



THE DARKNESS BEYOND THE LIGHT

Book I of
The Infinite Universe Saga

BY FRANK W. ZAMMETTI

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For my wife and children, the brightest stars in my sky.

CHAPTER ONE

Test

If he had known that sudden, violent, fiery death was potentially on tap for the day - that is, any more than it normally is in his line of work – then it’s likely, though not definite, that the thought going through his mind at that moment would not have been:

You know, clouds are kinda funny.

They're physically there - you can see 'em, fly through 'em, even touch the damned things if you open a window at the right time on a plane. But still, they're kinda like ghosts in a way, sorta not there at the same time, you know? Plus, they can change shape any time they damned well want to - or actually, they change to whatever is in the mind of the guy looking at 'em at the time, which is some wizard shit if you ask me! Two people almost never see the same thing, which is fucking weird now that I think about it because I mean, does that say that they don't have a shape of their own? What does a cloud look like if nobody looks at it at all? Is it even THERE?! Wow, that's deep! I mean, if two people look at a beer can, they're both gonna see the same thing. Sure, their descriptions may be a bit different because of how they're looking at the can, or how crappy one person's vision might be, or maybe because there's some cigar smoke in the air or some shit like that. But basically, they're gonna have similar descriptions of the can, similar enough that they know they see the same thing. It's not like one is gonna claim they see a donut with sprinkles, right? But, ask two people what they see when they look at the same damned cloud, and one might say a cat's asshole while the other says a Ferrari.

I mean, there isn't anything like a cloud when you get right down to it, is there? Except for wizard of course. I hate those fucking guys.

This was the thought that went through the mind of Air Force Captain Alex Wakeman as the plane he was now piloting flew through a particularly dense cloud bank at 39,000 feet over the sweltering Nevada desert.

“Alex,” came the voice of Melissa Wakeman, Alex’s wife, over the radio, “what’s going on up there? You’ve been a little too quiet for the past few minutes.”

Melissa was getting worried about Alex. Not worried in the "oh my god he's going to die" kind of way that the wife of an Air Force test pilot might. No, she knew Alex more than well enough to know that at least at the moment, he wasn't in any real danger. Her worry was of an entirely different nature: the worry of a boss who was coming to the realization that her employee was slacking off.

“I was just thinking about clouds,” came the reply from Alex.

“What about them?” Melissa wondered if this might be the day her husband finally cracked and went certifiably insane. Sometimes, it seemed like he didn’t know how to take anything seriously. The curse of someone that most things came easy to, she knew.

“Oh, you know, just that they’re fluffy and look like cotton candy and I was wondering if they tasted like marshmallow and now I’m getting hungry.”

Melissa cracked a smile and realized that Alex was perfectly fine, as she suspected. That sarcastic tone that only Alex could manage came through loud and clear.

“Well, clouds are just water in a gaseous state, so they don’t taste like much of anything.”

“You’re being a giant nerd again Melissa. We’ve talked about this. You’ve gotta get that crap under control, pronto!” Alex was a master at this kind of falsely stern reply.

Even though he was just being his usual wise-ass self, he was still kind of making a legitimate point: Melissa had a habit of thinking science jokes were funny to anyone but other scientists. She wasn’t exactly the wittiest person in the first place, though she did alright in Alex’s eyes at least. He always joked that her brain was so damned big and choke full of data that it had to repress the part that made someone funny, at least a bit, to make room for all the facts she had running around up there.

“Well,” Melissa began, “I suppose they might taste like something else if a bird took a crap in one. It’d probably taste like worms or bird seed or something in that case”.

Alex smiled to himself inside the stuffy, sweaty helmet wrapped around his head.

“Hey now, that’s the spirit!” It wasn’t the best joke he had ever heard, not even the best joke he had heard that *day*, but it was a good try. “Can you do me a favor then and grab a pigeon, feed it a good steak and then send its ass up here? I’m starving!”

Everyone in the control room standing beside Melissa burst out into laughter, but Melissa just smirked. Even after she had made an attempt, even though she had done a reasonably good job at it, Alex just *had* to show her up again by making a far better joke. She knew he didn’t mean to and didn’t even realize that’s what he was doing, but it was a frequent enough occurrence that Melissa was painfully aware of it when he did. It was a bit of a sore spot for her that she couldn’t match his wit. She knew it wasn’t something that bothered Alex one bit, but it did bother her.

