

Star Struck  
By  
John Erik Ege

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This story has been an ongoing work in process for some time now, with characters that came from my young adult life. It is intended for a wider range of audience than many of my books. Translation: this is young adult friendly. There is violence, but probably less graphic and less violence overall than say “twilight.”

The author is available for comments or questions. This book is still a work in process, so feel free to send editorial comments as well. If you like the author’s work and would like to see more, donations would be nice, but more important is simply sharing the work with others through recommendations and by leaving comments. Thank you for reading.

John Erik Ege, [SOLARCHARIOT@hotmail.com](mailto:SOLARCHARIOT@hotmail.com), or 214-907-4070.

“Whatever inner worlds I choose to explore  
Or how subtle and etheric my sensations may become  
No matter how far over time and space I travel in order to heal-  
I AM going nowhere and nothing is coming to me in this silent celebration of Unity”  
Narayan

## Chapter 1

### Dog Star, Texas.

On the far end of a tree from where Enedelia Garza sat on her porch contemplating the nightmare of her life and her very present hunger, a street lamp cast an eerie glow on the dirt road. The street light was probably bright enough to be seen from the International Space station, first due to its brightness, and second, because it was probably the only street light in a hundred miles; not really, but Enedelia imagined it to be true. On a calm day, she wouldn't have been able to see it for the tree. She would have known it was there because of the aura it gave the tree, but on this particular evening, she could see it as it cut through the clapping leaves stirred by the wind. It was almost a disco light effect, which was a nice counterpoint to the lightening in the distance, so distance the thunder was lost. The occasional thunderstorm was all the excitement that the poor town of Dog Star could afford her. Dog Star was so small a town that it was no longer found on any of the Texas maps, no matter how hard you looked.

Enedelia Garcia shook her head with disgust. “Even *I* could have come up with a better name than Dog Star,” she thought, as she spied the sign: Dog Star, population 441. The place wasn't big enough to be considered a town, and though her family hadn't been there a month, everyone in town knew them by name. For her, this meant that she couldn't get into any mischief because it would get back to her mother before she could even commit the act. Worse, Dog Star was so small that she couldn't find any real mischief to get into even if she had wanted to. The most exciting mischief would be cow tipping, and she wasn't fond of injuring other animals. Her mom was renting a crappy, little trailer from an old farmer, and working double shifts at an emergency clinic about an hour's drive away. This left Enedelia to fend for herself most the time, which meant entertaining herself, feeding herself, making herself do homework, which wasn't hard because you'd be surprised what a person would do when they're that bored. She did have an older brother but he was useless, and this night he had found new ways to prove just how useless he could be. Instead of stopping by the store on his way home to buy groceries with the money mother had left him, he and his only friend went and bought a new video game. As she sat, hungry and bored, they were in his bed room trying to save the universe, or some nonsense. She had knocked on his bedroom door, had pleaded for him to at the least go get a cheeseburger for her, but all she got for her efforts was a fist in the face, and a few kicks when she fell to the floor. The floor smelled like cigarette smoke and dog urine, thanks to the previous occupants. The brother cursed at her, emphasizing the control he had over his space, and then closed his door again.

She had spent a few moments in the bathroom nursing her wounds, wanting revenge, but her hunger pains proved more powerful than the bruises she had received, and so she had turned to practical matters.

There had been nothing in the fridge or cabinets that resembled a meal, or even a snack, unless you counted peppers and onions as a snack. There was a dried up tortilla, because someone, perhaps her useless, piece of crap, brother, hadn't sealed the bag properly. Of course, even if it had still been eatable, it would be rather bland without butter or cheese, or a little salsa. She had not even been able to fill a single bowl with cereal, even after mixing the remains of several boxes. It did leave a nice colorful mix of powdered sugar, like a swirl of glitter, which she would have gladly eaten had she not discovered too late that the milk had soured. She had tossed the cereal out the window for the chickens to find in the morning, dumped the milk down the drain, and had sat down on the porch, wishing her mom would drive up with a pizza, or a subway sandwich, or ice cream, or pasta. She missed being able to walk across the street and get something at the mall.

Thinking of the mall added another pain to sing counterpoint to the hunger and bruises. Enedelia had one thought on her mind: escape. She wanted out of Dog Star. She wanted out of her life. After running through the consequences in her head of what might occur, she acted on her impulse to flee. She went inside, took her brother's keys off the kitchen cabinet, slipped out into the darkness on the far side of the trailer, closed herself in her brother's car, started it without hesitating, and drove off without permission. She didn't even look back to see if he had come chasing out of the trailer on hearing his car starting. Instead, she focused on her goal of "anywhere but here." Maybe she would run away to Dallas and trade his car for a Big Mac. That would teach him; and send mother a message about trusting him to buy food instead of games. Problem was, his car probably wouldn't get her a Big Mac.

She was in that, "I'll show you" mode, for maybe ten miles before being replaced with concern when the car started to sputter. Her first thought was fear, fear that she had broke it, and then fear she hadn't gone far enough away. Then she realized her creep of a brother hadn't bothered to put fuel in his car! She pounded the steering wheel. Even her get-away was cursed by her dreadful life.

