," added the other officer, a Lieutenant Mattoso.

Konami frowned at his sample flask. *Probably not much left of whatever it was in here.* Konami wanted to tell the XO that they should have waited to flush the space, but he held his tongue. In the formal chain of command, the executive officer only had authority over civil section department heads like Konami in matters concerning operation of *Aotea's* systems, but he thought prudence would be wise in this case. *At least, at first.* Konami had exchanged only a few words with the colony ship's XO in his five years onboard — he recalled a short meeting in his first few months, and he would see him at the periodic department head meetings, but the chief inspector realized that most of what he knew of the ship's second-in-command fell in the category of gossip and rumor. Popular opinion held that the XO was a stern, humorless man who commanded more than a little fear in his subordinates.

Konami shrugged and took off the breather and thinsuit. There was the barest chemical tinge to the scent of the air.

"Bag up Muahe's suit and breather and get them to the lab," ordered CDR Criswell as he bent to examine the partially melted hatchway. Lieutenant Mattoso acknowledged, and Konami realized they were ignoring him.

"XO?" Konami offered, and after a moment, repeated it louder.

"Yes, Inspector?" responded Criswell from a crouch, almost growling.

Konami ignored the tone of the XO's voice and tried not to smirk. "I'd like to go over the scene before we move anything else." *This ought to be good.*

"Inspector, you'll have plenty of time in a few minutes. There were at least two system failures here — the breather and the hatch — and I mean to find out what went wrong."

"Of course. So do I, XO. But please, don't touch anything until my constables and I have looked everything over."

The XO stood up straight, crowding Konami without even taking a step. “I don’t think you understand, Inspector...”

“No, XO. You don’t understand,” Konami cut in quietly. CDR Criswell pulled back in surprise. “Section 5.27.3.a.1 of the Charter: the Chief Inspector will have authority over any possible crime scene unless the location or equipment within must be utilized for vital operations as determined by the Commanding Officer.” Konami was far from an expert on the *Aotea*’s systems, but no one knew the law enforcement procedures of the Charter for a New Humanity Beyond Earth better than him. He studied it for the year-long lead up to his interviews and selection as first alternate, and even in the years afterwards, before he was called up to take the place of the deceased, he recalled most of it. No one but the commanding officer could override Konami at a crime scene.

“‘Possible’ crime scene?” echoed the XO. “What makes you think this was a crime?”

Konami refrained from explaining the feelings a cop might get sometimes. *And as out of practice as I am, I’m not sure if I even trust my gut.* “Like you said, two unprecedented system failures at the same time?”

The XO remained stone-faced and silent for several seconds. “Very well, Chief Inspector. But I expect to be notified of your progress, and the minute you’re done with the scene.”

Konami tried to quash the little schoolboy surge of delight he felt when the XO instructed Lieutenant Mattoso to stay behind as liaison between ship’s force and the Constabulary before he departed. Luckily, the chief inspector was saved from awkward banter by the arrival of two constables.

“The casualty is through to the Ring, Chief,” one reported.

Konami nodded and called Emer, instructing her to have a constable stationed at the Infirmary to wait for news. Konami doubted a single one of his forty-six constables was not awake and busy right now. *Probably for the first time in years.*

Konami turned back to the two nervous-looking constables. “Take it easy, guys. Just remember procedure. Like the drills.” He left out his opinion on their performance in the most recent. On Earth, Konami had despised drills. Now he spent weeks making them as perfect as a murder mystery novel, just to have something to do. “First thing’s first. Moby: logs. Peter: images and prints. Especially in the purifier space. What was he doing in there?” The two constables snapped into action, and Konami made a short call to Emer to make sure more were on their way to, among other things, bag up every loose object in the vicinity for analysis. With the first potential crime scene in years, Konami was sure every one of his constables would be eager to assist.

He found himself awkwardly alone with Lieutenant Mattoso once again; he nervously looked at his shoes for a moment after their eyes met.

“So what now, Inspector?” The officer’s question snapped him back into the present.

*Gotta think like a cop again.* It would be just like exercising a long-dormant muscle. “Now we recreate his steps. Follow me.”

## CHAPTER 5

Beatriz Mattoso followed the chief inspector as he made his way stiffly down the crawlway, looking over his hunched shoulders every few moments to ensure that she was still behind him. *Steel yourself, Bea. You didn't minor in investigation for nothing.* Maybe he was just as nervous at the prospect of death as she was, despite the cycles (she recalled they counted by *years* on Earth, rather than the three hundred-day cycles on *Aotea*) of experience he had. So she had heard, anyway.

But it couldn't be anything but an accident. This wasn't Earth. This was *Aotea*, and everyone onboard was a member of the Society for a New Humanity. It wasn't just the genetic screening – psych tests, background checks, interviews... surely any hints of a capacity for violence would have been finagled out and sent packing.

She had to tamp down her sense of excitement. This was a tragedy, of course, but she felt exhilarated – which led to a wave of shame. It wasn't the way of the SNH to find any positive feeling in death, even in the death of one's enemies. Per the SNH, *there were no enemies*, at least no human ones. The real enemies were those aspects of culture that glorified violence and conflict – the parts the Society had purged.

This exhilaration she felt must be a remnant of that culture – even on Ceres, and with parents that had subscribed to the Society's tenets, she couldn't help but be influenced by the wider culture. It wasn't her fault, she decided. The important thing was that she recognized that it was wrong, and did the right thing. She knew how to do the right thing; that sometimes she had feelings otherwise was merely an obstacle to be overcome.

The sewage control space was already manned by a junior HabTech, who greeted Mattoso and Chief Inspector Konami with a nervous nod. The department chief arrived moments later. HTM Wells was a lanky, angular woman in a rumpled jumpsuit. *XO would send her back to change.* Or maybe not — he didn't seem as stuck on appearance with the bluesuits as he was with her fellow khakis. Inspector Konami started to brief the HTM on the incident, but she interrupted him.

"I already heard the scuttlebutt," said Wells. "DT1 on watch, non-responsive in the purifier lockout space."

"Right," answered Konami. "So what would he be doing there?"

"Purification Bank clean and inspect, which is a periodic task, or clearance of a filter clog." Wells projected a field of numbers on the bulkhead. "Bacterial was a bit high with the last log, so he must have decided to clear it himself. Wish all my watchstanders were as conscientious..."

"Can't the rover clean a filter clog?" asked Mattoso. Konami raised his eyebrows minutely.

"Of course," replied Wells. She reached over the HabTech's shoulder and swiped one of the screens. "RoverBot is in recharge." The HTM tapped the Voice unit.

"Atmo, MT2 Taki."

"Atmo, this is HTM Wells. Did you have the RoverBot busy earlier?"

"Uh, yes it was. Some emergent repair with the TechBot." Mattoso could still hear the machinery white-noise through the Voice channel. "Did something happen to the Sewage watch?"

Konami spoke before Wells could answer. "Atmo, this is the CI. We're conducting an investigation right now, so we can't answer any questions. Thanks for your assistance." He gestured and the HabTech closed the Voice channel. "So the RoverBot was occupied..."

HTM Wells talked them through some technical background for the purification filters as they walked back toward the scene. The discussion went silent at the sounds of an argument in the crawlways around the corner.

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