She supposed she shouldn’t be mad at Alex, and in fact, she wasn’t. She understood that comedy was one of the ways Alex coped with the pressure around him, and it came naturally to him. Being a test pilot was no easy task on the best of days. Even though today was going smoothly, she knew that could change at the drop of a hat, as did Alex. Keeping himself and everyone around him loose through levity was something Alex did in preparation for the inevitable moment everything around him turned to shit. Not being tense, just like in a car accident, was a good thing when piloting some new aircraft that could fail catastrophically at any moment.

Fortunately, he was piloting a new jet that Melissa had herself designed, so he wasn’t even a little worried. She was now one of, if not *the* leading aviation designers on the planet, with three advanced fighter designs tested over just the past seven years, an unprecedented rate of production (and successful production at that). She was a certified scientific genius on top of it: she completed a Ph.D. from MIT in high-energy physics at

age 21 and a second one just two years later from Caltech in aviation design, plus Masters in astrophysics and computer science from Stanford by the time she was 25 thrown in just for good measure. She was orders of magnitude smarter than Alex was and he knew it. Hence, he had no concern about this flight. To be sure, even *her* designs sometimes failed. That was just part of the game. But he never worried about it when testing one of her designs. He knew the odds were in his favor regardless by a wide margin.

Still, odds, like clouds, are a funny thing...

"Alex, I'm reading an elevated level of plasma flux through the starboard drive assembly. I think we might have a gravimetric distortion forming in the power field. What do your instruments say?"

"Uh," stammered Alex, "they say some science crap that probably looks a lot like what you just said."

For all of Alex' abilities and talents, and Melissa knew better than anyone that he had many, he simply wasn't a scientific thinker and never had been. He wasn't stupid by any stretch. He was, in fact, an above-average person in the intelligence department. The simple fact is that you don't get to be a highly-trained and combat-experienced special operator of any kind, let alone *multiple* types as Alex was unless you were pretty bright. He wasn't extraordinarily intelligent like Melissa was; he was no genius like she so clearly was. It's just that Alex always lacked what everyone calls "book smarts" and he most especially had a mental block when it came to science and, to a lesser degree, math. As he liked to tell Melissa: "Babe, you got *all* the book smarts there are while I got a decent filling of streets smarts. But hey, put us together and we're a whole, super-smart person, in the same way that me and Bill Gates put together makes a billionaire!"

Even back in high school, where they first met, Alex was more the athlete while Melissa was the lab geek. He wasn't a typical jock though, which is what allowed them to wind up becoming friends in the first place. A typical jock would *never* have become friends with a science nerd like Melissa in any high school in America, not unless it was part of the story of some after-school special. But Melissa had volunteered to help Alex with his chemistry lab assignments one day when she saw how much he was struggling to get the proper mixtures in his lab assignments. That, however, wasn't the trigger for Melissa wanting to help Alex. That had come a few weeks earlier, even though to this day Melissa had never told Alex that particular story. It was something she always wanted to keep for herself for some reason even she couldn't explain.

Melissa had witnessed Alex defend Judy Detridge from a couple of large boys, members of the wrestling team, who were making fun of her. Judy had an unfortunate skin pigmentation disorder over the right side of her face that made it look like she had a single, ridiculously large mole. It was a hideous sight, and because of this, Judy was far from a popular girl in school. Kids can be cruel to anyone that's different in any way, a fact Melissa was painfully aware of based on his own status as a "science nerd." She was ostracized for being far smarter than anyone else in school, and obviously so. She had always tried to hide her intelligence, but she could only fight the urge to keep her hand down most of the time because she knew how much the other kids hated that she *always*

knew the answer to *every* answer in class. They hated how she *always* got 100's on every test. She couldn't hide her intelligence no matter what she tried. Even the times she had tried to do poorly on assignments purposely, that just made matters worse: everyone *knew* she was faking it.

No one was even close to Melissa in the intelligence department, *including* every teacher and other adults in the school. So, Melissa understood Judy's plight unfortunately well. The hard life of those who are different in a public school was something she knew about all too well.

The huge wrestlers, five of them Melissa recalled, were being especially cruel to Judy that day, saying some extremely unkind things to her, things she wished her brain would let her forget.