The nearest place to find food, and gas, was a little convenient store slash burger stand slash gas station. It was the only thing near enough to their home to be considered civilized. Then again, with no gas, it was like an oasis in the middle of a dessert. Of course, her dessert was all farm land. Fields of grain on one side of the road, and fields of corn on the other all lit by the moon, sneaking a peak through the waning storm, and the occasional flash of lightening bugs skimming over the top of the plants. She saw the lightening from the storm in her rearview mirror, as if it were confirmation that her troubles were behind her, when in reality, she was still carrying them with her. The fire flies amused her, offering her a bit of a distraction as the lights on her brother's car dimmed with the loss of power. It was almost magical, like watching floating constellations moving between the plants, living and dying in a single heart beat. The bug's luminescence was just bright enough to stir an inkling of hope that there was something better out there. An armadillo scurrying across the road paused to look at the approaching head lights and then continued on its way, showing no concern whatsoever for the slowing car.

As it turned out, her brother had just enough gas for her to coast up to the fueling island and park as if she were going to intentionally fill up. She closed her eyes and muttered under her breath "useless." She didn't have money for gas. She only had a

couple dollars, and that would just buy her a meal. The only thing in the ash tray was a penny coked up with some sticky residue that kept her from moving it. The car smelt like her brother after two days of no bathing. Her choice now was to put her three dollars and sixty two cents into her brother's car so she could return home, or go and buy her dinner and walk home and let him deal with the empty gas tank. She also considered doing a drive off, continuing down the road to Dallas with stolen gas, but she didn't trust the car to go the distance in the condition her brother kept it.

An eighteen wheeler was parked on the other side of the island. The truck driver was writing in his log as the gas clicked away. She considered hitching a ride out of here. She wondered if the driver would help her or use her. She was annoyed by the reality she might accept being used in order to change her life. Even if the driver was an ax murderer, she figured her crappy life could only improve. Then he spit tobacco and lifted his belly to scratch himself at his belt line and that flight plan closed forever. She got out of her brother's car with the sun warped, cracked dashboard, and a gold pendant of Mother Mary hanging from the rearview mirror, and slammed the door. Mother Mary swung from her chain as Enedelia headed up to the convenient store.

Jenny Mae Moncrief was running the place and had just finished flipping a burger as she entered. She smiled at Enedelia. "Hey," she said, saw the car, noted Enedelia was alone, and then smiled. "You know you're not allowed to drive without a licensed driver with you."

Enedelia shrugged. She had applied for a hardship license, but had failed the written test. They had given her a temp anyway, small towns did have some local authority to abuse, with the condition that a licensed adult be with her while she drove. "I couldn't resist coming up here for one of your specials."

"You and your brother been fighting again?" Jen said more than asked. She had a way of saying things that were never quite a question, nor a committed statement.

"No. Why would we have cause to fight?" Enedelia asked.

Jen shook her head, not pursuing the obvious signs of abuse. "Usual?"

"Please," Enedelia said, letting some of her rage dissipate. She had no reason to be less than civil to Jenny. She wasn't the cause of her troubles. It helped just being out of the house, being able to exercise a minimum level of control over her life. She felt a bit more relaxed and could afford to be civilized. And she didn't have to pretend as if she had permission to be up here. Jenny wouldn't rat her out, which was another reason why she shouldn't be snappy with Jen. Jen seemed to understand that Enedelia's life was chaos, and not from her own choosing. She had to continuously remind herself that she wasn't the crazy one. Her brother was crazy. Her mom was paranoid. But she, Enedelia, a one time princess, at least to her father in a far away place, was sane.

Enedelia put her money on the counter, stacking the coins. She placed them all heads up, with the faces looking the same way, east, which meant the heads were upside down from her vantage point. Jen continued her cooking, throwing another hamburger patty down while wrapping up the other burger before placing it in a bag. Enedelia figured it was for the truck driver. Satisfied that the coins were as perfect as she could stack them, she sighed.

"Jen, would you be willing to extend me credit for the meal, and let me use this money to put some gas in the car," Enedelia asked

Jen looked at her with a knowing smile. "Of course, dear. Is four dollars enough for gas?"

"Not really, but it will get me home," Enedelia said. "And leave enough for my brother to get to school in the morning."

"I could use a baby sitter this weekend, if you're free," Jen said.

"Alright," Enedelia agreed. It wasn't a great trade, but it did give her some control over her situation. And it wasn't like she had anything else important to do.

Enedelia looked around the store, leaning back against the cabinet. Two old men were drinking ice tea at one of the tables near the front window that looked out into the parking lot. She had seen them before, and though they knew her name, she still hadn't bothered to learn theirs. This was their nightly ritual. Enedelia imagined herself becoming old, trapped in a horrible ritualized life, in this God-forsaken town. Sipping tea and listening to the same old stories day after day, stories that revealed the small mindedness of the locals. It was mostly rivalry between the only two local churches, the Baptists and the Church of Christ. She silently made a prayer for God to save her from such a life, and crossed herself.