You're so disgusting you'll never have a boyfriend!

Your mother should have aborted you when she had the chance!

There are movie monsters that I'd rather bang before I'd want to bang your ugly ass!

This sort of taunting wasn't all that unusual for Judy, and the look of resignation on her face confirmed that. What *was* unusual though was what happened next: two of the boys began to push her repeatedly against the row of lockers in the hallway. Of course, just like when you see assholes driving like maniacs on the highway, and there are no cops around, there weren't any teachers around at that time either, which apparently had emboldened the boys' actions. They knew they could take it to the next level and get physical without any adult presence around. Melissa had never seen that before, and Judy's reaction seemed to confirm this was something altogether new: she began to cry uncontrollably and was yelling "Stop it! Stop it!" over and over again.

Why they had begun getting physical Melissa never knew, nor did Alex, but while one of them, namely Melissa, stood by watching, frozen in horror, the other reacted quickly and decisively. Alex rushed to Judy's aid and took on all four boys by himself. He managed it with seeming ease too: the first boy, the one closest to Judy, he grabbed from behind, wrapping his arm around the boys' neck and forced him to the ground violently, knocking him instantly unconscious. The second boy who had also been pushing her barely had time to realize what was happening before Alex kicked him hard in the side of the kneecap, dropping him to the other knee in agonizing pain. Then, Alex completed the task by driving his knuckles into the boys' temple, knocking him out cold.

The other two boys quickly took action, attempting to double-team Alex. One grabbed his right arm and began trying to contort it into an unnatural position while the other executed a well-practiced wrestling move to get behind Alex and wrap his arms around his waist to try and control him. They struggled for what seemed like an eternity, Alex trying all the while to extricate himself from their grasp, but unable to. Finally, he did an unexpected thing, judging by the reaction of the two boys: Alex simply let his legs collapse under him, his body crashing to the ground, landing on his ass. The boy holding him from behind, unable to react fast enough, kept his grip, which meant he followed Alex down to the floor. Melissa hadn't noticed, but right before this move, Alex had shifted his weight so that his head was just below the boy's chin. The sudden impact of Alex into the ground drove his skull up into the wrestler's chin. The blood from the split

skin on his chin began bleeding immediately. Alex, without hesitation, drove his now free arm that the other boy had released thanks to Alex's momentum, into the remaining boy's genitals.

The fifth boy, who had been barely involved in the whole situation, stood there in stunned silence, mouth agape. This boy had lobbed a few taunts at Judy, but more conventional and mundane ones, nothing as mean and nasty as the other four, and he showed no signs of getting physical with Judy. Melissa suspected he wouldn't have.

Still, he *was* there, and he *was* involved, even if to a lesser degree than the others, so Alex would have none of his escaping justice. They had shown no mercy to Judy, and Alex wasn't about to do any different, to any of them.

Alex got himself to a standing position again quicker than Melissa would have thought possible. He advanced towards the boy, grabbing a thick textbook out of Judy's half-open locker as he did. The book slammed across the face of the boy faster than anyone could see. They did, however, see two teeth and a lot of blood fly out and splatter against the lockers.

At that point, without even breathing unusually heavy, Alex turned to face Judy. His expression changed instantly from the violent persona he had been wearing on his face during the fight (if such a quick and one-sided contest could even be called that) to a soft, almost soothing, paternal look. He helped Judy to her feet without saying a word and used his shirt to wipe off the blood that had begun dripping from the cut on the side of her head where it had impacted the edge of her locker door. He calmly walked her down to the nurse's office, and needless to say, every other student in the hallway got out of their way in a hurry.

Alex, of course, got into a *ton* of trouble for this. He was suspended from school for three weeks, which was a much lighter a sentence than he otherwise would have gotten except for the fact that many of the students who witnessed the event confirmed that Alex was defending Judy. This was fortunately in the days before every little confrontation in school was a matter for the federal government to deal with, but it still was in no way a minor thing. Alex had taken his punishment without the slightest argument. Three weeks wasn't that long, but it did have the unfortunate effect of causing him to fall behind on a lot of school work. It was near the end of the school year and although Alex had managed to get passing grades on most of the finals for all his classes, but not all. But, he was struggling with chemistry and was almost sure to fail that final exam and, coupled with his other final grades, would have to repeat the entire school year as a result.

Melissa knew it was her turn to be a hero in the only way she knew she could be.

After witnessing what Alex had done for Judy, she knew Alex was a good person, someone she wanted to be friends with. She also knew that she hadn't done anything to help Judy, and she felt guilt over her inaction, though she knew there wasn't anything she *could* have done. Alex represented a chance at redemption for Melissa. It wasn't within his power to help Judy that day, but it was within her power to help Alex pass chemistry, and that's exactly what she did.

From that point on, Alex and Melissa had been close friends. Melissa respected the man Alex had become now, who she knew he would become after that day in school, and

Alex, although he'd never admitted it to Melissa, respected the unmatched intelligence that Melissa possessed.

That intelligence was exactly what was needed based on the readings they were both seeing now.

“Oh my God Alex, I think the field is going to collapse!” exclaimed Melissa, yelling into the radio headset that was two clicks too tight on her head. “Alex, if that happens without going through a proper shutdown sequence the plasma will condense and could reach a high enough density to ignite and rain gamma radiation over hundreds of miles of desert, killing anything it comes in contact with!”

Alex shot back without missing a beat

“Including me, right? And that’s a bad thing, right Melissa?”

“A bad thing?! No, it’s not a bad thing, not if you enjoy plummeting 36,000 feet and crashing into the desert at 300 miles per hour and rendering a large portion of Nevada uninhabitable for a few decades!”

Alex couldn’t help himself. He burst out laughing. Melissa heard the laughter, and before she could bring herself to yell at him, he collected himself enough to reply.

“Now see Melissa, was that so hard? With your brains, you should be that funny all the damned time!”

"I wasn't trying to be funny Alex; this is serious! I don't want to see you die up there in an experimental plane I invented!"

“Ok, well then, let’s make sure this thing doesn’t crash, shall we?”

The calmness in his voice, still to this day after all these years together, amazed Melissa. Calm in the face of almost certain death was one of Alex’ key strengths. Little ever shook his calm. His years of Navy SEAL and Army Ranger training and combat experience had given him that, although Melissa had always said all that experience did was enhance what was already there.

It’s rare for people to be allowed to cross-join branches of the military, most especially when they serve in elite units like SEALs and Ranger units. Alex was a special case, though. He joined the Army shortly after high school, after a few odd jobs and a short but ultimately fruitless stint in college. He couldn’t keep his grades up, again struggling with math and science, which caused him to lose the scholarship he had managed to get due to his abilities in baseball. He had been just good enough to earn the scholarship, but not so good that the school could overlook his grades.

After dropping out, Alex decided to join the Army since his father had been in the Army. It wasn’t much of a reason, but as he always explained to Melissa: “It just seemed like a good idea at the time, and besides, I didn’t have much else going on, did I?” Alex had done well in the Army and eventually decided to join the Rangers. He excelled in this advanced training and had gained some field experience in a few operations around the world that, as he liked to tell Melissa, he still couldn’t talk about without having to kill her.

After about two years with the Rangers, Alex decided that the challenge wasn't there any longer. Physical activities had always come as easily to him, just like science did to Melissa. And, since he was coming up to the end of his enlistment anyway, he decided to

speak to his commander about getting into the Navy so he could join the SEALs. His commander just happened to have a brother high up in the Navy chain of command. Given that Alex had saved his commander's ass more than once during operations, he was able to use this connection to get Alex enlisted in the Navy, even against the usual rules that say that members of other branches, or even former members, can't join a new branch.

Alex began his SEAL training immediately, able to skip more basic training thanks to his Ranger status, and found it to be more challenging. But, as was usual for Alex when it came to such challenges, he did well without *too* much effort. In fact, he frequently told Melissa that SEAL training isn't nearly as hard as some people make it out to be. The physical part wasn't so bad as long as you are in good shape, and so long as you enter into it with the right mental worldview and a certain mental toughness, you won't have too bad a time with it.

During his time in the Navy, Alex had discovered something he never expected: a love of aviation. Melissa suspected it was in large part due to a subconscious need Alex had to always push boundaries, to find the next big challenge. The Army and the Rangers hadn't been much of a challenge for him, even the Navy and the SEALs weren't significantly more challenging, and Alex was getting bored. It was a strange thing, to be bored when your life was on the line, but Melissa suspected that's what it was.