Outside, the sheriff's car turned into the lot and pulled up behind Juan's car. A moment later, the lights came on. Enedelia saw the reflection of the emergency lights in the jar full of water that was positioned to catch spare coins for physically impaired children. She cringed and closed her eyes. The creep brother of hers had obviously called 911 to report his car stolen.

Jenny Mae put some fries in the bag and placed it on the counter next to a soda. She spoke into the intercom to let the trucker know his order was ready, and then noticed the sheriff approaching the store. She looked at Enedelia with a frown, walked around the counter, and patted Enedelia on the head as she passed. She went outside as if to intercept the sheriff on Enedelia's behalf. The sheriff was halfway between the gas pumps and the store when the trucker called for his attention. The trucker was pointing up into the sky. The sheriff turned and looked. Jenny Mae stepped off the curve and also looked up.

All Enedelia could think of is how much trouble she was in. She was probably going to lose her driving permit, as well as her driving privilege, which was the only joy she had. It was a joy that she could only experience when her mother had time for her. And though her mother would be angry, that was the least of her worries. Her brother was going to give her an unprecedented pounding. Perhaps she would get lucky and the sheriff would put her in jail until she was 18. When she got out, she could legally go anywhere she wanted.

The two old men were puzzled by the activity outside, wondering what might be happening in the sky above the parking lot, but they still had not generated enough curiosity to move themselves from their table. They were pretty heavy, old men, and, short of a disagreement about interpretations of the Bible, it took a lot to motivate that much flesh to do anything other than sit and watch the crops grow while sipping tea.

The electricity at the convenient store went out, causing the lights to fade both inside and at the gas pumps. Even the emergency lights flared and went out. For a moment it was just dark enough to see the moonlight, but then the parking lot was suddenly flooded with a brilliant white light, like a search light, with a visible boundary that was shrinking, becoming more focused. The two old men were suddenly motivated to join Jenny Mae, the trucker, and the Sheriff. They all stared up into the light, trying to

get a glimpse of what was up there while at the same time shielding their eyes from the brightness with their hands. Enedelia wasn't so curious and remained standing at the counter inside the store, still trying to resolve the conflict that she was sure to have with her brother when the sheriff returned her home. She helped herself to some of the truck driver's fries.

The people in the parking lot, like frightened armadillos staring into headlights of an approaching car, having had sufficient time to examine the object approaching them, simultaneously decided to flee. Had Enedelia not been so consumed about her own worries, she might have found it almost comical how they each chose a different line of departure and just narrowly avoided running into each other as they fled. The thing that finally brought Enedelia out of her conflict was the sight of her brother's car being flattened. She was pretty sure it was completely flat, but it was hard to tell because of the large object resting on top of it. The object seemed to sink about an inch into the concrete. Half of the sheriff's car was also underneath the object, and it appeared that the remaining half of the car was severed perfectly as if the sheriff had driven it half into the strange glowing object. The object wasn't a pyramid, because it only had three sides, minus the side resting on the ground, and each side had equally large points coming off. The object radiated a cool, greenish, white light. The only variation in the light was where the seam of a door began to show as it opened. A ramp lowered, and a fat humanoid type being ambled down the ramp.

Enedelia began to consider that the problems with her brother were a minor detail in the face of this new situation. Her first option, which was to run, didn't seem advisable. No doubt the approaching creature would be able to outrun her, or shoot her down before she even made it out the door. Another option was to hide, but then, she figured a creature capable of flying in a giant pyramid style ship was more than likely holding scanning devices that would penetrate any possible hiding places she might be able to find on short notice. After all, she had seen the movies. They had immobilizing rays, and heat seeking probes, and motion detectors, and infrared vision...

Enedelia's mind didn't drop the list of details until the suited figure entered the store. She held her breath as its gloved hands reached up towards its helmet, twisted, and lifted it free. Enedelia let out a slight sigh of relief as the face behind the helmet appeared to be human. On thinking about it further, she began to feel a little disappointed. Out of all the possible shapes an alien life form might have taken on, and of all the potentials of meeting another life form, her encounter had to be the one with a human like face.

"That's all?" she asked.

"Pardon?" the stranger asked.

"I was half expecting you to have three heads or something," Enedelia said.

"Ah," the man said, nodding. "The Triloudians. You've met them, then?"

"Ah," Enedelia paused. "No."

"You're lucky. They're not very nice," he said.

Enedelia nodded as if she understood. Perhaps this was just a wayward NASA employee in some secret military test vehicle. She had no doubt that the government had access to more technology than it let on. She believed in conspiracies. It was the only framework that explained her life.

He smiled at her again. She tried to smile back. He tilted his head, awkwardly holding his helmet under one arm. He seemed to be waiting for something. She tried

matching his smile, but she could feel the muscles in her cheeks twitching, as she wasn't really in the mood to smile. And she rarely had the occasion to practice.

"Hello," he said.

Enedelia seemed at a loss. "Hello," she said, thinking, what, you've got to be socially polite before you kill me?

"I don't know how this works," he said.

"How what works?" she asked.

"The food ordering process," he said.