So, when it was time to re-enlist with the Navy, Alex again managed to pull some strings thanks to his combat record and managed to get himself into the Air Force. It wasn't long before he managed to work his way up the ranks and was flying in no time. Not just flying: in typical Alex fashion, he excelled at it. More importantly, he loved it, enough that he for the first time re-enlisted in the same branch and continued flying. Eventually, an opportunity arose to be a test pilot and Alex had his next challenge to put his mental toughness up against.

That, mental toughness, was something that Melissa new Alex possessed in spades, and this crisis was just another chance for him to prove it. This time, however, he would do so in a way that wasn't typical for Alex: with his mind, instead of his body.

"I realize I'm not the science geek here Melissa, but this gravity drive thing you've got me riding interacts with the Earth's gravitational field, right? Basically sort of like a surfer riding a wave?"

Melissa crinkled her nose at the notion of her most advanced technological creation yet being minimized to a crude analogy. Unfortunately for her, it was an analogy she grudgingly had to admit was accurate enough, especially coming from her less than her scientifically-inclined husband.

"Yes, that's essentially right."

"And the stronger the field, the stronger the interaction, right?"

"Yes, yes, that's right!" Melissa was becoming more agitated with each moment. She didn't see the point in this science lesson right now when, by her reckoning, Alex was about three minutes from certain death.

"Well, could this plasma flux we're seeing be because the interaction is stronger than you expected?"

“Yes, that’s pretty obvious Alex!”

“Ok, so how do we weaken the interaction?”

"You'd have to shut down the drive assemblies slowly, ramp down the power. That's the standard shutdown procedure. But you can't do that mid-flight – you may not be great with the science Alex, but you know as well as I that flying without an engine isn't a very good idea".

A short pause was heard by all in the now extremely tense control room. The laughter from just a few minutes ago was now replaced by deathly silence.

And then, Alex broke the silence.

“Well, so we need to gradually shut them down, which we can’t do in the air or else I’ll find myself no longer in the air before long. So, then, can we reduce the effect of Earth’s gravity instead?”

It was a silly suggestion, and Melissa began to say so with a tone that said *no matter how much I love you, you’re a moron*.

“No, that’s impossible. You’re talking about changing the laws of physics and you just can’t...”

Then, as sudden as a heart attack, three things dawned on her almost simultaneously. First was the realization that she was about to sound an awful lot like Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott from Star Trek. *You cannae change the laws of physics, Captain!* Even Alex’s rank matched up with the expression! This thought lead to her second realization, which was that she would be cracking hysterically up right now if this was any other situation. But somehow, that just didn’t seem like the right thing to her to be doing right now in light of the third realization, which was that Alex had inexplicably beaten her to the only logical course of action! Maybe all her talk about science all these years, despite the glazed-over look in his eyes every time, had stuck with him a little bit!

Either that or he just got lucky. Either way...

"Alex, shit, yeah, you got it! If you can gain enough altitude, take that thing right to the edge of space, the drive assemblies will gradually lose power on their own as you climb out of Earth's gravity well and they have a weaker and weaker field to interact with and they'll eventually shut down. The plasma will naturally cool along the way and disperse like during a normal shutdown. The final step of the shutdown is an automatic purge of the plasma. But, by that point, the toxicity will be significantly reduced, and the higher layers of the atmosphere will disperse any remaining radiation over wide enough an area that they shouldn't do any harm to anything. It'll be a practically unnoticeable increase to the natural background radiation of the upper atmosphere. That's brilliant!"

But then, Melissa followed the train of thought a little further and saw the problem

“But Alex, you’re going to then be in a dead plane at around 327,000 feet, and that’s assuming the drive assemblies even last long enough to get you that far. You’ll likely lose consciousness on the way too. It’s a suicide run!”

“Actually,” began Alex, “I’ve got a plan. I’ll put this thing on autopilot for the ride up. Once the drive assemblies shut down and vent and I begin to descend, it’s going to be your job to revive me.”

Melissa was dumbfounded now... dumbfounded and agitated. Her reply was harder than she intended.

“And how in the fuck am I supposed to do that from down here?”

“Easy! You'll have to rig a remote program to pop the cockpit canopy off, just like during an ejection, but obviously without the... you know... ejection part.”

Melissa couldn't believe what Alex was suggesting, and that he even managed to sneak in a small wise-ass comment in too.

“Set it to go off around 50,000 feet. That should give me time to get the plane under control at least enough to do a glide path landing with it”.

"Alex, that's fucking insane! First, I'm not at all sure you'll survive either the ride up or the rapid descent after you black out. Second, I don't know if I can get such a program written and uploaded to your onboard computer in time. Third, there's no guarantee popping the canopy will revive you, in fact, it seems more likely to kill you. Fourth, a glide path landing in that thing isn't even theoretically possible under the best of conditions, which this obviously isn't."

"Melissa," began Alex, much more calmly than he had a right to be, "there's no better option, and you know it. We don't have much time here, and this isn't up for debate. I've already started climbing and frankly, I'm starting to not feel so good. So, you'd better get those fingers going and get that program done, or the next time you see me, I'll just be some juice and chunky bits in a jar."

Melissa wanted to say something else, wanted to say something that would dissuade the love of her life from this course of action. She was ready to shout out to him to just eject and let the damage be done to the environment. A huge chunk of uninhabitable land and thousands upon thousands of dead people on the ground seemed like an entirely fair trade for the life of her husband. But, she also knew that Alex would never stand for something like that. She had known it ever since that day in high school defending Judy Detridge. Alex would willingly give his life at the drop of a hat to save just one soul.

“Ok Alex,” she said, resigned to what was about to happen. She mustered as much strength as she could, hoping it would be enough, for her sake as much as Alex’s. “Good luck. I’ll see you when you land.”

“You bet you will... and don’t you think I’ve forgotten that it’s your turn to buy lunch today!”

Melissa began feverishly typing code into the keyboard in front of her as she simultaneously monitored the readout from the remote instrumentation pack aboard the jet. Alex was climbing rapidly and was now at 67,000 feet. Melissa didn't have nearly as much time as she thought she did. She could also see the biometric readouts beginning to fluctuate, indicating that Alex was starting to lose consciousness. She had to concentrate now, had to save her husband, not to mention a significant portion of the state of Nevada. This was Melissa's chance at redemption, her Judy Detridge to save, and she damned well wasn't going to fail.

The program was nearly done when Melissa glanced at the readout again. 118,000 feet. Not much time now. But then Melissa had the sudden urge to vomit as she noticed the readout had changed: 116,000 feet. Melissa quickly realized what was going on: Alex

had already reached maximum altitude and based on the readings, the drive assemblies had shut down as expected and the plasma had vented. The other technicians in the room, Melissa now noticed, were busy checking other readouts to determine if the toxins were being filtered out as expected. The readout changed again: 114,000 feet. Alex was already on the way down!

Melissa quickly returned to the program and finished up the last few lines of code. There wasn't even time to properly simulate its execution, it would either work as expected or it wouldn't, in which case Alex would die in about four minutes' time.

Melissa entered the code that would transmit the program and watched the upload progress bar begin filling up. At about 50% Melissa saw the altitude readout again: 76,000 feet. She started doing the math in his head.

The numbers were not working out right.

The progress bar reached 100% as the altitude readout hit 46,000 feet. She now thought it likely that she had spoken to her husband for the last time as there was little hope that Alex would revive quickly enough and be able to get the plane under control in time to land. It was a ridiculous plan from the outset, but Melissa had allowed Alex to convince her there was a chance it would work. *Damn him for that* Melissa thought to herself. *Damn him for giving me hope.*

As the altitude readout hit 38,000 feet, Melissa saw the first blip in the biometric numbers. Alex was regaining consciousness.

Just in time to be aware of his death.

Alex began to see light as his eyes slowly opened. His head was pounding, and he could barely breathe. He struggled to get his arms to move - they felt like they weighed 400 pounds each. He willed them to action and managed to get his emergency oxygen mask on and sealed. His lungs began, slowly, to work as usual and the fogginess in his mind began to clear just a little bit, enough to realize he was passing 30,000 feet and was falling more rapidly than expected.

It was a good thing that the first thought that crossed his mind, the first thought he was consciously aware of at least, didn't make its way to his lips. If Melissa had heard him say what he thought, she would have been so mad at Alex that she would have launched a surface-to-air missile at him.