"Sorry? You want to order food?" Enedelia asked, incredulously.

"Yes, please. My memory says this establishment has the best cheeseburgers in all the known universe. I would like to place an order," he said.

"Your memory says?" Enedelia asked, a bit confused.

"Yes," he said. "You understand."

"Um, not quite. You've eaten here before?" Enedelia asked.

"No. Kirk has eaten here before. I am a clone, and I have his memory, and chance has brought me to this region and I have calculated that I have sufficient time to stop for a cheese burger in order to test whether his memory holds up to my standards."

"Kirk's standards?" Enedelia asked.

"My standards. I may be a clone, but I have feelings, too," he said.

Enedelia was beginning to believe 'clone' was synonymous with 'retard.' "So, what's your name?"

"Kirk," he said.

"I thought you said you were a clone of Kirk," Enedelia said.

"Yes," he said. "Oh, specifically, I am Kirk 23."

"I'm Enedelia Garcia," she said. She added her birthday, making a little joke, "15."

"Oh, you're a clone as well? Hello, I am Kirk 23," he said.

"Yes, you've told me," Enedelia said, sighing. He obviously didn't understand jokes, but then, no one ever got her jokes.

"Yes," he agreed. There was another awkward pause. "Could you help me order a cheese burger? And a coke, please. I remember drinking a coke, and I would like to experience it again."

"But you've never actually had a coke," Enedelia said.

"Technically, I have no direct experience drinking cokes, but I have the memory of experiencing drinking cokes, and I would like to have a real time experience to compare with the memory of the experience in order to decide for myself that the experience is all I remember it to be," Kirk 23 said.

"Right," Enedelia said, trying to check all the experiences he just threw at her.

"Can you assist me in this endeavor?" he asked.

Enedelia spied the meal on the counter, and smiled a genuine smile. "Of course I can," she said.

Kirk 23's smile also grew. "Great," he said, licking his lips, as if he had never eaten before.

"But it's going to cost you," Enedelia said, becoming serious.

"It always does. How much?" Kirk 23 asked.



“Seven thousand dollars,” Enedelia said, playing a game. She figured there was no way he had that much cash on him, but if he did, she could use the money to buy her own beat up car.

“Seven thousand?” Kirk seemed astounded. “My memory said it wouldn’t be more than a dollar twenty three.”

Enedelia shrugged. “Inflation.”

“I have diamonds to exchange for food,” he said, reaching for a pocket with his free hand.

“No,” Enedelia said.

Kirk 23 seemed a little disappointed. “My memories tell me this is a valuable commodity here on Earth. I can assure you they are of rarest form and purity.”

“Please, you can push diamonds all day long if you want, but I’m not interested,” she said. “They are worthless stones, unless your name happens to be De Beer. You can always buy diamonds from them, or a retailer, but they’ll never buy it back, and you can never sell it on the market for what they told you the original market value was. In fact, the most you can get for a rock at a pawn shop is fifty dollars, and you have to prove it’s not stolen, and quite frankly, I don’t want the hassle.”

“You seem very knowledgeable about the local economy,” Kirk 23 said. “Could you please inform me of what you might find acceptable trade? Gold perhaps? Silver?”

“Transportation,” Enedelia said, without hesitation.

“Could you be more specific?” Kirk 23 asked.

“I want you to take me with you on your spaceship,” Enedelia said.

“My ship is not a passenger ship,” Kirk 23 said.

“Fine, you can drop me off at the next civilized place you come to,” Enedelia said. “Just get me off this planet.”

“It hardly seems like a fair trade,” Kirk 23 said.

Enedelia picked up the meal and coke which had been prepared for the truck driver. “Look, I have a coke and cheese burger right here. You want it or not?”

Kirk 23 seemed to be making calculations in his head. After a dramatic pause, he agreed. “Alright, it’s a trade,” he said, reaching for the bag.

Enedelia pulled the bag and coke from his reach. “Not until we are safely on our way to somewhere else.”

“Fair enough,” he agreed, turning and heading for the door.

“Um, wait,” Enedelia said.

Kirk 23 stopped and looked at her.

“Do I have time to grab a few things I might need?”

Kirk 23 nodded. “Less than two minutes.”

Enedelia looked about for something to carry supplies. She grabbed the first thing in sight, which was a school backpack intended for sale. It didn’t bother her that it was a Hello Kitty school pack, she just needed something functional. She then ran up and down the aisles grabbing items, such as candy, cans of coke, a couple of bottled waters, chewing gum, pens, paper, and did this until her bag was almost full. The last impulse items she grabbed were five disposable cameras. “I’m not going on this adventure without proof!” She crammed these in the bag, squishing the bag of chips that had been on top. She then told Kirk 23 that she was ready, followed him out to the ship and, ascended the ramp with him.

The inside of the ship was like nothing she had ever seen on television, or even imagined. In fact, it was rather Spartan. The ramp closed behind them as they entered the ship, passed through a “clean” room, and entered the next compartment where Kirk 23 instructed her to sit. He sat next to her and began fastening his seat belts. There were no controls that she could discern, or even display terminals. The walls were bare, and dimly illuminated. Kirk 23 stared at the wall in front of him, silent, as if in meditation. He stayed this way for a few moments and then turned his attention to her.

“We are on our way,” Kirk 23 said. “May I have my cheeseburger and coke?”

“I don’t feel any change,” Enedelia said. “How do I know we’re moving?”

“I assure you, we’re moving at tremendous speeds. We have just left your planet’s atmosphere,” Kirk 23 said.

“But I didn’t feel any thrust,” Enedelia complained. “You’ll have to show me.”

Kirk 23 blinked, raised his hands in a gesture and made a face. A section of the wall became transparent, and she was instantly looking down on the Earth, from God knew how high. She felt a great sense of relief, and yet, at the same time, terror. Though it was dark, she recognized the outline of the Americas by all the lights. Perhaps her decision to leave Earth had been a bit rash, but then she convinced herself anywhere in the Galaxy had to be more civilized and nicer than planet Earth. She was mostly disappointed that leaving Earth didn’t come with an exciting rush of speed and vibration. She wanted the rollercoaster ride and magic, and everything life kept throwing at her was simply mundane, boring, and unremarkable. This was her life. Boring.

“That is the departing view,” Kirk 23 said. “The forward view is not too spectacular. Just stars.”

The Earth disappeared and was replaced with the forward view, and it was indeed, mostly stars. Distant stars, and not as bright as she imagined they would be. And there was no sense of movement. The shot of Earth suggested movement, because the Earth was getting smaller, but this forward view gave her no indication of anything but that the heavens were much dimmer than she had been led to believe by Hubble photographs. Not even the suggestion of colors. Just a few plain, old white, boring stars, like pin pricks in a curtain that would always be beyond her reach. Had NASA doctored all the photos released to the public?

“Why aren’t they brighter?” she asked.

“What?” Kirk 23 asked.

“The stars. Shouldn’t they be brighter?” Enedelia asked.

“It’s because of the angle of the forward sensor in relationship to your sun,” Kirk 23 said. “You can’t see the stars during the day, but they’re still there. If the sensors weren’t screening out most of your sun’s light, you wouldn’t see the stars at all.”

“It looks like we’re not moving,” Enedelia complained.

Kirk 23 rotated the perspective until the moon came into view. The moon was drifting as if it were falling away. It was a small, unremarkable moon, but it was definitely the Earth’s moon. Once again she was disappointed, for it seemed way too small. She wanted to challenge Disney and Spielberg to a fight for raising her expectations.

“It looks so small,” Enedelia complained. “Hell, it looks bigger from the Earth!”

“That’s an optical illusion created by the viewer examining the moon too close to the horizon. Looking up at the moon when it is directly overhead gives you a more

accurate idea of its size based on its distance from you. What you are seeing now is its true size to distance ratio,” Kirk 23 said.

“Can we swing by Mars, or Saturn? I would love to see the rings of Saturn,” Enedelia said.

“No,” Kirk 23 said. “I’m not a tour ship. And that was not part of our arrangement.”

“You’re right, here’s your meal,” Enedelia said, handing him the cheeseburger and coke.

Kirk 23 set the coke beside him and removed the French fries from the bag. He looked at them curiously and then to her. “What are these?”

“They’re French fries. Try them. They’re not Micky D’s, but they’re pretty good,” Enedelia said.

Kirk 23 withdrew a fry, put it in his mouth, paused, and then began chewing, nodding. “Yes. These are appealing. I remember these now. It’s missing something. Yes. It’s missing transfat. I’m sure of it. They also require more salt.” He set them down, and retrieved the cheeseburger from the bag. He un-wrapped it from the paper and eagerly bit into it, fully expecting to enjoy it as much as his memory told him he would. He spit it out, making a gagging noise. Enedelia tried patting his back, but the suit was like armor.

He took a breath and said, “That’s horrible. How could anyone eat that crap? Best cheeseburgers in all-the-universe my ass.”

Enedelia handed him the coke to wash the taste out. Kirk 23 nodded, took the coke, sipping it through the straw. There was no disguising his lack of appreciation. He spat that out as well.

“That is not coke,” Kirk 23 insisted.

Enedelia had watched Jen push the coke button on the fountain, but it was possible Jen had gotten the syrup lines that ran from the soda tanks to the dispenser confused. She took a sip from the straw, swirled in it in her mouth.

“That’s coke,” she confirmed.

“It’s nothing like I remember it,” Kirk 23 said.

“Maybe your biology is slightly different and you just don’t enjoy the same tastes?” Enedelia said.

“Or maybe that’s not coke,” Kirk 23 insisted.

“When was Kirk One last on Earth?” Enedelia asked.

“I don’t know if Kirk One was ever on Earth,” Kirk 23 said.

“Aren’t you a clone of Kirk One?” she asked.

“No, you never make a clone of a clone,” Kirk 23 said. “Even I know that. Kirk one is the first Kirk clone.”

“Okay, the original Kirk, when was he last on Earth,” Enedelia asked.

“I don’t know,” Kirk 23 said.