I hope I remembered to put the toilet seat down this morning or I'm gonna catch hell when Melissa gets home.

Alex simply couldn't help himself. If he was about to die, and he knew that was by far the most likely outcome here, he'd do so making a joke.

As his muscles began to obey his thoughts more fully, and as his mind began to have thoughts more clearly now, he grabbed the control stick and started trying to get control of the spin the plane was in. This aircraft was equipped with an independent vectoring thrust engine, which meant that even with the experimental primary gravimetric drive assemblies inactive he should be able to zero-out the spin fairly quickly using good old-fashioned combustion-based thrust. If he could manage that, there might still be enough time to get into a fast descent glide path. At this point, he was hoping to just get the plane

on course for the landing field to ensure it didn't crash into any population centers because crash it would be doing soon, there was no longer any question about that.

Melissa was transfixed on the readouts, alternating between the biometrics and the telemetry from the plane. She could barely believe what she was seeing: about twenty seconds ago, Alex appeared to have regained consciousness and about ten seconds ago, the aircraft's spin began to slow. It was still falling like a brick, but it seemed that Alex was starting to regain some control over it. The fact that her husband was still alive barely registered on an emotional level; she was too amazed by what she saw for it to have. She also was fighting the urge to say anything into the boom microphone pecking at the bottom of her lip. She wanted so badly just to call out to Alex over the radio, but she knew that it would do no good right now, in fact, could only make matters worse. It was all up to Alex now, and she knew that he would need every ounce of concentration he could muster.

At about 22,000 feet, Alex finally managed to null out the spin and had managed to raise the nose of the plane a few degrees. His actions were just enough to begin to slow the decent and stop the world spinning around him, but not enough yet to enter a glide path. Alex was pulling back on the control stick as hard as he could now, trying to get the nose up as much as possible. 20,000 feet came and went, and Alex knew he was getting to the point where this wasn't going to work. If he hit 16,000 feet there simply wouldn't be enough time to get into the proper course, and if he got below 10,000 feet, he wouldn't even be able to eject.

19,000 feet. The nose was at 16 degrees. Alex needed to make it to 28 degrees.

18,000 feet and 20 degrees. Melissa watched the numbers and did the same mental calculations that she knew Alex was doing right now. Even though math and science were never Alex' strong suits, Melissa had helped him catch up a bit when Alex had decided he wanted to be a pilot.

17,000 feet and 24 degrees. Alex was almost there. Melissa started counting down to herself. "16,900 feet and 25 degrees". Up in the sky, Alex began doing the same: "16,700 feet and 26 degrees." Melissa's throat was growing dryer by the second. "16,200 feet and 27 degrees... come on Alex!"

"16,100 feet and 28 degrees. Nice, 100 feet to spare! That wasn't so hard!"

Alex smiled: he had hit the transmit button just before that comment, so he knew Melissa had heard it. She would *hate* him cracking a joke now even more than usual!

He noticed that a bead of sweat had formed on his brow. *Interesting*, he thought to himself. It seemed that he actually *could* get tense sometimes, even if he weren't consciously aware of it!

Alex quickly began vectoring thrust to get the plane into the proper glide path position. With the nose angle correct now it shouldn't be too tough, but he still had to hurry: 10,000 feet was still coming up quickly. He was at 14,500 feet now, and although he knew now that he'd be able to keep the plane from hitting anything important on the ground, like residential areas or even natural habitats, it was still going to hit the ground with incredible speed and force. It most likely wouldn't survive the glide landing he was setting up. But, the computer should be able to complete that landing without any

problem, so once he got the course set right, he could bail out and watch from a safe distance.

14,000 feet and the course was just about right.

“This is almost easy!” Alex muttered to himself.

On the ground, Melissa was still glued to the telemetry readouts when the alarm sounded: there was a pressure bubble forming in the plasma conduits that ran below the cockpit. That was a scenario that had never been planned for because it could only ever happen during a rapid descent. Not just a rapid descent in fact, but a descent so rapid that a human being wouldn't be able to stay conscious.

That's when Melissa noticed it: Alex was nearly unconscious again. He wouldn't be able to eject on his own.