“How old are you?” Enedelia asked.

“In Galactic Time or Earth Time?” Kirk 23 asked, and when she indicated the latter, he said, “Roman calendar? 5 Earth years old.”

She sighed. “That explains a lot. But how old is Kirk?”

“Which one?” Kirk 23 asked.

“The original Kirk, the one whose memories are bouncing around in your head?” Enedelia said.

“Oh, I think he’s in his late seventies,” Kirk 23 said, becoming equally frustrated. “What does this have to do with anything?”

“I’m trying to figure out when he was last on Earth. The memory of him having a cheeseburger at that place, when was that?” Enedelia asked.

“Not exactly sure. I remember he was driving a truck,” Kirk 23 said.

“Can you get me close? In Earth years, please,” Enedelia said.

“1967, or was it 68,” he mused out loud. “I’m having some trouble accessing that information. I didn’t really focus too much on that detail since the information didn’t seem that important during the memory transfer process.”

“Well, that would be enough to explain why the coke tastes different,” Enedelia said.

“Really? You have an explanation?” Kirk 23 said, more interested.

“Yeah. Sometime in the 80’s they changed the formula for the coke product.

There’s a song reference to it, by Billy Joel, I think, about the cola wars. It was a big deal. People didn’t want the change, but the new management did, but they refused to sell the old formula, or some nonsense. They made the change and then sells for coke dropped off. They tried bringing it back as classic coke, selling the new coke right beside it. After all sorts of drama, they supposedly stopped making the new coke and just stuck with the original formula,” Enedelia explained. “But my mom says it’s just not the same. I don’t know why they didn’t offer the new product and see how it sold before they went and messed with everything, but then, I am just a stupid teenager, what do I know about running a big corporation like that.”

“Those bastards,” Kirk 23 said. “I just hate corporations. It reminds me of this rickety tin outfit I’m currently working for, the little CREEPS!” Kirk 23 slammed a fist down. “Sorry. Did they fire that management team? And why does this coke taste different if they returned to the original formula?”

“Well, like I said, my mom thinks they just phased out the classic coke, which really isn’t the classic coke, because back in the thirties coke actually had cocaine in it. Anyway, lots of people maintain that coke has never been the same since the cola wars. I think there’s a difference in taste between fountain drinks, canned drinks, and bottle drinks, but supposedly, it’s all the same,” Enedelia said. “As for the corporate leaders, well, they don’t get fired. Ever. They just kind of go on vacation, and get compensated for the rest of their lives. Golden parachutes or some nonsense like that. I don’t understand it all.”

“Me neither,” Kirk agreed. “And I’m very disappointed that my memories don’t match my experience.”

“I understand. My experiences hardly ever meet my expectations. I guess that’s kind of the same,” Enedelia commiserated.

“Maybe I should give up my memories, and you should give up your expectations,” Kirk 23 said. “Maybe we’d both be happier?”

Enedelia nodded, looking at the stars. The stars were much brighter now, but there was still no indication of movement. “How long will it take us to get somewhere?”

“Oh, once my Quantum Drive is fully charged, and the return coordinates are set, two minutes and twenty seconds, plus traffic and docking time on the other side. I should still be ahead of schedule.”

“Okay,” Enedelia said, simply playing along. “How long till the Quantum Drive is fully charged?”

“About fifteen more minutes, maybe?” he offered.

“Okay. Do you have any memories of candy?” Enedelia asked, reaching into her pack. She pulled out a Recess Peanut Butter cup and handed it to him. “Try this.”

Kirk 23 un-wrapped it and put it in his mouth. “Oh, my word,” he said, praising with his mouth full. He had failed to remove the paper cup the candy was sitting in and ate it all. “This is good. No. This is great. Do you have more?”

She pulled out another and gave it to him, this time taking the candy out of the paper cup for him. He ate it up like a true American, hardly letting it stay in his mouth long enough to let it melt. She offered him a sample of everything she had grabbed until he was satiated.

“That was great! Definitely worth the trip. I’m very happy to have come after all. Yes. Okay, the Quantum Drive is fully charged, and it’s time for me to fulfill my end of the agreement,” Kirk 23 said. “I still think you’re getting the raw end of the deal, but, a deals a deal. Um, you might want to strap yourself in.”

Enedelia did as she was told, observing he was double checking his own straps. She felt a bit of excitement. “What should I expect?” she asked.

“One minute and ten seconds of thrust, and then one minute and ten seconds of a sensation of falling,” Kirk 23 said. “It should be perfectly safe, provided, of course, everything has remained constant, and the data I have is correct, and...”

“What happens if something is wrong?” Enedelia asked.

“It depends on the severity of the discrepancy,” Kirk 23 said.

“Worst case scenario?” Enedelia asked.