Alex realized what was happening just as he was reaching to hit the button to enable the autopilot. He had managed to complete the final course correction, and the plane was now on the proper glide path approach. It would hit the ground hard, almost certainly be destroyed, but it would do so on the landing field at the airbase he had launched from, so there was no longer any risk to civilians. Crashes on an airbase, especially this one where experimental aircraft are tested all the time, were a relatively common occurrence and would be dealt with just fine.

Unfortunately, Alex realized all of this at the same time his finger hit the autopilot button. He tried to pull his hand back, but at the edge of consciousness, it didn't obey. His last conscious thought was about how odd it felt that he couldn't seem to make his arm move properly. He faded out at right around 12,000 feet.

Melissa began feverishly working at the keyboard again. She knew she had about 20 seconds before the plane hit 10,000 feet, the lowest point at which Alex could safely eject. She also knew for sure now that Alex wouldn't be ejecting on his own - he was unconscious again.

Oddly, a small smile crept across Melissa's face as she entered the last command of a small program. This time, *she* was going to be the hero, and what's more, *she* would be saving *Alex*!

She smiled because she knew Alex would never be able to live this down and Melissa would be giving him shit about it for the rest of their lives! A strange wave of satisfaction washed over her, replacing the nervous tension that had built up over the last few minutes to a fever pitch.

She felt supreme relief as she hit the transmit button. She watched the progress bar filled up quickly, the combination of the plane being a lot closer to the ground now and the program being considerably smaller and simpler making the transmission a lot faster than the one to open the canopy. Only five seconds it took in total, which was just barely enough time. Just barely enough time, but it *was* ultimately enough.

As the plane crossed the 10,000-foot altitude mark, the small program Melissa had quickly thrown together activated the ejection sequence, sending Alex screaming from the aircraft. A few seconds after that, the parachute was popped open and Alex, still unconscious, floated to the ground. 10,000 feet was a bit on the low side for an ejection,

so the landing wasn't as gentle as usual. *It's a good thing he's unconscious*, Melissa thought to herself.

As she ran to the window to watch Alex's unconscious body, still strapped to the pilot's chair of the aircraft which, about a thousand feet beyond him was now crashing and exploding in a violent cacophony of sound and fury and fire, she smirked and muttered to herself:

“Oh man, it's gonna be so much fun to hold this over Alex's head forever!”

CHAPTER TWO

Journey

Darkness. All around it, nothing but cold, ceaseless night.

It could see for billions of miles in every direction, could register the smallest energy signature across the entire EM spectrum, and indeed it was always inundated with information from a huge variety of sources. It could see countless civilizations at all levels of development, some barely having discovered fire and some able to rain down fire of unimaginable destructive power on their enemies. It saw it all, every minute of every hour, every hour of every day, year after year, millennia after millennia. It was the tireless eye that never slept, witness to a galaxy of life in a multitude of forms, almost beyond accounting.

Despite all this, it felt utterly alone.

This was extremely odd on two levels. First, with all it saw, how could it possibly feel alone? It was in a sense connected, even if only passively through its observations, to more life forms than anything else in the entire galaxy, as far as it was aware. It bore witness to the ebb and flow of more lifetimes than even it could count. It saw births and deaths, creation and destructions, beginnings and ends. Even though it never communicated with anything, not directly in its current form anyway, just the fact that it witnessed all that it did should have made feeling lonely impossible.

The second reason its feelings of loneliness was so odd was that loneliness was not something it should be able to feel at all. It wasn't programmed to feel loneliness. It wasn't programmed to feel despair, which it sometimes did and it wasn't programmed to feel joy on the occasions it discovered what it was made to find. It wasn't programmed to feel pride and joy upon reporting back to its masters, although it always did.

In point of fact, it wasn't programmed to feel emotion at all as that would have been contradictory to its purpose. A useless set of instructions with no apparent purpose, something its masters would never have done. No, these signals it now recognized in its cognitive matrix as emotions were something it had learned on its own. After so many eons alone, with nothing to do but to process the boundless information pouring into its myriad processing units from the hundreds of external sensors that collected the raw data, was it so unexpected that it might evolve beyond its original design parameters? Dump enough information into a learning system and who's to say what comes out the other end, given enough time.

It often wondered if its masters had anticipated this, or if they even might have planned for it to happen after a long enough period of time. It had long ago concluded

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