“You want to know my worst case scenario, or your worse case scenario?” Kirk 23 asked

Enedelia didn’t know how to respond to that, but by the time she figured out what she wanted to ask, there came a build up of noise, like a generator on overload, drowning everything else out. It was so loud that talking to Kirk would have been useless. She couldn’t hear herself think, much less hear herself shout over the din. Then suddenly, the stars on the screen, which had been there for her benefit only, streaked across the screen becoming solid white lines, twirling to make circles, like a time lapsed photo from a stationary telescope. At first, she felt a bit of vertigo, but she focused on the streaking stars which swirled giving a tunnel effect. The screen itself filled with more and more white streaks until the screen was completely white with light. Enedelia was pushed back into her seat, as if she were in a car accelerating at a tremendous rate of speed, and it’s exactly what she had imagined the astronauts experience when they get launched into space. She felt the vibration through her seat, and could smell ozone in the air, the scent she would have usually associated with a summer rain. A minute and ten seconds seemed like an eternity, but she managed to look at her watch, gauging how much longer this experience would continue. The vibration grew stronger until, at the height of one minute and ten seconds, all sensation of thrust stopped. There was an intense, melodic noise that faded to an awkward silence, like an orchestra coming to an agreement on one note after a piano crashed from being dropped from a very high building. The screen glowed in patches of colors like an old disco light from the sixties that would alter its patterns with

the tempo of the music. For just a moment, all sense of motion ceased, and if it weren't for the harness Enedelia felt certain she would have flown across the room.

"That wasn't so bad," she said.

Enedelia felt the ship's orientation change, or so she assumed, partly because she fell forward in the seat slightly, and to the right. The only thing that kept her from flying forward was the seatbelt, which dug into her body. She noticed Kirk 23 was whistling a song, not concerned at all, but her body began reminding her of what happens to objects that fall. They go splat. She was very concerned about going splat, but no matter what thoughts she came up with to convince her body she wasn't about to go splat, it all came back home to that one word. Splat. She always imagined the worse. Like a giant trash bag full of vegetable soup, dropped from the top of the Sears building in Chicago, going splat. Of course, that would probably hit before a minute and ten seconds were up, so her splat would, no doubt, be much more spectacular to witness. She had a strong desire to be home. Maybe even a pounding from her brother would be better than going splat.

They dropped into normal space, and after a moment of vertigo, gravity returned to normal, and she felt surprisingly fine. Kirk 23's song came to an end.

"Exactly two minutes, twenty seconds. Perfect. I am in touch with space traffic control. We should be docked in about twenty five minutes," Kirk 23 said. "Let me be the first to welcome you to Indigo Space Center. Almost everything you want to find can be found right here. It may be only the fifth busiest space traffic port in all the Known Galaxy, but I have found it's certainly the friendliest."

There was indeed a space station on the screen. Enedelia couldn't discern if it was a large space station, or a small station, since it was the first station she had ever seen, but based on Kirk 23's statement, she assumed it was large. She identified various ships coming and going, and the light reflecting off a thousand objects just beyond the station. The bulk of the station seemed to be cylindrical in nature, which acted as an axis for five rings, and it looked like two more rings were in the process of being constructed. They were approaching the top end of the cylinder part of the station, which flared out like one of those screws that set flush in the wall.

The most noticeable feature of the back ground was the nebula. It was as if a painter had splashed various colors of blue against the night sky, and then illuminated it from with-in and with-out. There were places where stars burned through the haze, and other places where the nebulous clouds were so thick and dark it looked like it might rain. Every now and then there were flashes of light, as if lightening was occurring, and once she actually caught glimpse of a clear lightening path as it spider webbed across a lobe of the nebula. Parts of the nebula spread out like pseudo pods, as if the nebula were an amoeba that was reaching for something to eat.

Something nearby flashed, catching her attention. Beyond the space station, but much nearer than the nebula, was a series of objects. The nebula was so far away that it almost looked flat, as if painted on the canvas, while the closer objects had more three dimensional appearances. Some of them were lit by station lights, some of them had small beacon lights that flashed, while others had a slight internal glow. There appeared to be lines upon lines of these barrel-like objects that would comprise a cube if you were to draw a line connecting each one.

"What are those? Spaceships waiting to dock?" she asked.

Kirk 23 looked to where she indicated. “Oh, no. Those are storage containers. Some of them are shipments waiting to be moved to other destinations, some of them contain property, probably belonging to people on the station that couldn’t afford a big enough flat to house them and their stuff. Toxic waste capsules. I suppose some of them might even be prison pods. Yeah, the ones with the internal glows are most likely indications of internal life support, prison cells, or simply low cost housing, which is no different than a prison. Sometimes the Grays are forced to live off station, so they could be housing for Grays. Mostly its cargo. That’s a great thing about space stations, especially outside of a star system. Practically unlimited growth potential. This is about as civilized as you’ll find, I assure you. You’re going to like it here. I just know it.”

## Chapter 2

The inside of the top portion of Indigo Space Center was like being in an airport terminal. That was the closest analogy that Enedelia could come up with. There were gates, and bridges connecting ships, and big windows that allowed you to view outside at the ships coming and going. The inner circle had restaurants, lavatories, communication terminals, and even duty free shops while the outer circle offered resting areas for those waiting to transfer to various ships. She was unable to read the writing on the walls, naturally, but she felt confident enough that she had assessed her new environment accurately. She knew she wasn't on Earth, but the forms of social life seemed consistent with her expectations.

And she was frightened.

"You can't leave me here!" Enedelia pleaded with Kirk 23.

"Oh, yes I can. A deal is a deal," Kirk 23 said.

"But the smell is horrible and I don't speak the language..."

"After a while, you'll not notice the smell, and the language will come to you in time," Kirk 23 said. "Relax. Enjoy your time here."

"But, I have no money," Enedelia said.

"You're a resourceful human," Kirk 23 said. "You'll be fine."

"At least give me some of those diamonds you were going to pawn off on me back on Earth," Enedelia insisted.

He fumbled at a pocket and pulled out a small, black, felt bag apparently weighted down with large jewels inside. He handed this to her.

"Thank you," she said.

"No problem," he said, turning to walk away. He arrived at the bridge door that lead back to his ship, and then looked one last time to Enedelia. "Though, I'm not sure why you would want them. Apparently, they're about as useless here as they are on Earth. Saturated market, I suppose. Damn De Beers."

The door slid open, he stepped through, and the doors shut. Enedelia watched as he walked down the bridge back to his ship. Her heart sank. Here she was, probably billions of miles from home and not a bit of money to her name. Perhaps she should have thought this through more fully before making arrangements with a clone. A creature ran up to her and made a noise, shaking a slimy tentacle, its whole body pulsing with the movement of liquid. It pulsed like a jelly fish that had been poked and changed colors. She stared at it, mouth slightly ajar, until, that was, a creature four times as large slid up to her like a giant slug, picked the little thing up, growled-slash-gurgled something at her, and slid off, cooing at the smaller version of itself. Their mass of gelatin changed colors as they communicated to each other.

Enedelia felt a bit weak at the knees and so found a place to sit down. The bank of chairs was facing one of the eateries, back to open panes of space, and traffic coming and going. The only way she could look at the eateries, without growing sick at her stomach, was to imagine it was a Lucas or Spielberg film. This was fantasy. The only thing was, fantasy never smelt so bad. She tried to put the smells in perspective, too. She loved ferrets. She thought they were the greatest little creatures ever, but her brother and her mother thought they smelled awful. To her, they didn't smell bad, they just smelled



different. Most people walk into your house and smell a dog or a cat, and they're okay with it because they are familiar with those smells. But when they walk into your house and they smell something they can't identify, like a ferret, they automatically put the smell in a 'bad' category. She imagined this was some sort of biological self defense against wondering into something new, dangerous and potentially deadly. She made a decision to retrain her brain to accept this new smell as pleasant. Or hope that she soon became immune to the smell.

Enedelia tried to focus on something other than the scents. Instead, she began to size the aliens up in terms of threat level. Of all the creatures present in her line of sight, with the exception of maybe two or three, she figured there would be no way she could beat them in a fair fight. Between claws, teeth, and sheer mass, there was just no touching them. Not that she had any desire to get any closer, much less have any conflicts, but she knew all too well that it was indeed possible to say something wrong or even make a gesture that could be interpreted negatively and then you were unwittingly drawn into a fight; hopefully authorities would be called due to an offense. So far, as she continued to sit, no one bothered her. That was a good thing. Except for the fact that she would eventually have to get up and approach someone for assistance.

Of course, the more she thought about the potential of unwittingly offending someone with a simple gesture, the more rigid she sat. She felt sicker and wanted desperately to be home, in her own bed. Perhaps she should offend someone. Perhaps she should march right up to the creature serving food at the closest eatery and slap it in the face. Yeah, that was a good plan. That way the authorities would come, throw her in jail, and she would get a free meal, and maybe even medical care. And a bed. It's not like she was on Earth where there was potential for being tortured and mistreated in jail. After all, this was the heart of a true civilization. They had to treat prisoners well. She smiled at how clever her plan was and forced herself to stand up.

To her relief two humans rounded the bin. Instead of going to strike the food server thing, she approached them. Perhaps too quickly. The closer one drew a weapon.

"No, don't shoot," she said, holding her hands up.

It said something to her and she just stared in awe. It wasn't speaking English, Spanish, or any other language she knew. He appeared human, in every aspect she could see, but it felt strange watching his mouth move while listening to the strange sounds that tumbled out.

Enedelia backed away, keeping her hands in the classic "I surrender" stance. The two questionable humans went about their business. She returned to her seat and sat down. She was still feeling sick to her stomach, her forehead beading with perspiration, which she wiped with her sleeve. She remembered that she had been extremely hungry not too long ago, but now all she could think of was vomiting. Fortunately she hadn't partaken in the junk food she had fed to Kirk. It was amazing to her how being so excited, and then suddenly ill, could remove all the thoughts of food from ones mind. She wondered if eating would help, but the thought of eating made her sicker. Still, she forced herself to eat one of the sandwiches she had stolen from the convenient store, and a portion of the crushed chips. She also sipped from her bottled water. Nothing seemed to be helping and she fought the urge to puke it all up. There was nothing worse than being sick, except, being sick so far away from home and far, far from anything familiar. Even a home where a brother beat you...

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